

Now is not the time to ease social distancing measures, experts say

March 25 2020, by Saralyn Cruickshank



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In a tweet issued late Sunday night, President Donald Trump suggested that the economic impact of social distancing measures enacted around the United States may be worse than the spread of—and deaths

attributed to—the coronavirus pandemic itself. Monday, he said that [his administration may soon relax federal social distancing guidelines](#) meant to slow the spread of disease and suggested that closed businesses should reopen—talking points he reiterated today, saying he ["would love to have the country opened up and just raring to go by Easter"](#). That's a little more than two weeks from now.

That message has been echoed in various forms by a growing number of pundits and officials, even as the number of COVID-19 cases escalates rapidly across the country. The World Health Organization said today that with the national surge in new confirmed cases—[which now exceed 46,500](#)—the U.S. has the potential to become the new epicenter of the outbreak.

A premature return to business as usual could make transmission of the virus in the U.S. far more widespread, experts caution, and amplify a surge of illness that threatens to overwhelm the nation's health care capacity.

"Anyone advising the end of social distancing now needs to fully understand what the country will look like if we do that," wrote Tom Inglesby, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, in a series of tweets shared tens of thousands of times Monday night.

"[COVID-19] would spread widely, rapidly, terribly, could kill potentially millions in the [year] ahead with huge social and economic impact across the country."

In addition to shortages of masks to protect [health care workers](#), hospitals have already reported that within a week, they expect to run out of ventilators to treat the sick, Inglesby continued. Because nearly 15% of COVID-19 cases are severe, a shortage of ventilators means health care workers would not be able to provide enough oxygen to these patients.

To drop all these measures now would be to accept that COVID pts will get sick in extraordinary numbers all over the country, far beyond what the US health care system could bear. 11/x

— Tom Inglesby (@T_Inglesby) [March 23, 2020](#)

Current evidence indicates that without social distancing measures, the virus spreads to an average of 2.5 people for every one person infected, Inglesby said. "For this disease to stop, we need to make it so that the average person spreads it to less than 1 other person," he tweeted. He pointed to countries in Asia where social distancing practices have helped curb the rapid spread of disease within three weeks.

But we need to press ahead for now w closed schools, mass telecommuting, no gatherings, strong advisory to stay home unless you need to go out—all are needed to slow this epidemic. 23/x

— Tom Inglesby (@T_Inglesby) [March 24, 2020](#)

In an [op-ed published Tuesday in The Baltimore Sun](#), Johns Hopkins leaders echoed Inglesby's sentiments, calling social distancing measures "indispensable."

"Along with every other health care organization and health department in the country, Johns Hopkins is doing all it can to increase preparedness for a potential influx of COVID-19 patients," wrote Ronald J. Daniels, president of JHU; Paul B. Rothman, dean of the medical faculty and CEO of Johns Hopkins Medicine; and Kevin Sowers, president of the Johns Hopkins Health System. "Nationwide, we've made important progress in this, increasing our supply of beds, staff and equipment. But hospitals and health departments can't do it alone. We need everyone to

do their part to reduce infection rates."

Caitlin Rivers, a senior scholar at the Center for Health Security, tweeted earlier today about the importance of not giving up on social distancing measures prematurely.

This is the moment I warned of—we have sacrificed so much already, but it feels like nothing is working. That's because it takes weeks to see results. We must stay committed and trust that the social distancing we are enduring now will save thousands of lives. <https://t.co/rzu2LXgIAh>

— Caitlin Rivers, Ph.D. (@cmyeaton) [March 24, 2020](#)

In an earlier series of tweets, she said that it is difficult, even for experts in pandemics and infectious disease, to know when a country has passed its peak transmission. That's because, especially in the United States, there's no single outbreak—there are many, with varying timelines and rates of transmission. It's difficult to know when a peak is passed until much later, she explained.

Rivers urged policymakers and the public to "take the long view" and recognize that social distancing measures may be working even when it's not apparent that they are.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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