COVID and Culture: Countries with Strict Social Norms Fare Better

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 4, 2021

While we lament the lack of cooperation in Western culture that allows a virus to spread, we can simultaneously celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit that allows a cure to be discovered.

Throughout the COVID pandemic, many Americans complained that our culture made it far easier for the coronavirus to spread. Specifically, they objected to Americans’ flippant attitude, disregard for expertise and the law, and an unwillingness to cooperate.

As we’re about to see, they are probably correct. But they also probably wouldn’t like the conditions that are necessary to have the sort of culture that they think they desire.

The Law Can Only Go So Far

As the pandemic wore on, a common refrain from those lamenting American culture was, "If only everybody could just stay home for two weeks, this crisis would be over."
Let's set aside that (1) it's wrong because people would still need food and supplies delivered to them, a wartime-like mobilization that likely would require millions of (mostly unvaccinated) essential workers who would continue to spread COVID; and (2) it goes against our social nature as humans, and a policy that contradicts human nature is likelier to fail. It's also cruel. There's a reason that many consider solitary confinement a human rights violation.

What those who complain about the spread of COVID in the U.S. fail to realize is that the problem isn't unique to us. As soon as Europe let its guard down, the virus came roaring back.

So, to get things back under control, many European countries went into another strict lockdown and forced people to obey by imposing stiff penalties. According to the Wall Street Journal [2], people caught breaking various rules can be fined €250 in Belgium; €400 to €1,000 in Italy; €135 to €3,750 in France; and £200 to £6,400 in the UK. Spain went all in on this strategy: Scofflaws can be fined €100 to €600,000. Prison is an option on the table as well in some countries, like Spain and Italy.

Did the harsh penalties work? It appears they had an effect in most places, but not in all. Perhaps some countries didn't have the ability or willpower to enforce them. Whatever the reason, they certainly didn't work everywhere. Note the following graph (based on data from the European CDC [3]) which includes the major countries of Western Europe. The UK and Spain are doing just as poorly as the U.S.

![Rolling 14-Day Average of New COVID Cases per 100,000 People by Country](image)

If strong-arming your countrymen into following lockdowns doesn't work, what does? New research in The Lancet Planetary Health suggests culture might.

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Led by Dr. Michele Gelfand, the team examined the relationship between what they call "cultural tightness" -- by which they mean countries that have strict social norms -- and the severity of COVID. Cultural tightness/looseness is obviously a subjective quality, but the authors utilized data from a system that tried to quantify it using statements like, "There are very clear expectations for how people should act in most situations." Using this method and plotting COVID cases and deaths as a function of cultural tightness, the authors found that countries with "loose" social norms had five times as many COVID cases and more than 8.5 times as many COVID deaths as countries with stricter social standards.

If the authors are correct -- and their results certainly confirm what many of us suspected -- it suggests that the best way to fight a pandemic is to have a culturally tight society, which likely leads to more cooperation. But, of course, there are major downsides to a culture with strict social norms. These cultures tend not to be particularly friendly to women or various minorities.

So while we lament the lack of cooperation and cultural tightness in Western civilization that allows a virus to spread, we can simultaneously celebrate the cultural looseness and subsequent
entrepreneurial spirit that allows a cure to be discovered.