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Social Capital May Increase Social Distancing

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The practice of social distancing has been widely credited with reducing the spread of the coronavirus (or “bending of the curve”) in countries around the world. Even after the pandemic winds down, a new study suggests that occasional social distancing may be required over the next two years to ensure that adequate critical medical care facilities are consistently available over time.¹ Relatedly, a study of the 1918 Flu Pandemic found that early public health interventions, such as social distancing, not only reduced the number of deaths in the U.S. but also led to a more rapid post-pandemic rebound in manufacturing activity.² This in turn raises the question of whether certain factors predict or are associated with greater adherence to social distancing requirements within U.S. counties.

A new study³ by Princeton University’s Professor Patrick Sharkey, which has not undergone peer review, examines factors associated with greater social distancing. Among these factors he includes the NERCRD’s social capital index,⁴ which measure the local connections and bonds that act as “the glue” holding together a community; some communities in the U.S. have higher stocks of social capital than others. Prof. Sharkey finds that counties with higher stocks of social capital also score better in terms of following social distancing guidelines. To measure adherence to the guidelines, he uses data from a company⁵ that tracks people’s mobility, including what is deemed “non-essential” travel.⁶ Other controls in this preliminary study included poverty; population; unemployment; median household Income, educational attainment; as well as voting patterns and attitudes towards climate change.

With the threat of recurring waves of coronavirus infections in the fall and beyond, social distancing may remain a critically important tool at least until more COVID-19 tests and perhaps vaccines are available. If the results of this new study are confirmed in future research, then communities with higher stocks of social capital will likely fare better in terms of staying on top of future viral outbreaks,

¹ Kissler, S.M. et al., (2020) Projecting the transmission dynamics of SARS-CoV-2 through the postpandemic period, *Science* 10.1126/science.abb5793.

² Correia, S. and S. Luck, and E. Verner (2020) Pandemics Depress the Economy, Public Health Interventions Do Not: Evidence from the 1918 Flu (March 30, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3561560> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3561560>

³ Sharkey, P. (2020) The US has a collective action problem that’s larger than the coronavirus crisis (Apr 10, 2020, 4:40pm EDT): <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/10/21216216/coronavirus-social-distancing-texas-unacast-climate-change>

⁴ Available: <https://aese.psu.edu/nercrd/community/social-capital-resources/social-capital-variables-for-2014>

⁵ <https://www.unacast.com/covid19>

⁶ Another data source on close to real-time human mobility is: B. Tau, “Government Tracking How People Move Around in Coronavirus Pandemic,” Wall Street Journal, March 28, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/government-tracking-how-people-move-around-in-coronavirus-pandemic-11585393202>.

as social distancing rules are put into place again. Conversely, in communities with lower stocks additional measures and safeguards may have to be put in place to protect overall community health.

In our research we have found social capital to contribute to local economic well-being; this form of capital promises also to play a positive role in mitigating the adverse effects of the COVID-19 crisis. At first glance the finding that social capital increases social distance appears counterintuitive, because individuals in communities with higher stocks of social capital also tend to associate more with one another in civic and social activities, etc. The findings of Prof. Sharkey's study suggest that civic-minded adherence to rules and regulations outweighs the desire to participate in social activities and gatherings in these places.

About the Author: Goetz is Director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and Penn State Professor of Agricultural and Regional Economics. He is the 2019/2020 President of the North American Regional Science Council. Contact: sgoetz@psu.edu I am grateful to David Fleming for drawing my attention to the Sharkey study, but am solely responsible for the content of this brief.

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