

The Unexpected Consequences of Covid-19

Over the past weeks, we have used the word ‘unprecedented’ and unprecedented amount of times. It’s true, we live in strange times and the entire world has changed over the past two months. There are, of course, expected consequences of this pandemic – deaths from Covid-19, an increased focus on the NHS and health services, a growth in home working. Today, however, I want to focus on consequences that you might not have thought about. I don’t really want to focus on politics with a capital ‘P’, but instead to focus on some of the interesting, quirky and thought-provoking ideas that I have found in the media.

I am going to look at 20 claimed potential consequences of Covid-19 – I’m not talking so much about what is happening now, but social changes that we might see down the line that we will be able to trace back to the pandemic.

As I go through them, I want you to note down three things: 1) the effect that you think is most likely; 2) the effect that you think is least likely, and 3) the effect that you think is just the most interesting. If you are feeling particularly bold, you might also think about what effects aren’t covered in this talk.

1. A decrease in homelessness

There have been some shocking, and heart-breaking news stories about how badly the those experiencing homelessness have been hit by coronavirus (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/europes-homeless-hit-hard-by-coronavirus-response>) but there is also some potentially good news.....

About 2000 rough sleepers have been given hotel rooms during the crisis, where charities such as St Mungos have been able to help them potentially access more long-term support. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52332453>

There are obviously longer term social issues at play here, but this could be one silver lining.....

2. The death of the cinema? A change to how we watch movies

A number of films scheduled for release have now gone straight to streaming (I haven’t watched Trolls: World Tour yet, but I’m not ruling it out), leading some to question whether this is something that the industry might do more of in the future.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/mar/26/film-industry-blockbusters-multiplex-cinemas-closed-coronavirus>

If nothing else, the pace at which films such as The Rise of Skywalker have made it to the small screen may lead many to question whether there needs to be such a big delay.

3. A baby boom in early 2021

With couples having to spend more time together indoors, some have questioned whether we might see a result of this in 9 months time. In fact, in Ukraine, the President has even encouraged people to use this opportunity to boost the country’s birth rate. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/04/03/will-the-coronavirus-lockdown-lead-to-a-baby-boom>

However, many demographers have said that this is unlikely as people are nervous about bringing a child into such an uncertain world, especially with the economic consequences of the lockdown likely to be considerable (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/04/us/baby-boom-coronavirus-demographics/index.html>)

4. An increase in divorce rates

As stated for the previous example, couples are having to spend more time together indoors! Some reports from China suggest that there has been an increase in the number of divorces there, and the logic of people realising that they don't actually enjoy each other's company any more does make sense.

However, it after 9/11, the divorce rate in the USA did go down, as people felt it wasn't really the right time to make life-changing decisions. Might the same be true now?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/singletons/202004/more-babies-or-more-divorces-after-covid-19>

5. A reduction in deaths from air pollution

The statistics here are incredible. In China in January and February, the NO2 levels fell by 40%, equivalent to removing 192,000 cars from the roads. In March, in the UK some cities had 60% decreases. Cancelled flights, closed factories and fewer journeys may all add up to a real life-saver. The WHO estimates that about 3 million people die each year from illnesses caused by air pollution, so in a very, very, very strange way, this pandemic could actually save lives??? Marshall Burke, a Stanford professor, has suggested that the lives of 4000 young children and 73000 elderly adults may have been saved in January and February of this year.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-lockdowns-air-pollution>

6. A decrease in demand for urban houses

Hear me out on this one! Whilst I'm not 100% convinced that there will be a massive surge for people to work from home full time once this is all over, a lot of people have discovered quite how much they can do from home. A lot of people live in cities in order to minimise their commute, but if they don't have to travel to work as much, maybe they won't mind a longer commute. In the suburbs you get a bit more 'bang for your buck' and possibly a better quality of life? Might we see a large move out of cities and towards the suburbs? (Idea from

<https://freakonomics.com/podcast/covid-19-cities/>)

7. A Growth in eSports

Confession time – I have watched some of the e-Grand Prix, AND even some footballers playing Fifa... I would say I need to get out more but..... But esports involve much more beside just sitting on your sofa – cyclists have been racing from stationery bikes, for example, meaning that there is some physical prowess needed. Might now be the making of esports, or is spike in popularity just respite as we wait for a return of the 'real thing'

[\(https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2020/04/14/will-necessity-be-the-making-of-esports-during-covid-19/\)](https://www.forbes.com/sites/adigaskell/2020/04/14/will-necessity-be-the-making-of-esports-during-covid-19/)

8. A collapse in business travel

Now that people are routinely attending meetings in their slippers, many may be asking whether they really do need to fly to New York, Tokyo, or Dubai for business meetings. If so, this could be a further blow to a battered airline industry, and possibly hotels too –

<https://www.demandcalendar.com/blog/business-travel-will-not-be-the-same-after-covid-19>

9. A decrease in gang violence

One of the stranger stories of this crisis have been how gangs in some counties have taken a role in enforcing social distancing and providing home delivery services. The most notable example of this is in South Africa, but there have been similar trends in El Salvador, which has seen a significant decrease in its murder rates. Might these truces last after the end of lockdown?

<https://www.theweek.co.uk/coronavirus/106013/the-unexpected-consequences-of-coronavirus>

10. A decrease in the sale of wild animals for food (and benefits to wildlife more generally)

This has already been seen in China, which has outlawed all trade and eating of non-aquatic wild animals. My favourite story of the pandemic though has been that Ying Ying and Le Le, two pandas in a Hong Kong theme park mated for the first time in 10 years, now that they had the privacy to do so!

<https://www.theweek.co.uk/coronavirus/106013/the-unexpected-consequences-of-coronavirus>

11. Fewer cases of other illnesses

This probably won't be a long term impact, but Japan has seen a 60% year-on-year decline in flu cases. It could be argued, though, that the public is now more aware of hygiene (good hand-washing practice, for example), which could help in 'normal' flu season.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/02/21/national/influenza-wave-drastically-wanes-japan-amid-spread-coronavirus/#.XqBDC25FzIV>

12. A backward step for feminism

Two gender-based trends have been well reported during this crisis. Men are more likely to be seriously affected by Covid-19 than women, whilst reports of domestic violence against women have sky-rocketed in many countries. A UN report has suggested that women might be more negatively affected than men in the long run, on account of having fewer savings, and undertaking more of the unpaid care work that has come through lockdowns. There seems to have been a return to many gender stereotyped roles during this crisis that could have a lasting impact.

https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf

13. Negative impacts on mental health..... but healthy coping strategies

There has been a lot in the press about how much damage this lockdown might be causing for people's mental health; to say nothing of potential long term problems with PTSD of similar for front line workers. But studies from the SARS, Ebola and swine flu outbreaks also showed that people, keen to regain a sense of autonomy, committed more to 'self improvement' projects, such as exercise, weight loss, reading and learning.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/world/americas/coronavirus-social-impact.html>

14. An increase in cannabis use

Take what you will from the fact that coffee shops in the Netherlands have been deemed essential businesses, as have dispensaries in the USA. Or the fact that cannabis prices have soared in France and Spain. This price increase could be due to supply issues, but there seems to be a demand spike here too. This could, of course, simply be short-term as people hoarded before lockdown, but it might be new customers from this period lead to a long term increase in demand for cannabis

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cannabis-idUSKBN21B2DC>

15. An increase in xenophobia and discrimination

You may have heard about Trump's 60 day ban of immigration into America, in order to protect US jobs, but discrimination has been on the increase more generally during this crisis. This discrimination has been particularly focused on China, where the outbreak began. Whilst there are political questions to ask about how effectively the Chinese government dealt with the crisis, the general prejudice against those of Chinese origin in many other countries is a worrying trend. It's not necessarily a simple trend though, as there has been state sanctioned discrimination of those from African decent within China, and a terrifying amount of various forms of prejudice in many different countries, targeted at many different groups. A time of crisis can certainly open old wounds....

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01009-0>

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-stay-away-from-here-in-china-foreigners-have-become-a-target-for/>

16. A tightening of abortion laws in the US

The issue of abortion in the US remains highly contentious. Some states have deemed abortion a 'non essential medical procedure' during the pandemic, leading critics to suggest that states may be using this opportunity to force through changes in abortion law. Legal challenges have already been

successful against a number of states trying to 'ban' abortions in this way, but this pandemic has shown that the abortion-debate in America isn't going to end any time soon.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/anti-choice-politicians-are-using-the-coronavirus-crisis-to-deny-abortion-rights-973096/>

17. Better data for researching seismology

A number of seismologists have reported that the decline in human movement, including transport, industry etc, has given them a rare data pool into the seismic activity going on under the earth's surface. This data could prove invaluable for future research in this area.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-pandemic-earth-pollution-noise/609316/>

18. New terrorist groups

There is a school of thought that suggests that this pandemic might lead to new terrorist groups forming – those who campaign against big government, those opposed to the growth of technology, opponents of China, as just a few ideas. Lots of research is being done though to see what impact Coronavirus will have on terrorism. It was reported that ISIS told its members not to travel to Europe in case they caught the virus, whilst a lack of mass gatherings for the foreseeable future might also limit terrorist opportunities. On the other side of the coin though, police forces and governments have their hands full with other things at the moment.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/after-coronavirus-terrorism-isis-hezbollah-5g-wont-be-the-same/>

19. Progress in the war on misinformation

There has been a huge amount of disinformation and misinformation during this crisis in a continuation in the growth of 'fake news'. Some of the stories that have been doing the rounds have been mind-boggling. The good news, however, is that Facebook, Google and Twitter are working with the WHO to stop this, leading people to question that if they can do this for Covid-19, why not other stories too?

<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-proves-facebook-twitter-google-tackle-misinformation-and-harmful-content-2020-4?r=US&IR=T>

20. The rebirth of community spirit

There have been countless examples of communities coming together at this time – whether ‘clap for carers’, the NHS volunteer army, or simply people helping their neighbours out. This pro-social behaviour may be here to last, as people form long lasting bonds with those around them. Sociologists suggest that humans instinctively come together at times such as this, which may mark a change from the competitive capitalist spirits.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/world/americas/coronavirus-social-impact.html>