Social Capital May Increase Social Distancing

NERCRD COVID-19 Issues Brief No. 2020-4

Stephan J. Goetz, Director, NERCRD and Professor of Agricultural and Regional Economics, Penn State
April 15, 2020.

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 is 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,

4 Available: https://aese.psu.edu/nercrd/community/social-capital-resources/social-capital-variables-for-2014
5 https://www.unacast.com/covid19
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.

About this series: These issues briefs are designed to provide information quickly or stimulate discussion, and they have not undergone regular peer review. NERC RD receives core funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (award #2018-51150-28696) as well as from Multistate/Regional Research and/or Extension Appropriations (project #NE1749), the Northeastern Regional Association of State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors, and the Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences. Any opinions are solely those of the authors.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The University is committed to equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment for all persons. It is the policy of the University to maintain an environment free of harassment and free of discrimination against any person because of age, race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, creed, service in the uniformed services (as defined in state and federal law), veteran status, sex, sexual orientation, marital or family status, pregnancy, pregnancy-related conditions, physical or mental disability, gender, perceived gender, gender identity, genetic information, or political ideas. Discriminatory conduct and harassment, as well as sexual misconduct and relationship violence, violates the dignity of individuals, impedes the realization of the University’s educational mission, and will not be tolerated. Direct all inquiries regarding nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Office, The Pennsylvania State University, 328 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802-5901; Email: aao@psu.edu; Tel: 814-863-0471.