

Measuring Overreaction

Scott Sumner is happy to admit that we've overreacted to Covid, but presents the overreaction as relatively mild:

Pundits often criticize the US government for overreacting to Covid, especially the excessive mandates for masks, vaccines, etc. I share their concern. But I also wonder where some of these people have been. On a list of regulatory overreaction, these mandates don't even make my "top 100". For decades, overreaction to tiny safety risks has been getting worse, with no end in sight.

Elaborating:

Unlike airline crashes, Covid has killed roughly 800,000 Americans, despite all sorts of social distancing, of which nearly 200,000 are less than 65-years old. Yes, we are overreacting, but it's not like with airline crashes where the risk is entirely imaginary. Covid really is somewhat dangerous; not in absolute terms, but at least relative to the almost absurd safety of modern America.

In a sense, Scott is completely right.

If you measure overreaction using the *ratio* of the reaction to the *actual* harm, then the Covid response probably doesn't even make the U.S. "top 100." After all, many government crusades target "problems" that cause zero harm. Or, like immigration, negative harm.

In another sense, however, Scott is completely wrong.

If you measure overreaction using the *total* amount of effort that fails a cost-benefit test, then Covid has arguably been the greatest overreaction in U.S. history.

By my math, the total cost of the reaction for the U.S. was roughly *fifteen times* the total cost of the pandemic itself. (Similar calculations for Canada [here](#)). But that's fifteen times a genuinely enormous cost of 800,000 lives, implying many trillions of dollars of

overreaction.

In contrast: If the total cost of the reaction to shoe bombs was fifteen times the total cost of shoe bombs, the total harm would still be trivial, because shoe bombs themselves are trivial. You could have a 1000:1 ratio, and the *sum* of the harm of the overreaction would remain moderate. You might argue that a 1000:1 ratio is somehow more intellectually jarring. But if you could push a button to get rid of just one overreaction, you should clearly push the button that undoes more *total* harm, not the one with the most ludicrous cost/benefit ratio.

Sumner also remarks:

I don't disagree with those who point to excessive fear of Covid, but why is anyone surprised? I'm surprised the regulations aren't far worse. Given our history of overreaction, I would have expected us to emulate Australia.

Indeed. Which is why despite everything, I'm now convinced that *the U.S. had the least-bad Covid response of any major English-speaking country*. The United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand all beat us in terms of fatalities/population. But almost no part of the U.S. ever put innocent people under house arrest. For most of Covid, I lived in one of the strictest regions of the U.S., yet there was never a day I couldn't walk outside with my family, mask-free. I never even had to pretend to shop or exercise.

More importantly, due to America's strange experiment in federalist dictatorship, large swaths of the U.S. returned to near-normalcy in a matter of months. This didn't merely allow these states' original populations to breathe freely again. It also provided an escape valve for locationally-flexible, risk-tolerant people around the country. And despite some minor exceptions, no U.S. state seriously tried to close its borders to other states. Thank you Texas, Florida, and Tennessee, where I've now lived for about five months of Covid.

Do I damn the U.S. with faint praise? Sure. But when I talk to my friends elsewhere in the Anglosphere, I still pity them for the tyranny they've endured – and often continue to endure.