

Thinking Ahead On Post-COVID-19 Vulnerabilities

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As someone who has dedicated much of his scholarly career working on the Fukushima nuclear disaster, I came to understand the ripple-like effects of governments' decisions in managing health risks. For instance, the



Fukushima disaster, which led to the release of radioactive contamination throughout Japan, initially prompted the forced evacuation of many citizens. While this evacuation was necessary to protect citizens from harmful radioactive exposure, the aftermath associated with massive evacuations also brought its own share of problems, such as the fragmentation of families, personal bankruptcies, or suicides.

Similarly, the recent [lockdown of major cities](#) associated with COVID-19, so as to slow down the spread of the virus, is a potential disaster in and of itself. In particular, the lockdown risks putting vulnerable members of the population through a heightened state of precarity.

First, the lockdown order has resulted in the temporary closure of non-essential business, like bars, restaurants, or hair salons. While this represents money saved for everyday people who won't be able to grab a pint at their favorite bar, the situation is much more worrisome for small business owners. Many simply don't have the margins to overcome the economic hardship of facing weeks-long shutdown of their businesses. Even a [potential federal stimulus](#) linked with COVID-19 was described as not being enough to help small business recover. These economic hardships risk resulting in debt and potential bankruptcy, leading to depression, mental health problems, or suicidal behavior. Indeed, a [public health study](#) on the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated that indebtedness has serious effects on health, such as the aforementioned.



Secondly, homeless people are also members of the population facing greater risks from COVID-19, especially since many already suffer from poor immune systems, malnutrition, or chronic disease. Cities in lockdown with significant homeless populations, such as San Francisco or New York, risk facing [unique challenges](#) in trying to contain the spread of the



virus while addressing homelessness crises. For instance, the order of self-isolation and social distancing is often impossible to enforce in cramped and packed homeless shelters, making the propagation of the virus potentially easier. This is reinforced by the fact that many shelters do not have [adequate cleaning supplies](#) to mitigate the spread of the virus. Indeed, one of the results of the lockdown was the hoarding of essential products like hand sanitizers, disinfectants, and toilet paper. These shortages make sanitation even more difficult for places like shelters, which face higher risk.

Lastly, the lockdown also resulted in university classes being canceled or suspended. In some cases, undergraduate students were required to move out from their campus accommodations within a few days' notice. While some students might consider the shutdown of their college as a form of vacation, many struggling students have been imbedded in a [chaotic situation](#) as they try to figure out what to do. Indeed, many students simply cannot afford to make arrangements to come home, nor to ship their on-campus belongings [without financial support](#). Not only has the lockdown resulted in exacerbating stress within the student body, but the logistic and financial burden associated with this decision puts low-income and international students at [risk of leaving college for good](#). In addition, many students have no other choice but to come back to live with relatives such as parents and grandparents, which are precisely in the age strata that make them more vulnerable to the virus. As some students argue, universities' decisions to send students back home put their [parents at an increased risk](#) of contracting the virus.

In the end, I am not arguing that the lockdown was not essential, nor effective in stopping the spread of the virus. After all, when there is uncertainty regarding health hazards, and considering the rising death toll caused by the virus, it is necessary to take preventive measures over lax policies. At the same time, the lockdown can also lead to other problems, which aggravate present inequalities for some of the most vulnerable people; those who live pay-check to pay-check, those with no families, or those with few resources to survive extended lockdowns. This is also a disaster, which needs to be taken care – in and of itself.

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