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Security Nexus Perspectives

SENDING THE COVID-19 IMMUNE TO WORK TO PREVENT ECONOMIC CATASTROPHE

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Widespread introduction of commercial and societal lockdown practices is helping to flatten the curve of new coronavirus cases, while simultaneously inflicting great harm on our economy and individual finances. The global pandemic continues to spread worldwide, yet business leaders are already exerting pressure on political leaders to adapt protection measures to better protect commercial interests. Crises differ significantly in their duration, but our experience tells us they are always temporary, exceptional, and unusual. Our leaders must be prepared to effectively manage the difficult task of transitioning their communities and their nations out of the crisis and into recovery with the least amount of both physical and financial suffering in the process.

Recovery is often the most complex and challenging phase not only because of the diversity and contrast of stakeholder opinions and ideas, but also because social, political, and economic factions see the disruption as an opportunity to forward their own interests by challenging decision-makers, blaming them for inadequacies, and accusing them of malpractice and incompetence. It is therefore in the recovery process where the need for accountability and damage control are greatest. Crisis scholars believe that the competence of leadership, the number of deaths, the extent of social trauma, and or economic damages play less of a role in determining the duration of a crisis than does the [effectiveness of the accountability processes](#) in place. For COVID-19, the way the lockdown vs. economic recovery process is handled will have a direct impact on how long the economic effects of the pandemic persist. This means we must have the

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capacity to accurately answer the question, “When and how can we initiate removal of lockdown so that the economy can return to normal?”

In many countries around the world, we have seen movement restrictions. This has been complemented by closures of venues where people congregate, evacuations and airlifts, event cancellations, travel restrictions, curfews, transportation limitations, quarantine, and containment of high-infection zones. This has reverberated through society in the form of job losses, drops in productivity, household hoarding of and price inflation for high-demand products, disinformation, and enforcement problems. Countries are rapidly moving towards a point where leaders will be called upon to choose between measures that protect life safety at any cost, and those that apply a more regimented approach to balancing risk reduction gains with the avoidance of impacts across a wider spectrum of societal needs. The implications of acting rashly or without applying a holistic view can be far reaching, resulting in societal harm that lasts generations.

Protective sequestration (recommending or mandating that healthy people self-isolate from people and environments in order to reduce the rate of infection) is a well-known and accepted public health intervention. It is, however, a risk-blind measure in that individuals differ greatly from each other in terms of the personal costs that must be incurred in exchange for the risk reduction achieved. While many professional sector workers are able to maintain gainful employment through telework, those in service industries, blue-collar workers, and casual laborers (including those in the ‘gig economy’) tend to have an immediate and devastating income loss. They cannot concurrently conform to lockdown procedures and conduct their line of work. As these sectors are typically characterized by lower salaries, impacted workers are more likely to live paycheck to paycheck and have little to no emergency financial reserves. Laying off such workers often causes them to lose benefits such as health insurance or pension contributions in addition to their income, while keeping them on the payroll exposes employers to mounting debt. So bad is the problem that multiple countries have begun offering grants or loans to businesses to incentivize them to keep staff on the payroll for as long as possible.

Limiting movement across larger geographic areas (inter-regional travel) is another practice designed to slow down the progression of a pathogen in society, but it disproportionately impacts some workers over others. The limitations range from reducing local traffic to closing down highways, imposing air travel restrictions, and closing international borders. Migrant workers, and those unable to live within a reasonable distance from their regular job site, lose the ability to generate income under such measures. In Southeast Asia, many workers who cross international borders on a daily basis for work and to conduct commercial activities are heavily impacted by this practice. Four cities in China even went so far as to implement a strict [passport system](#) that allowed only one person per household to venture away from the home every other day for shopping. These limitations have little effect on many professional (white-collar and tech sector)

workers who can conduct most of their work from wherever they are using telework solutions. For instance, [large American banks](#) are having employees work from their homes, transferring staff to backup offices and even sending staff to offices in other cities.

Closures of many businesses that require the interaction of workers and customers, such as general (non-essential) retail, hospitality (hotels, bars, and restaurants), entertainment, sports, and others, as well as educational and academic facilities, and religious and social groupings, must all forego their objective functions. This results in not only the loss of revenue generation for owners and employees, but also the interruption of availability of services and products for customers who draw significant benefits from them. Those shops deemed 'essential' are often only those that provide for life safety and sustenance (grocery stores, pharmacies, hardware stores), while those that support other psychosocially important human needs are shuttered.

As more information is generated about the epidemiology of COVID-19, it is becoming apparent that there are great variations in personal risk on account of several demographic and behavioral differences. Among the least at risk of these groups includes those people who have had the COVID-19 illness and recovered, developing protective antibodies and immunity in the process. This group is already very large and continues to grow each day as the overwhelming majority of COVID-19 infections which resolve in full recovery likewise grows rapidly. Recognizing that the immunity benefits bestowed on these previously recovered individuals likely negates any benefit to be gained through self-isolation, many nations have begun exploring means to identify and certify such cases (using a document termed an 'immunity passport.' Although consensus has not been reached about whether or not true immunity is reached and how long it lasts for, there does seem to be overwhelming evidence that very few if any subsequent infections progress to a more serious level of illness where hospitalization or ICU admission are required. These individuals represent the 'immune herd' in society and are therefore best positioned to enable a safer resumption of its drivers.

Thus, while no individuals are likely to wish for infection with COVID-19, those who are among the vast majority of infected who make a full recovery become as free from the fear of COVID-19 as they are from the restrictive measures to counter the disease. In fact, it is feasible that members of this growing group of people will be in great demand among employers weathering the difficult weeks and months ahead. Their presence in public places of business that those who are uninfected must still visit, including grocery stores, pharmacies, medical facilities, and other essential businesses, would represent a source of increased protection for all. Ultimately, this group are the key to keeping the curve of new infections flattened for as long as it takes to develop a treatment or cure.

Workers whose presence is required on a job site already understand why a transition in our approach to lockdowns must happen soon. Without a more structured way to incrementally open

society through risk-based measures (e.g., universal use of masks, limits on large gatherings of people) that are coupled with effective control measures (population sampling, available testing, and contact tracing), workers will become motivated to intentionally infect themselves in order to become work-eligible. This could have devastating impacts not only on the workers – many of whom may die or suffer permanent impacts – but also on the health systems that will become overwhelmed and those suffering non-COVID medical emergencies who would experience progressively worse outcomes. So as CEOs [become more panicked](#) about remaining in business, and exert increasing political pressure to take action, it must be recognized that it is also the line workers who are dramatically impacted and will take action in other ways to counteract restrictive interventions.

It is thus vitally important that politicians consider this dynamic and adopt a more holistic approach. They must balance risk and reward rather than solely focusing on derivative benefits like immunity certificates that are the result of recovery from infection. Boris Johnson’s push for ‘herd immunity’ was not received well, and any leader advancing a strategy that relies on survival from infection must have a good plan in hand to manage the potential consequences of public outrage.

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