

Coronavirus: How to make the three-tier lockdown work

October 12 2020, by Renaud Foucart



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Over [50 areas in England](#) are under local lockdown. The patchwork of restriction is [complex](#) and [difficult to enforce](#), so to simplify things, the government [is introducing](#) a much simpler three-tier system of

lockdowns. England will be divided into three zones: medium risk, high risk and very high risk.

Economic theory tells us that if the system is well designed, it could improve adherence to the lockdowns—which at the moment is [extremely low](#). For it to work, the criteria for each tier needs to be clearly defined, the difference between tiers must be large, and the system needs to be managed by an independent organization.

Compliance will be limited

A consequence of not following COVID regulations is to get infected with the coronavirus. A perhaps more important one is to transmit it to your family and the rest of society.

Most people care more about their own health and the health of their family than do about society as a whole. For this reason, since the beginning of the outbreak, government officials have introduced policies with the expectation that [compliance will be limited](#).

The panel of government scientific advisers (Sage) estimates, for instance, that [less than 20% of people self-isolate when asked to](#), an even lower number than [it expected would self-isolate in March](#).

There is only so much the [police can do](#) to enforce national and local regulations. This summer, for the whole of England, only 179 fixed penalty notices were issued for breach of local restrictions, 89 fines for not wearing a mask, and 18 for holding large gatherings. The government has no choice but to rely on people sticking to the guidance.

So it is very tempting for [government officials](#) to present the [worst-case scenario](#) in the hope that it will scare people into complying. But if you believe the government makes inflated claims in order to increase

compliance, you take this into account and comply less.

The government has [no way to credibly communicate](#) the important epidemiological information it has because it keeps enacting rules a bit more severe than the previous ones to counterbalance the low compliance.

When local restrictions differ, the problem is worse. Many areas under different shades of local restrictions accuse the government of a [lack of transparency](#).

The criteria on which local lockdowns are enacted are a mystery. Regions with similar infection rates are [treated differently](#). And some interventions, such as the 10pm curfew, aren't based on [publicly available scientific evidence](#).

To solve the vicious circle of very strict guidance and very low compliance, [setting out broad categories](#), such as the suggested three-tier system, can be part of the solution. Instead of providing a range of very specific local guidance, the tiers must reflect large differences.

The top tier must be composed of areas with an extremely high average risk of hospital saturation and subject to strict but realistic local rules. The difference with the second tier must be large enough that people understand the government has no interest to exaggerate and put a mildly affected area in the top tier because the economic cost would then be very high.

Avoid political influence

However, a major problem remains: political influence.

The criteria to be in one category or another, as well as the

corresponding restrictions, are clearly a legitimate political choice. Only elected politicians have the authority to take tough decisions balancing public health and economic activity.

The government would, however, be wise to take implementation out of political hands. No one will comply to very strict regulation if they believe it is the result of [political bias](#).

The most obvious solution would be to delegate the creation of a map assigning local areas to the different tiers defined by the [government](#) to independent advisers. This would not only simplify the regulation and increase transparency but also encourage more people to stick to the rules.

The European Union has a similar problem with a myriad of local travel restrictions. To increase compliance and avoid political influence, EU countries [plan to delegate](#) the elaboration of a three-tier map that would decide which regions are subject to restrictions to an agency [independent of national governments](#).

There is no reason for the UK not to move in that direction. A three-tier system is a clear improvement over the status quo, but it will only work if the tiers are sufficiently different and if the implementation is clearly devoid of political influence.

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