

## Equitable Immunization: It's the Economy, Stupid

*By Dr. Robert F. Breiman*

Let's begin with a premise: Fair, equitable and optimal use of safe and effective COVID19 vaccines is not only an ethical prerogative, but one that will lead to immense economic and societal benefit.

Rapidly developing safe and effective COVID19 vaccines will be an unparalleled achievement. But the objectives for investment in accelerated vaccine development, testing and production will not realize their intended potential unless:

- People are willing to be immunized.
- Communication and context-specific messaging builds broad-based vaccine demand across a variety of demographics, locations, and race and ethnicities.
- Immunization programs successfully address challenges created by the unique characteristics of these novel vaccines.
- And, critically, there is substantial attention to fair, equitable and priority-based access to immunization.

Given the initial limited vaccine supply, it will be crucial that vaccines be administered to people who meet specific priority criteria, addressing two overarching considerations: a) risks from severe disease and mortality; b) overwhelming risks for becoming exposed to the virus.

The first consideration is straightforward. The second consideration needs some explanation. If essential and critical workers get sick and suffer short-term and long-term morbidity (or death) from COVID-19, they will be out of commission – consequently, our collective economic well-being and security will suffer substantially. Said in the reverse, having a robust, fully functioning economy depends on the well-being of these people.

It might not be immediately and reflexively obvious why ensuring equitable distribution of an effective prevention modality is critical to our collective economic security. There are three bases for this assertion:

1. This pandemic affects our society unevenly: the greatest incidence of infection, severe illness and death is on people whose living and working conditions are associated with an immensely increased potential to be exposed to the virus –the work responsibilities for these people cannot be carried out remotely.
2. People whose work functions put them at increased risk for exposure to the virus are carrying out essential responsibilities for workplaces and for society. These key workers provide law enforcement and security, emergency response, health care, and public transportation. They maintain power and communication grids, collect our trash, work in restaurants and help to maintain our food chain.

3. There is another type of essential worker to consider too. For companies, industries and sectors of the economy that are operating almost entirely remotely or are on pause during the pandemic, to return to full, robust function requires a healthy workforce to carry out the work, such as maintenance, cleaning and reception, necessary for workplaces to open and function. Many of those who carry out this service work may be at increased risk to transport the virus due to their living and transport conditions. Their well-being and protection from COVID-19 illness is vital to fully functioning workplaces. Many higher-level employees can continue to work from home, but those responsible for the functioning of the workplace itself cannot. And often these people are at increased risk for severe illness and death due to COVID.

It is hard to imagine a cogent argument that achieving high coverage rates of a safe and effective prevention modality in people who are at disproportionate risk for COVID hospitalization and death would not avert health costs associated with hospitalization and managing post-illness sequelae. It is best left to economic modelers to create scenarios where the low salaried and hourly workforce – those who keep office buildings open and running, pick fruits and vegetables (and, yes, this includes undocumented people), work in food service, drive buses and run trains – are able to work because COVID19 is prevented, or are not because they became ill, perhaps even hospitalized or die. It is not a question of whether an immunization program that assures access to safe and effective vaccine, provides information and resonant dialogue for people at disproportionate risk, and simply achieves high immunization coverage rates, will result in societal economic gain. The real question is what will be the magnitude of the dollars saved. An immunization program run optimally and equitably could yield immense savings.

People who are at increased risk because of the above three considerations are often marginalized by society and tend to have poorer access to health care and opportunities for prevention services. They may also be likely to not trust this particular vaccine without transparent, targeted dialogue and context-specific communication efforts to provide useful and interpretable information and address doubts and lack of trust. Consequentially, there must be intentional efforts to address systemic inequities and ensure that no one is marginalized when it comes to interpretable, demand-generating information about COVID19 vaccines, accompanied by a highly functional and efficient process for getting immunized.

At minimum, efforts are needed on:

1. Implementing a multimodal communication and messaging strategy that generates “vaccine demand,” including in populations at disproportionate risk from COVID-19. This will include sentiment analysis, qualitative rapid ethnographic surveys, bidirectional community engagement and message development, and community, regional and national-based communication efforts followed by reassessments and refinements of messaging.



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999 PEACHTREE ST NE

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2. Building a community-base for immunization working with houses of worships and community-based organizations to be trusted sources of information and to provide access to immunization.
3. Working with state and local health departments, and big box pharmacies (which will be allocated certain allotments of vaccine) on providing tools to help them to focus immunization efforts on priority populations including essential workers and marginalized populations.
4. Facilitating corporations and smaller companies to strategize to consider what steps they can take to promote and support immunization for their employees whose work, transport and living conditions increase their potential for COVID-19 infection.

While these are the right steps to take from a public health standpoint, they are also fundamentally sound for ensuring rapid and robust economic recovery.