

Safety Can Be Hazardous to Our Health

Kudos to Glenn Greenwald, a rare leftist voice of sanity on so many issues, for opening his recent article this way:

In virtually every realm of public policy, Americans embrace policies which they know will kill people, sometimes large numbers of people. They do so not because they are psychopaths but because they are rational: they assess that those deaths that will inevitably result from the policies they support are worth it in exchange for the benefits those policies provide. This rational cost-benefit analysis, even when not expressed in such explicit or crude terms, is foundational to public policy debates — except when it comes to COVID, where it has been bizarrely declared off-limits.

He goes on to write that the “quickest and most guaranteed way to save hundreds of thousands of lives with policy changes would be to ban the use of automobiles, or severely restrict their usage to those authorized by the state on the ground of essential need (e.g., ambulances or food-delivery vehicles), or at least lower the nationwide speed limit to 25 mph.” (Watch the video version.)

But no one advocates any of those restrictions, and anyone who did would be dismissed as a fringe character. But why, considering how many lives would surely be saved (1.3 million worldwide)? It’s not because opponents don’t care about human life; it’s because people understand that the costs in so many ways would be far worse the benefits:

It is because we employ a rational framework of cost-benefit analysis, whereby, when making public policy choices, we do not examine only one side of the ledger (number of people who will die if cars are permitted) but also consider the immense costs generated by policies that would prevent those deaths (massive limits on our ability to travel, vastly increased times to get from one place to another, restrictions on what we can experience in our lives, enormous financial costs from returning to the pre-automobile days). So foundational is the use of this cost-benefit analysis that it is embraced and touted by everyone from right-wing economists to the left-wing European environmental policy group CIVITAS....

Exactly so. Once you put safety not just first but above everything else you’re able to come up with the most insane proposals for reshaping society. Heaven help us from those who are concerned only about safety.

Risk is integral to life, social life included. As Thomas Sowell puts it, there are no solutions, only trade-offs—you can’t do only one thing. So each of us does cost-benefit analyses all the time in everyday life. As individuals we could be completely protected from other people

simply by living as hermits. But few choose to do so for entirely understandable reasons. Instead we live among others, taking reasonable precautions. Indeed, some of the most admired places to live are the most densely populated places on earth. We accept the costs because the benefits dwarf them—so much so that we don't normally have to explain it to other people.

But some people forget to apply this common sense in particular matters. Greenwald's target is draconian COVID-19 policy: "It is now extremely common in Western democracies for large factions of citizens to demand that *any measures* undertaken to prevent COVID deaths are vital, regardless of the costs imposed by those policies." Yet, he continues, "It is impossible to overstate the costs imposed on children of all ages from the sustained, enduring and severe disruptions to their lives justified in the name of COVID.

"However, "The latest CDC data reveals that the grand total of children under 18 who have died in the U.S. from COVID since the start of the pandemic sixteen months ago is 361 — in a country of 330 million people, including 74.2 million people under 18."

Children, of course, are not the only ones who have suffered from lockdowns and lesser restrictions on their activities.

Unfortunately, opponents of these blunt-instrument, liberty-violating approaches, such as the authors and signers of the Great Barrington Declaration, are smeared, if not as uncaring sociopaths, then as blind ideologues or sell-outs.

Greenwald also properly see a class conflict in how the COVID policy has affected people:

The richer you are, the less likely you are to be affected by these harms from COVID restrictions. Wealth allows people to leave their homes, hire private tutors, temporarily live in the countryside or mountains, or enjoy outdoor space at home. It is the poor and the economically deprived who bear the worst of these deprivations, which — along with not having children at all — may be one reason they are assigned little to no weight in mainstream discourse.

He emphasizes that "this is not an argument in favor of or against any particular policy undertaken in the name of fighting COVID. What it is, instead, is an attempt to highlight the pervasive and deeply misguided refusal to assign any costs to the harms caused by anti-COVID policies themselves."

Consider the "precautionary principle," the admonition that nothing should be allowed unless it's proven to be totally safe. Now think of where mankind would be today had our ancestors had adopted this principle. The human race would be considerably smaller. *Has it ever occurred to its advocates that the precautionary principle cannot even pass its own test?*

COVID is only the latest example of how the obsession with safety can be hazardous to our health. It is by no means the only one. The other most prominent case relates to fossil fuels and climate change. As I discussed recently, if the economic way of thinking—that is, the cost-benefit trade-off approach—informed the discussion of the environment and our place in it, that discussion would look very different. Why? Because people would realize that the elimination or radical reduction of fossil-fuel use worldwide literally would shorten billions of lives, and make the rest of them miserable. Even a small benefit from oil, gas, and coal would outweigh that cost. But in fact the benefits are immense.