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BRIEF19

A daily review of covid-19 research and policy.

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Early Data Suggest Black Lives Matter Protests Not to Blame for Resurgence of Covid-19 Cases.

Following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25th, massive protests against police brutality and structural racism began under the banner of Black Lives Matter. As of July 3, [polls estimate](#) that between 15 million and 26 million people had participated at some point in the demonstrations in the United States, which would make it the largest protest in US history.

In the wake of these protests, many public health officials and physicians have worried that there would be a surge of covid-19 infections. However early data now suggests the opposite. A working [paper](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research used data from 315 American cities with at least 100,000 residents, covering the period of May 25th (the day George Floyd was killed) to June 20th to estimate the impact mass protests had on social distancing and covid-19 case growth. The researchers used event-study analysis with cell-phone tracking data as well as local prevalence of covid-19 cases from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to compare the experience of the 281 cities where protests erupted with 34 cities where they did not. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the researchers found compelling evidence that stay-at-home behavior *increased* in cities with large-scale protests. The authors go on to assert that they “found no evidence that urban protests reignited covid-19 case growth during the more than three weeks following protest onset.” They further hypothesize that this finding may be due to an increase in avoidance behavior by non-protestors in the regions, limitations on travel, mask-wearing, and other social distancing behavior on part of the protestors. Alternatively, it may be that the characteristics of the protest attendees (on average, younger than the general population) did develop more infections that have been detected, but have gone undiagnosed. Other studies have found that younger persons show milder symptoms of covid-19 or have symptom-free SARS-CoV-2 infections and are therefore less likely to get tested. The authors point out that the results do not imply that large outdoor gatherings are safe in general, however as the compensatory avoidance behavior of non-protestors likely contributed to overall net effects observed in the general population.

—Regina Royan, MD, MPH

POLICY BRIEFING

School's Out Forever?

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) [announced](#) on Monday that non-immigrant foreign students on M1 or F1 visas planning on attending school this fall must leave the country if they will be taking all classes online. M1 visas are for students participating in vocational education, whereas students on F1 visas pursue academic schooling. The new policy is in line with other rules around online education, however ICE previously made exceptions to

its typical stance for the spring semester of 2020 because of the emergence of the novel coronavirus and the travel restrictions around nationwide shelter-in-place orders. Current rules limit F1 students to one online class per semester, but if a school is adopting a hybrid model of education with some online classes and others in-person, the one class limit may be lifted under certain circumstances. Under both the new and old rules, M1 students are not permitted to take any online classes. The change will also apply to students attending schools that start the semester with in-person classes but later transition to online-only learning. *US Immigration and Customs Enforcement*.

–Jordan M. Warchol, MD, MPH

Where the Economic Relief Went.

According to data released by the Trump administration, restaurants, car dealerships and medical offices were the [largest recipients](#) of funds earmarked for small businesses in the Paycheck Protection Program, a coronavirus relief program established by Congress in March to provide cash directly to businesses with fewer than 500 employees that were affected by the coronavirus outbreak. [Two sets](#) of data were released, one representing loans of \$150,000 or more, which accounted for less than 15 percent of all money distributed through the program, while the other offered statistics for loans less than \$150,000. The data indicate that the relief program has distributed \$4.9 million in loans, with an average payout of \$107,000. Some critics have pointed out that small businesses were hardly the greatest beneficiaries of this program, and some recipients have close ties to the current administration. Initially the program was set to end on June 30th, but with \$131.9 billion still available to be allocated, President Trump signed legislation over the weekend to extend the application deadline to August 8th. *New York Times*.

–Jordan M. Warchol, MD, MPH

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