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Pandemic Stress Indicator: Expert Panel

Wave 2: June 2, 2020

AUTHORS

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IGPA is developing several Pandemic Stress Indicators, designed to evaluate the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Illinois residents. This first stress

indicator is a frequent poll of three sets of experts about pandemic policies.

The Pandemic Stress Indicators grew out of the work of IGPA's Task Force on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic (<https://igpa.uillinois.edu/page/igpa-covid-19-pandemic-task-force>).

Experts on economics, public health, and/or vulnerable populations from across Illinois have generously agreed to provide opinions on pandemic policies. In answering the surveys, panelists provide only their own personal views and do not offer official positions on behalf of their respective institutions.

IGPA invited about 50 experts to our new survey on June 2. We received 30 responses.

Bright or dark near future?

As most of Illinois shifted from Phase 2 ("Flattening") to Phase 3 ("Recovery"), many restrictions on normal-life were eased or, in some cases, lifted. We asked the experts about when Chicago might make this same shift, and whether (or when) they expect a further transition, either a welcome jump to Phase 4 (Revitalization) or a regrettable slip backward to Phase 2.

On the first question, respondents living in the greater Chicago metropolitan area were mostly optimistic: about one quarter said they weren't sure if Chicago would shift to Phase 3 before the end of June, of the remainder, three-quarters expected that it would. About half of downstate respondents said they were not sure, while the remainder were evenly split between optimistic and pessimistic. Even experts are perhaps forming their expectations as much from first-hand observation as from analysis official data.

Somewhat ominously, 22 of the 30 said that they expect some part of the state to revert to Phase 2, following worsening data, five said this will happen before the end of July and 17 expected the bad news between August and December.

Optimism, by way of an expectation that at least some parts of the state will see improvements in data and a concomitant shift to Phase 4, was a little scarcer. Half of the respondents had no expectation of improvement or they were not sure, seven thought that parts of the state could be in Phase 4 before July is up, and the other eight thought it would happen in the autumn or early in 2021.

Our experts had many different combinations of expectations: some were unsure about both predictions; some were both pessimistic about near-term shifts back to Phase 2 in some places and optimistic about near-term shifts to Phase 4 (in other places); some were optimistic about Phase 4 and unsure about backslides to Phase 2; and so on.

Life in Phase 3

We asked the panel to evaluate some of the new, slightly looser rules about day-to-day life in this phase of the outbreak. Are they sensible, too restrictive, or not restrictive enough?

Table 1. Evaluating Some Phase 3 Openings

	Too Restrictive (%)	Sensible (%)	Not restrictive enough (%)
Gatherings of 10 or fewer	10	80	10
Youth-sports practice, without games	17	60	23
Outdoor dining, w/ rules	10	70	20
Hair-care facilities, w/ rules	3	73	23
Non-essential businesses, w/ rules	7	80	13
Remote learning P-12, limited child care	7	86	7
Indoor worship services w/ guidance	7	17	77

Row labels are shorthand for longer descriptions; please see appendix for full wording of each item. N=30 for all rows except "remote learning" for which N=28, with 2 respondents having skipped the item.

Most experts judged most rules sensible. The opening of hair-care facilities, with selective restrictions, was a step too far for about a quarter of the respondents, and only one person thought that these rules are too restrictive. But the pattern-

breaker in Table 1, clearly, is the new status quo on public (indoor) worship. Churches, temples, and other places of worship have gone from being closed to having the option to be open, with non-binding guidance on conduct, capacity, and cleaning. For two respondents, these constraints are unwarranted; for five, they are fine. The other 23 (more than three quarters) finds them not restrictive enough.

Panelists also weighed in on an external threat to more spread. We asked if they are concerned about adjacent states loosening restrictions more quickly than Illinois. In an echo of differences from wave 1 of this panel, the economists were more relaxed, and the public-health and vulnerable-populations scholars, more concerned.

Table 2. How Concerned About Adjacent States Looser Restrictions

Experts in...	Not Concerned (%)	Somewhat Concerned (%)	Very Concerned (%)
Economics	30	50	20
Public Health	11	44	44
Vulnerable Pop.s	10	50	40

N=10 economists (1 “not sure” excluded); 9 public-health experts; 10 vulnerable-population experts.

We asked respondents to compare the United States and Europe in two respects. First, responding to some recent data suggesting that unemployment has spiked less in Europe, we offered some explanations and some caveats, and allowed respondents to agree to as many as they liked. The most popular combinations of choices were that Europe had somewhat better stimulus-spending programs than the U.S., and, especially, that the short-term trends in unemployment are not very important in any case. Some respondents opted not to answer this question.

Meanwhile, whether the United States has been hit especially hard by this pandemic, as compared to Europe, has also been a topic of debate of late. The answer is not obvious, but the

British magazine *The Economist* argued that their experiences have been similar, even though most Americans think that the crisis has been worse here. We contacted no experts in Europe, or even outside Illinois, but our panelists were about evenly split between saying that Europe and the U.S. have been equally hard hit or the U.S. has been harder hit. No one thought Europe has had worse COVID crisis, thus far.

European nations and the U.S. are both accruing debt at a very rapid pace, as they fight this disease. So, we also floated one idea for generating new revenue to deal with this crisis and future pandemics, asking about the advisability of a new tax on international flights, given the role played by international travel in the disease's spread. Eight of 11 economists were opposed, and the others merely uncertain. Five of the other experts liked the idea if multiple countries collaborated on a scheme, (5) three were in favor of a federal U.S. tax (3), but a dozen respondents were either opposed to or uncertain about the idea.

Finally, we asked for responses to an open-ended query, "Some have complained that policies in Illinois (and some other states) are too tilted towards halting COVID-19, with insufficient attention to the downsides of shutdown. Others think that the economic losses from shutdown and whatever bad social and health outcomes follow (e.g. higher suicide rates or poverty) cannot be compared to the cost of a major COVID-19 outbreak, so that it is sensible that criteria for reopening are all defined in terms of COVID-19 spread, medical capacity, testing, tracking and the like, and not in reference to, say, economic data. Do you think that the Illinois approach to reopening is about right, or could be better in important respects?"

Responses were diverse and thoughtful. We give the last word(s) in this report to some of the people who graciously spared their time to answer our questions yet again.

Mostly right

“Illinois has done a pretty good job thus far. I’m a little concerned about opening up at this point and think Illinois will definitely see another surge in cases. It is important to test and track adequately and it has not been shown that the testing capabilities have improved.”

“It seems like Illinois re-opening is about right, however, I am concerned that there is not a significant reduction in cases and we are re-opening because of quarantine fatigue rather than declining cases.”

“I think it's about right. It was certainly cautious compared with some other states, but Illinois has among the highest number of infections and deaths among states. So, caution was warranted. But I also think the go-slow reopening in phases based on data, despite economic pain, is about right as well.”

“I agree with and appreciate the actions taken in Illinois. However, without national-level agreement, these changes will be for naught.”

Could have been better

“It could be absolutely improved with regards to utilizing economic data. We are seeing an increase in suicide, poverty, alcoholism, pregnant women skipping appointments, people not utilizing preventative care.... the deaths and socioeconomic decline related to these points will be similar if not larger than COVID-19 in magnitude in the medium and long term.”

“I believe that the re-opening of the economy could be done more expeditiously to help halt the economic impacts. Other states have opened up with little to no changes in cases while Illinois continues to lag behind those states, some of which are neighboring states.”

“I think the state could have taken a more local approach to reopening. Many if not most downstate communities were never at the same risk as the Chicago area.”

“...more emphasis needs to also be placed on the needs of rural areas across the state that may not have the same situation that urban/metro areas are currently in and may require a shift in

how the movement phasing is driven in different geographic areas.”

“The Illinois approach could be better targeted: both at people who are most vulnerable, and at activities that contribute the most to the spread of the disease.”

“I think Illinois suffers a communication problem and could do a much better job of sharing information about people-flow from higher morbidity areas to other areas and vice versa. People typically assume their experiences are 'normal' so if residents in a rural area know few people from urban areas which are experiencing higher COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death rates, they may feel 'protected' without fully understanding transmission risk within their own community.”

Neither/both

“You can't separate like this. It is a false comparison. If you do not halt COVID and open up too quickly, then you will have to shut down again when it spreads. You need to massively increase testing and tracking capabilities in order to minimize spread, and then you can open up with reduced risk. I think that Illinois may be able to open up more quickly in some rural areas with minimal amounts of COVID. Elsewhere, it just can't be done.”

“I think COVID-19 is showing the pre-existing health equity gaps, and Illinois should try to build back...with a plan to build towards health equity, by focusing on the social/political determinants of health that created this divide...”

“I think it is appropriate to put more focus on preventing infections and death. I think the economic impacts could be short-term. I think they could have been mitigated even further if we appropriated most of the funds to individuals as grants and to small businesses (privately held) as zero-interest loans. Deaths and disability related to COVID, especially in working-age individuals, will have much longer-term impacts.”

Appendix A. IGPA Pandemic Expert Panel

Evan Anderson, Northern Illinois University

Laurence Appel, University of Illinois at Chicago

Brandi Barnes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Mark Daniel Bernhardt, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Mark Borgschulte, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Stephen Brown, University of Illinois at Chicago

Beverly Bunch, University of Illinois at Springfield

Patricia Byrnes, University of Illinois at Springfield

Lorraine Conroy, University of Illinois at Chicago

Toni Corona, Madison County Health Department

Michael Fagan, Northwestern University

Joseph M. Feinglass, Northwestern University

Barbara Fiese, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Lidia Filus, Northeastern Illinois University

Tamara Fuller, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Michael Gelder, Northwestern University

Robert J. Gordon, Northwestern University

Betsy Goulet, University of Illinois at Springfield

Jeremy Groves, Northern Illinois University

Bart Hagston, Jackson County Health Department

Marc D. Hayford, Loyola University Chicago

Ronald Hershow, University of Illinois at Chicago

Hana Hinkle, University of Illinois at Chicago

Joseph K. Hoereth, University of Illinois at Chicago

Wiley Jenkins, Southern Illinois University

Timothy Johnson, University of Illinois at Chicago

Greg Kaplan, University of Chicago

Sage J. Kim, University of Illinois at Chicago

Brenda Davis Koester, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Ken Kriz, University of Illinois at Springfield

Janet Liechty, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Justin McDaniel, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Ruby Mendenhall, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Edward Mensah, University of Illinois at Chicago

Linda Rae Murray, University of Illinois at Chicago

Katie Parrish, Lake Land College

Sarah Patrick, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Alicia Plemmons, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Carolyn A. Pointer, Southern Illinois University

Tara Powell, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Tyler Power, Quad Cities Chamber of Commerce

Elizabeth Powers, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Chris Setti, Greater Peoria Economic Development Council

Abigail Silva, Loyola University Chicago

Brian Smith, University of Illinois at Springfield

Tracey J. Smith, Southern Illinois University Springfield

Nicole M. Summers-Gabr, Southern Illinois University

Vidya Sundareshan, Southern Illinois University

James A. Swartz, University of Illinois at Chicago

Kevin Sylwester, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Karriem Watson, University of Illinois at Chicago

Moheeb Zidan, Knox College

Appendix B. Questions

Most of Illinois has just shifted to Phase (Recovery) under the Restore Illinois plan, based on data pertaining to COVID-19 cases and medical capacity, plus testing and tracking capacity. Do you think the following Phase 3 provisions, easing previous restrictions, are sensible, not restrictive enough, or too restrictive? (If you are not sure what to think about a given rule, you can leave a row blank.)

	too restrictive	sensible	not restrictive enough
Gatherings of 10 or fewer allowed.			
Allow youth sports training with distance, but no games.			
Allow outdoor seating at restaurants, with distance and caps on party size and total capacity.			
Allow hair-care facilities to open, with masks, customer distance, and total-customer caps.			
Non-essential businesses allowed to open with distancing and capacity restrictions			
Remote learning in P-12 schools and higher education; limited child care and summer programs open with IDPH approved safety guidance			
Allow indoor worship services, with guidance (not restrictions) on capacity, cleaning, and conduct			

Do you expect Chicago also to shift into Phase 3 before the end of June?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Do you think any part of Illinois will shift back to Phase 2 (Flattening), out of Phase 3 (Recovery), because of new outbreaks, increased positivity rate, or sharp declines in capacity?

- Yes, by the end of July
- Yes, between August and December
- Yes, early in 2021
- No
- I'm not sure

Do you expect any part of Illinois to shift from Phase 3 (Recovery) to Phase 4 (Revitalization) because of improving data and/or modified criteria in the near future?

- Yes, by the end of July
- Yes, between August and December
- Yes, early in 2021
- No
- I'm not sure

How concerned are you that adjacent states are loosening their restrictions faster than Illinois, so that outbreaks in those states could quickly spread to Illinois?

- very concerned
- somewhat concerned
- not concerned
- I'm not sure

Recent data suggests that the surge in unemployment in the U.S. has been much bigger than in many of the large European democracies. How many of the following claims do you think are mostly correct? Please choose as many as you like (including none).

- Smaller rises in unemployment in Europe reflects better stimulus-spending programs
- Smaller rises in unemployment in Europe reflects better (looser) restrictions on normal activities
- Smaller rises in unemployment in Europe are a short-term, not very important difference
- Short-term unemployment trends are not a reliable predictor of medium-term recovery from the current economic crisis

What is your impression of how the United States and the European Union compare in COVID-19 cases and deaths, thus far?

- The U.S. has been harder hit (more cases, higher death rate)
- The European Union has been harder hit (more cases, higher death rates)
- They have been hit about equally hard
- I'm not sure

International air travel seems to have played a large role in the COVID-19 pandemic. Would you support a new tax on international flights, to help defray the costs associated with this outbreak and create a fund set aside for future pandemics? Please select as many responses as you like below.

- Yes, if multiple countries collaborate on such a tax
- Yes, as a federal tax in the U.S.
- Yes, as a state tax
- No
- I'm uncertain without knowing more details

Research Area: none

Policy Initiative: none

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