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Op-ed: Late-pandemic predictions, from a data scientist who writes about COVID-19

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Back in March 2020, the U.S. economy was grinding toward a painful shutdown. Now, 14 months later, with nearly one-half of all American adults fully vaccinated, and federal public health officials releasing these people to resume pre-pandemic activities, the economic resurrection has begun with a fury.

What changes can we expect over the rest of 2021?

Air travel, hotel demand will rise

Travel will be hot. This means that pent-up demand, including for airlines, trains, hotels, entertainment destinations and cruises, will see an unprecedented increase in activity.

Airlines will scramble to find crewmembers to meet the needs of expanding flight schedules. Seeing younger first officers will be more common as airlines retool their staff during this transition.

Airfares will also creep higher, until the demand-supply equilibrium is reached and business travelers return to fill high-revenue seats. Once federal mask mandates end later in the year, expect airlines to add the check-in question, “Have you been fully vaccinated against the coronavirus?” creating controversy among those not vaccinated.

Vaccinations will reach a critical threshold

Along these lines, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines will gain full approval by the Food and Drug Administration, eliminating one of the reasons given by some against taking the vaccines. Expect to see widespread vaccine mandates by businesses, health care centers and schools.

As such, a stream of those initially resistant to vaccination will take their shots, contributing to the eventual 200-plus million adults in the U.S. who will be immunized.

The vaccines will also gain FDA approval for use in young children, allowing the country to approach the elusive threshold for herd immunity in 2022.

Hair salons, dry-cleaning portend a return to normal life

With masks becoming less commonly needed and used, personal care items, particularly makeup for women and razors for men, will see an uptick in sales. Teeth whitening strip sales will also surge, as will previously postponed visits to the dentist. Hair salons will see a surge of activity.

With more people returning to the office, home utility bills will go down, while gasoline and parking expenses will go up. Public transportation, which has been free in several locales during the pandemic, will once again begin to collect fares.

Shoe sales and dry-cleaning activity will pick up, as people return to wearing head-to-toe business attire, not just what was needed to look presentable on a Zoom call.

Restaurants will see an unprecedented resurgence of business, putting pressure on staffing and food service supplies. Buffets, a casualty of the pandemic, will return with precautions. Unfortunately, with more people eating out again, waistlines will expand and the nation's obesity epidemic will continue to grow.

In the Midwest, state fairs will be back, bigger and better than ever. Plans for fall high school football will begin, with fall education at all levels looking more like how they were prepandemic.

Face shields will disappear. Masks, on the other hand . . .

Some things will fade away.

Plexiglass barriers will remain for a while, but eventually inventoried into storage rooms. Services to recycle such items will pop up as businesses seek to discard them, lest they end up in landfills.

Disinfecting hand wipes and hand sanitizer sales will begin a steady decline. Hand sanitizer dispensers in public places will persist, but with less use, eventually removed and disposed of with plexiglass barriers.

Face shields will disappear, while mask use will drop, but not completely go away. Anyone who has travelled to China will see many residents there wearing face masks, a holdover from SARS in 2002.

Common cold is coming back like McRib

With fewer people wearing face masks and paying diligent attention to hand hygiene, the common cold and the flu will return.

Questions remain as to what epidemiological changes from the past year will persist. For example, young people (those under 15 years) died at a lower rate in 2020 than in 2019. Was this an artifact of the stay-at-home orders, or some other yet uncovered societal change? Will this unexpected benefit persist, or will young people experience an uptick in their death rate in 2021 and 2022 compared to 2020?

At the same time, the non-COVID death rate surged for the 25-44 year age group. Will such excess deaths persist and create a new higher benchmark, or drop back to pre-pandemic levels?

The rest of 2021 will be anything but usual. Transitions are difficult, and the one we are experiencing now will be no different. The good news is that this transition is taking our nation to something welcomed by most, rather than something many struggled with when it all began just 14 months ago.

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