Post-COVID World: What Will Life Be Like After Coronavirus?

By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 3, 2020

We're social animals, and we want to socialize. We're also lazy, and we want to do whatever is easiest or most convenient. Those two facts about human nature, far more than the coronavirus, will shape our future.

As I mentioned previously, I've been marooned in Poland for a few months due to the coronavirus pandemic. Poland, along with several other Eastern European countries, implemented a very severe lockdown. In large part, it's because their healthcare system sucks, they know it, and they didn't want to tempt fate by letting the virus run wild.

As Poles emerge from lockdown, I'm struck by what I observe in the small city in which I currently live: Most people aren't wearing masks, using plastic gloves, or applying hand sanitizer like fiends. Though life certainly isn't back to normal -- economic activity here is way down -- those who have decided to go about their daily lives seem to be behaving normally. The only social distancing I notice is that people tend to stand further apart from each other.
This has made me wonder about our post-COVID world. Media outlets all tell us the same thing: Life will never "go back to normal." This piece [3] in The Atlantic tells us that restaurants will never be the same, full-capacity stadiums are a thing of the past, and there will be no more conferences or parties. If that's what life really will become in the United States, then I'll just stay here in Poland. My skepticism of these dire predictions comes down to one thing: Human nature. And, for our purposes here, two specific features of human nature are most relevant: (1) We're social animals, and we want to socialize; and (2) We're lazy, and we want to do whatever is easiest or most convenient. Those two facts, far more than the coronavirus, will shape our future. So, here is where I believe our society is headed after the coronavirus:

**Restaurants, bars, sporting venues, and other sources of entertainment will go back to normal relatively soon.** People like going out to eat or having drinks with friends. Single folks want to mingle. So, this feature of life will return, even though we may see more hand sanitizer stations than usual. And, for a nice change, restaurants will be forced to clean their tables. However, it's not all good news for the entertainment industry. Movie theaters, which were suffering before the pandemic [4], may be finished. It's easier, cheaper, and more comfortable to watch movies at home.

**The "sharing economy" will hurt for a while but will bounce back.** How many of you feel like riding a bicycle that some other sweaty dude was just riding a few moments ago? Yeah, I didn't think so. Our collective awareness of germs means that the "sharing economy" -- typified by companies like Uber and Airbnb -- is in trouble in the short term. Longer term, I think the sharing economy will bounce back because, at the end of the day, Uber is cleaner and more convenient than a taxi.

**Brick-and-mortar retail is toast.** The coronavirus has simply accelerated a pre-existing trend. It's far easier to have Jeff Bezos deliver toilet paper and goat cheese to my doorstep than for me to drag my lazy rear end to Target. COVID-19 may prove to be the coup de grâce for this struggling sector.

**More of us will work from home.** Having had a taste of the telecommuting life, many employees will demand more of it. And since it's cheaper not to pay for an office, many companies may decide to downsize or forgo them entirely. Now is not a particularly good time to become a commercial real estate agent.

**Over the medium- to long-term, people will start moving out of cities again.** For several years, people were moving into the downtown area of major cities. The appeal is obvious: Downtowns had been revitalized, there are plenty of things to do, and crucially, jobs were located there. However, that caused a problem: Soaring rents. Now, if people are no longer required to show up to the office, there is far less incentive to live downtown. The large amount of money that would be blown on outrageously high rent could serve as a down payment on a home in the suburbs. So, people will live there instead.
The bottom line is that life mostly will return to normal, especially if and when the virus is "tamed" and becomes just another seasonal virus. The stuff we don't like (e.g., going to the office) will disappear, and we can use the coronavirus and other germs as a convenient scapegoat.


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