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# In Social Distancing We (do not) Trust

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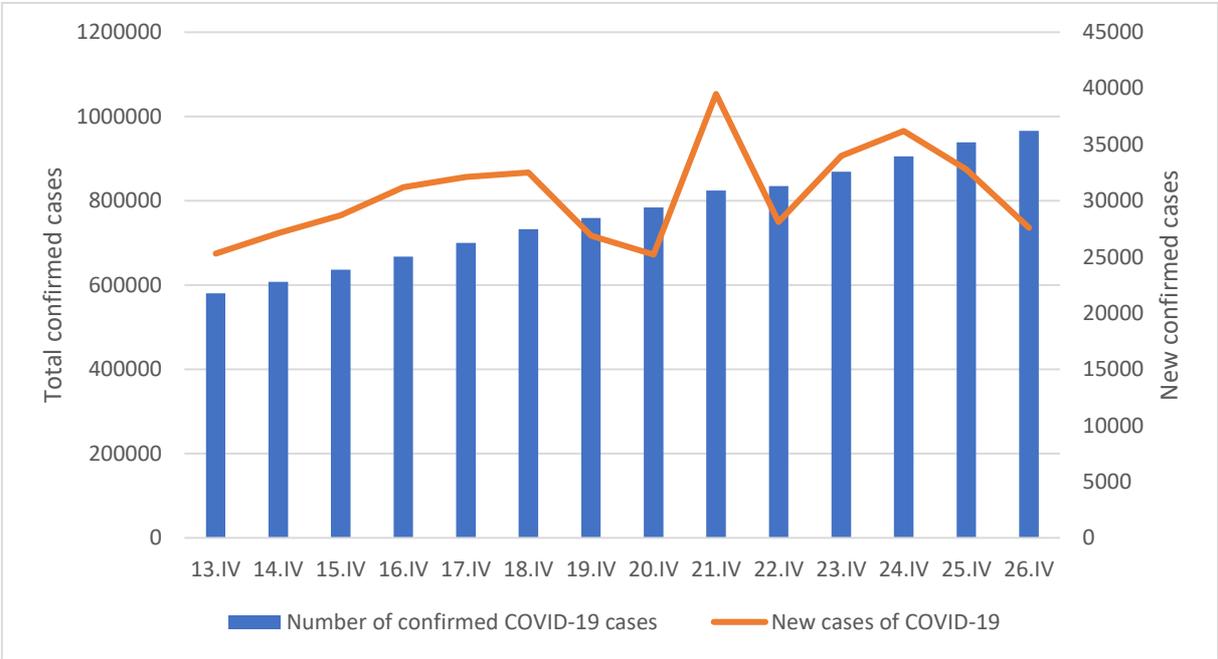
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# In Social Distancing We (do not) Trust

Policy Paper – Ryan Jacobsen, April 2020

In the land of the free where the constitutional rights of the people are above all else, and where the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the hardest, many are sick of being told to stay home. Protests against lockdown measures have occurred in 20 different states (as of April 26<sup>th</sup>) with hundreds if not thousands of people attending these protests, going completely against the advice of virtually every infectious disease expert to keep a safe distance from other people. As the number of cases in the US has surpassed 950,000, the protestors are, ironically, prolonging the need of the very thing they are protesting against: stay-at-home orders.

**Figure 1:** Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and number of new confirmed COVID-19 cases last two weeks



**Source:** John Hopkins University<sup>1</sup>

The majority of people in the US are obeying the stay-at-home orders, and in a recent Pew Center poll 66% of Americans asked said they are concerned that state governments will lift restrictions too quickly.<sup>2</sup> Yet, thousands of Americans still gather together to demand the restrictions be lifted immediately. A lot of this is out of frustration from being cooped up at home without work. These protests, however, are likely going to prolong the need for stay-at-home orders.

<sup>1</sup> John Hopkins University. “Coronavirus COVID-19 Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering” 2020

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Center Research. “Most Americans Say Trump Was Too Slow in Initial Response to Coronavirus Threat”. 2020 <https://www.people-press.org/2020/04/16/most-americans-say-trump-was-too-slow-in-initial-response-to-coronavirus-threat/>

While the protests are kicking off, conspiracy theories are beginning to spread rapidly online. Conspiracy theories are to be expected, and they generally do not pose much of a threat to public health as they are confined to niche groups. In this case, however, two theories have found the spotlight of some mainstream media: the stay-at-home orders are a democratic ploy to remove Donald Trump from the presidency, and Bill Gates is trying to cull the population and inject tracking microchips into people through COVID-19 vaccines. What is most surprising, especially about the Bill Gates theory, is that quite a few famous and influential people have been spreading it, making it seem like it has some legitimacy.

## Conspiracy Theories

The theories being perpetuated in the US have most likely contributed to some people disobeying stay-at-home orders and not taking the virus seriously. One of the more widespread conspiracy theories comes from Rush Limbaugh, host of the most popular radio show in the US with 15.5 million listeners every week. Limbaugh claims that the current measures in place to control the spread of the virus are really an attempt by the Democratic Party and left-wing media to remove President Trump from power in the upcoming election. During an April 13<sup>th</sup> show, Limbaugh said, “this shutdown is a political effort to get rid of Donald Trump in the election this November”<sup>3</sup>. On April 20<sup>th</sup> during his show he reiterated this point saying, “these Democratic governors are hell-bent on keeping it shut down... This is part of the presidential campaign, for this economy to become as weak as they can make it, for more and more people to lose their jobs, that’s how they think they’re finally gonna get Trump”<sup>4</sup>. This enforces the idea that the virus is not serious and is merely being blown out of proportion by the media. At the protests, it is not uncommon to see signs along the lines of “COVID-19 is a lie” or “FAKE NEWS”.

The most recent theory to take social media by storm is that the pandemic was created by Bill Gates to install tracking software into people through vaccines and to depopulate the planet. Originating from a Twitter thread by conspiracy YouTuber Jordan Sather, this theory has become very widespread. Robert F. Kennedy Jr, a lawyer and grand nephew of John F. Kennedy, has picked up on this theory. On April 13<sup>th</sup> he wrote in an article on Canadian conspiracy website Global Research, “vaccines, for Bill Gates, are a strategic philanthropy that feed his many vaccine-related businesses (including Microsoft’s ambition to control a global vaccination ID enterprise) and give him dictatorial control of global health policy”<sup>5</sup>.

What is most surprising is that this theory has made it into more mainstream media. Laura Ingraham, who hosts the fourth most popular cable news show in the US<sup>6</sup>, has mentioned it by tweeting, “Bill Gates is seeing his utopian globalization project go up in smoke”<sup>7</sup>. Rogan O’Handley, a popular social media political commentator with over a million followers across

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<sup>3</sup> The Rush Limbaugh Show. “The Ongoing Effort to Sabotage Donald Trump” 2020 <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2020/04/13/the-ongoing-effort-to-sabotage-donald-trump/>

<sup>4</sup> The Rush Limbaugh Show. “More Research Suggests The Lockdown Wasn’t Needed” 2020 <https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2020/04/20/more-research-suggests-the-lockdown-wasnt-needed/>

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Jr. “Gates’ Globalist Vaccine Agenda: A Win-Win for Pharma and Mandatory Vaccination”. Global Research, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/gates-globalist-vaccine-agenda-win-win-pharma-mandatory-vaccination/5709493>

<sup>6</sup> AdWeek. “Basic Cable Ranker: Q1 2020 (Total Viewers)” 2020, [https://www.scribd.com/document/454237396/Basic-cable-ranker-Q1-2020-Total-Viewers#from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/document/454237396/Basic-cable-ranker-Q1-2020-Total-Viewers#from_embed)

<sup>7</sup> Laura Ingraham (@IngrahamAngle) 2020 <https://twitter.com/ingrahamangle/status/1250601395935379461>

Twitter and Instagram, tweeted in a reply to Bill Gates criticizing the US halting funding to WHO “the fact that you like WHO only reaffirms my belief that WHO is trash... Go depopulate some other planet”<sup>8</sup>. Former Trump staffer Roger Stone, former representative of Texas’ 14<sup>th</sup> district Ron Paul, candidate for congress in California’s 34<sup>th</sup> district Joanne Wright, activist Candace Owens, 6-time Mr. Olympia Dorian Yates, and Pastor Adam Fannin are a few other well-known figures who have spread this theory.

If the belief that Bill Gates is attempting to installing tracking microchips into people through COVID-19 vaccines continues to spread and gain traction, especially with the help of well known and respected media personalities like Laura Ingraham and Candace Owens, then people will become less inclined to get a COVID-19 vaccine when it eventually gets approved for use. This conspiracy theory has been brought into the mainstream media and has been given legitimacy in the eyes of many of the viewers/followers of the celebrities who share it. A White House petition to investigate Bill and his wife Melinda Gates for medical malpractice and crimes against humanity was launched on April 10<sup>th</sup>. If it amassed 100,000 signatures by May 10<sup>th</sup> it would require an official response from the White House. It currently has over 400,000 signatures. The White House has not yet issued an official response.<sup>9</sup>

## Conflict with WHO

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, President Trump tweeted that he was going to look into the US funding of the World Health Organization, on April 14<sup>th</sup> he officially announced that the US would halt its funding of WHO.<sup>10</sup> He accused WHO of trying to cover-up the COVID-19 outbreak, and for mishandling its response. President Trump said, “Had the WHO done its job to get medical experts into China to objectively assess the situation on the ground and to call out China's lack of transparency, the outbreak could have been contained at its source with very little death”<sup>11</sup>. The US is the largest funder of WHO.<sup>12</sup>

This move has been criticised harshly, and President Trump has been accused of being hypocritical. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic to be a “public health emergency of international concern”<sup>13</sup>, and on March 11<sup>th</sup> WHO declared that it met the criteria to be declared a pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Throughout February and early March, President Trump reassured the American people that the virus was not so bad and that the situation was under control. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, President Trump would compare COVID-19 to the common flu and

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<sup>8</sup> Rogan O’Handley (@DC\_Draino) 2020

[https://twitter.com/dc\\_draino/status/1250458430273474565](https://twitter.com/dc_draino/status/1250458430273474565)

<sup>9</sup> We The People “We Call For Investigations Into The ‘Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’ For Medical Malpractice & Crimes Against Humanity”. 2020 <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/we-call-investigations-bill-melinda-gates-foundation-medical-malpractice-crimes-against-humanity>

<sup>10</sup> Ollstein, Alice Miranda. “Trump halts funding to World Health Organisation”. Politico, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/14/trump-world-health-organization-funding-186786>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> World Health Organisation. “Assessed contributions payable by Member States and Associate Members 2020-2021” 2020, [https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/2020-21\\_AC\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/2020-21_AC_Summary.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organisation. “Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)” 2020, [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov))

<sup>14</sup> World Health Organisation. “WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020” 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

then say the now famous quote, “when you have 15 people, and the 15 within a couple of days is going to be down to zero, that’s a pretty good job we’ve done”<sup>15</sup>. He would declare a national emergency on March 13<sup>th</sup>, and on March 17<sup>th</sup> he would say “I’ve always known this is a... pandemic. I’ve felt it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic.”<sup>16</sup>

It appears that President Trump’s defunding of WHO is his attempt to point the blame for the situation in the US. His claims that WHO did not do its job and reacted too slowly are open for debate. What is true is that he ignored WHO’s early declarations and continually downplayed the situation throughout February and early March. January 30<sup>th</sup> WHO declares it a public health emergency, and as late as March 9<sup>th</sup> President Trump was still comparing COVID-19 to the common flu, “So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of Coronavirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!”<sup>17</sup>. This March 9<sup>th</sup> tweet demonstrates that President Trump did not, in fact, know that it was a pandemic before anyone else.

While no one person or organisation should take all the blame for the situation in the US, President Trump using WHO as a scapegoat is not conducive to helping improve the situation. Defunding them in the middle of a global pandemic is also extremely counterintuitive. Regardless of whether one believes the WHO acted appropriately or not, save the blaming, punishments, and investigations for when the world is not in turmoil.

## The protestors

The majority of people protesting believe that the stay-at-home orders imposed in many US states violate the constitutional rights of the people. They come with signs with American revolution era slogans like “give me liberty or give me death”, others come with tongue-in-cheek slogans like “my body, my choice” (referring to the popular pro-abortion slogan), or “give me liberty or give me COVID-19”. Other popular slogans reference businesses deemed essential being allowed to remain open: “my constitutional rights are essential”, “freedom is essential”, “liberty is essential”, and “our rights are essential”.

President Trump has seemingly been encouraging these protests on Twitter. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, in three separate tweets, President Trump said, “LIBERATE MICHIGAN”<sup>18</sup>, “LIBERATE MINNESOTA”<sup>19</sup>, LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. It is under siege!”<sup>20</sup>. “LIBERATE” is in line with the protestors belief that the lockdowns are against the constitution, and the people must free themselves from the tyranny of the government.

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<sup>15</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Conference” February 27 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-conference/>

<sup>16</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing” March 17 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-4/>

<sup>17</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) 2020 <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1237027356314869761>

<sup>18</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) 2020 <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1251169217531056130>

<sup>19</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) 2020 <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1251168994066944003>

<sup>20</sup> Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) 2020 <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1251169987110330372>

The most well known of these protests took place in Michigan. Called *Operation Gridlock* the protestors rallied against Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s decision to extend the stay-at-home orders through the end of April. Michigan is one of the most affected states, with over 32,000 cases and over 2,400 deaths.<sup>21</sup> Other protests also called *Operation Gridlock* have since popped up in Colorado and Pennsylvania. Protestors in Michigan, with a handful of exceptions, obeyed the social distancing rules and protested inside of their vehicles. Several thousand vehicles caused a gridlock (hence the name) around the state capitol, and only around 150 people got out of their vehicles to protest on the capitol lawn.<sup>22</sup> The protestors want to be able to return to work, say Governor Whitmer’s orders are unconstitutional, and believing that since the curve has been flattened in Michigan there is no need for the stay-at-home order anymore, a sentiment shared among many of the protestors across the country.

## The irony

The irony is that the stay-at-home orders in these states is what is helping to flatten the curve. If people stay home as much as possible, the spread of the virus is minimised, and the stay-at-home orders can end sooner. By gathering together to protest, the stay-at-home orders have to remain for longer. As Governor Whitmer said, “they don’t like being in this stay-at-home order and they may have just created the need to lengthen it”<sup>23</sup>. With how quickly the virus spreads, and how people can still pass on the virus even without symptoms, having hundreds of people gathered together to protest COVID-19 restrictions could very easily have created the need for stronger and longer restrictions.

Since COVID-19 has an incubation period of up to 14 days, with very rare cases having longer, stay-at-home orders and other restrictions should remain in place for a minimum of two more weeks after the protests end, perhaps longer if a second wave hits. Dr. Frank LoVecchio, an emergency room doctor from Arizona, said “if there’s 100 people gathering, based on what we know, 5 to 7 people will have it and spread it to other people there”<sup>24</sup>. This does not bode well for the thousands of protestors, and many health experts are predicting a significant increase of cases stemming from the protests. Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist at Harvard’s school of public health tweeted, “2500 anti-lockdown rally in Olympia Washington. I predict a new epidemic surge... so increase 2-4 weeks from now”<sup>25</sup>.

Looking at Dr. LoVecchio’s statement, 5 to 7 out of 100 people are infected with COVID-19 presumably with mild or no symptoms. If we extrapolate that with Dr. Feigl-Ding’s number of 2,500 protestors gathered together in Olympia, we can estimate that there was likely between 125 and 175 people at the Olympia protest who were infected. The  $R_0$  rate of COVID-19 is estimated to be 5.7, meaning an infected person will, on average, infect 5 to 6 other people.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Government of Michigan. “Michigan Data” 2020, [https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98163\\_98173---,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/coronavirus/0,9753,7-406-98163_98173---,00.html)

<sup>22</sup> Berg Kara, and Paul Egan. “Thousands converge on Lansing to protest Whitmer’s stay home order” Detroit Free Press, 2020 <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/04/15/lansing-capitol-protest-michigan-stay-home-order/5139472002/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

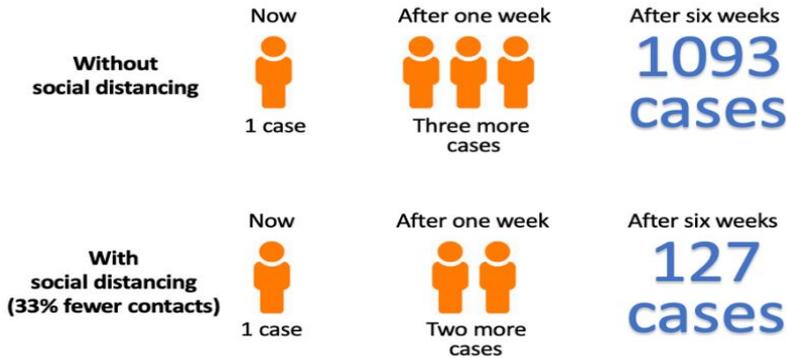
<sup>24</sup> Garcia, Nicole. “Arizona ER doctor says protests to reopen the state could spark a second wave of COVID-19” Fox 10 Phoenix, 2020 <https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/arizona-er-doctor-says-protests-to-reopen-the-state-could-spark-a-second-wave-of-covid-19>

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/DrEricDing/status/1252184608965365761>

<sup>26</sup> Ke Ruian, Nick Hengartner, Yen-Ting Lin, Ethan Romer-Severson, Steven Sanche, and Chonggang Xu. “High Contagiousness and Rapid Spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2” Emerging Infectious Diseases, Volume 26, 2020, [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282_article)

If the 125 estimated infected people at the Olympia protest infect 5 people each because they decided to go to a protest rather than stay home, that is 625 newly infected people. These 625 then go on to infect 5 more people each over several days following the protest, and there are now roughly 3125 new cases stemming from one protest. It is not hard to see how, quite quickly, 125 sick people can become tens of thousands. Apply this to the dozens of protests taking place across the country, and it is easy to see why many believe a second wave is imminent in the US. The  $R_0$  rate can be reduced with measures like social distancing (see figure 2): in South Korea the  $R_0$  rate was just 1.5 in early March thanks in large part to social distancing measures, but was estimated to be 11 on the Diamond Princess cruise ship where it was impossible to properly implement social distancing.<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 2:** Effect of social distancing with an  $R_0$  of 3



**Source:** Dr. Robin Thompson, University of Oxford<sup>28</sup>

### Why it matters

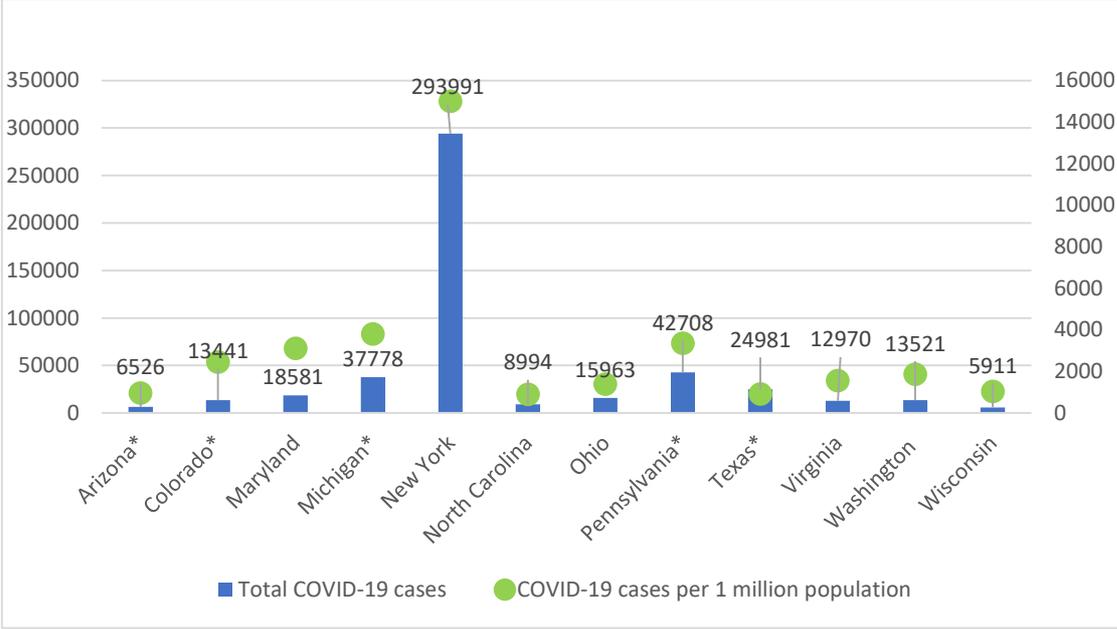
Conspiracy theories while entertaining can cause significant damage. If people stop taking COVID-19 seriously because they believe it is all a ploy to oust President Trump from power, we have the same problem we had a month ago with people ignoring proper safety measures because they do not view it as a threat. If, on the other hand, they believe it is all an attempt by Bill Gates to control the world through vaccines, then they will not get a vaccine when it is made available. This is also very troublesome: in the study done by Ruian Ke et al, they estimate that in order to stop transmission of COVID-19 (without social distancing or quarantines) at the very minimum 82% of the population needs to be immune to the disease either through vaccines or prior infection.<sup>29</sup> It is not yet known if being infected, and recovering, makes one immune to COVID-19 in the future. Social media has become an integrated part of our world and how we learn and form our personal beliefs and opinions, but it has made it difficult to tell what is true and what is not.

<sup>27</sup> Choi, Wongyeong, Gerardo Chowell, Yiseul Lee, Eunha Shim, and Amna Tariq. “Transmission potential and severity of COVID-19 in South Korea” International Journal of Infectious Diseases, 2020, [https://www.ijidonline.com/article/S1201-9712\(20\)30150-8/pdf](https://www.ijidonline.com/article/S1201-9712(20)30150-8/pdf)

<sup>28</sup> University of Oxford. “Coronavirus Modelling – why social distancing works” 2020, <https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/node/35371>

<sup>29</sup> Ke, Ruian et al. [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/7/20-0282_article)

**Figure 3:** Total COVID-19 cases and cases per 1 million population in US states with more than 5,000 confirmed cases where protests took place. Asterisk indicates that state has an exemption on public gatherings for religious events



**Source:** Worldometers<sup>30</sup>

The protests this week in combination with many churches and churchgoers defying stay-at-home orders on Easter a week ago could lead to a significant increase in COVID-19 cases over the next couple of weeks. The US is far from alone in this regard as protests have been taking place in Russia, India, Brazil, and Kenya and several other countries. The majority of people in the US support the stay-at-home orders, it is only a slim minority who are out there protesting and disobeying the orders. It is a sad irony that this minority of people is likely prolonging the need for stay-at-home orders. Social distancing works and should remain in place until the threat of the virus is significantly minimised. If the parachute is slowing your fall, you still keep it on until you touch the ground. You do not take it off mid-air saying, “I’m slowing down, I don’t need this parachute anymore”.

**Recommendations**

- Do not end social distancing and stay-at-home measures early. It is very frustrating to be cooped up at home without work for weeks, but what is more frustrating is having to spend months cooped up at home without work because the social distancing measures ended too early and the second wave of COVID-19 hit harder than the first.
- Mainstream media, and government authorities should do their best to share facts and to try to debunk and prevent conspiracy theories that could be potentially harmful. The White House’s response to the Bill Gates investigation petition will have a significant influence one way or the other.

<sup>30</sup> Worldometers. “United States, Coronavirus” 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/>



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His fields of study at MGIMO and MIIS are focused on nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear policy, and nuclear energy. Currently an intern at the Institute for Politics and Society in Prague, he also completed an editorial internship in the summer of 2019 at Liden & Denz in Saint Petersburg.

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