

Coronavirus exit strategy: why 'low risk' millennials should be released from lockdown first

April 16 2020, by Nattavudh Powdthavee and Andrew Oswald

Millennials who do not live with their parents should be the first people released from the UK coronavirus lockdown. That is the conclusion of our [new research](#) which is being [studied in Whitehall](#) by officials. The move would be one part of a possible exit strategy the government could implement in the coming weeks and months.

We came to this conclusion because people aged between 20 and 30 are [statistically the safest](#) from COVID-19 among the age groups. They are also the [hardest hit financially](#) from the prolonged lockdown. Getting them back into work could help restart the economy and increase their own prosperity.

Releasing millennials from lockdown first would mean they could provide essential supports for the rest of society, particularly those in the high risk groups, such as the elderly or those with underlying conditions.

It could also be argued that giving this generation a strong leadership role to help the nation find its way out of the crisis could provide hope to the rest of the country.

According to the [Office of National Statistics](#), there are about 4.2 million people aged between 20 and 30 who do not live with parents. Of those, 2.6 million are private sector workers who may have lost their earnings entirely because of the lockdown. If half of those could be re-

employed by private sector when they are the first to be released, then the extra annual income generated would be about £13 billion a year.

How many would die?

But in doing this, there is obviously the questions about how many young deaths society would have to tolerate. Based on [a standard epidemiological model](#), the [fatality](#) risk associated with the release of these young people has been estimated to be at around three in 10,000. By way of comparison, the fatality risk is about 75 times higher for those in their 60s. If, for example, half of the 4.2 million [young people](#) were infected, then the extra premature deaths in the United Kingdom would be 630.

While we fully recognise that any loss of life—however few—is tragic, we believe that a policy that releases the young from the lockdown first will produce a number of fatalities that is far smaller in the long run than those from any general release of the population. Older adults who have been tested to have the necessary antibody can then be released later in a staggered way.

Understandably there would be many people who are opposed to the idea of releasing the young first. To these people, the small fatality risk associated with COVID-19 weighs much more heavily in their minds compared to other less salient fatality risks such as those associated with [poverty and unemployment](#). Because of this, many people would likely prefer that the state lockdown be extended until a vaccine is found. But this could be up to [18 months away](#).

Knowing all the risks

Efforts would have to be made by politicians and others to explain all the

risks to the general public. Here, a useful lesson could be learned from research on [risk literacy](#), which is the ability to deal with uncertainties in an informed way.

For example, according to a [2012 study](#), there was a sudden surge in the number of accident-related deaths on American roads, as people sought alternative transport to flying, one year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. An estimated 1,600 more people died as a result of a significant increase in traffic than would have been expected statistically. By contrast, there had been no fatalities from commercial flights in the United States during the same period.

The explanation for the findings may be obvious: flying is substantially less risky than driving a long distance. Yet, the fear of immediate death from a terrorist attack had altered the behaviour of many Americans, which had led to a significantly greater number of deaths than had they chosen to fly.

The fatality risk associated with road accidents is not so different from the fatality risk associated with economic inactivity for the young if the [lockdown](#) goes on for too long. Compared to the small risk of the young dying from contracting COVID-19, the long term fatality risk from poverty and unemployment for the young is much more substantial but likely to be less prominent in people's mind.

For such a step to be successful, it is vital that all of the associated risks are made clear and transparent to everyone. Unless a vaccine is suddenly discovered, any decision will be difficult. The best exit strategy would be one that minimises all of the associated risks, regardless of how attention grabbing each one of them is in our mind.

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