

Reopening America & The World

**A way forward from the
Brookings Institution**

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CORONAVIRUS[COVID-19]

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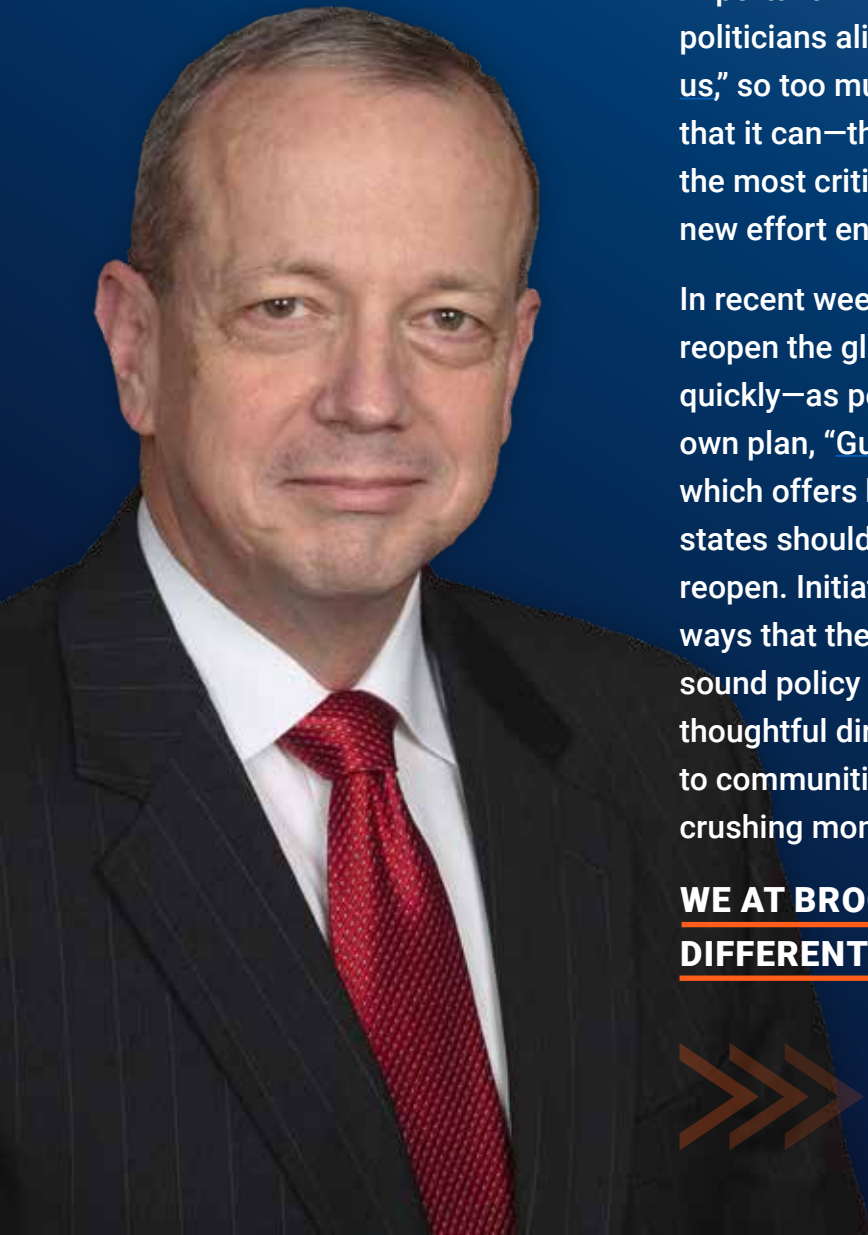
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A WAY FORWARD >>>>>

The Brookings Institution has long been committed to supporting the public good through non-partisan analysis and informed policy recommendations. Now, in the era of COVID-19, that mission has never been more important. Indeed, as many healthcare officials and politicians alike have declared that “science will save us,” so too must Brookings contribute in the best way that it can—through in-depth, multi-faceted research on the most critical issues of the day. That brings us to our new effort entitled *Reopening America and the World*.

In recent weeks, many plans have emerged to help reopen the global economy as safely—and for some, as quickly—as possible. These include the White House’s own plan, “[Guidelines for Opening Up America Again](#),” which offers broad recommendations on how U.S. states should think about their own individual plans to reopen. Initiatives such as these are noteworthy in the ways that they blend data and scientific guidance with sound policy analysis. And, at their best, they provide thoughtful direction—and more importantly hope—to communities struggling with the burden of this crushing moment.

WE AT BROOKINGS, HOWEVER, ARE TAKING A DIFFERENT APPROACH.



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In an environment as complex and fast-moving as that of COVID-19, adaptation and novel thinking are absolutely essential. To that end, our Reopening America and the World effort assesses the issue of reopening across a comprehensive array of topics. What's more, it will be a continuing conversation throughout the coming weeks and months as the facts on the ground change. We can only assess the reopening debate with the information available to us today. Thus, in the coming months, Brookings will contribute additional papers, conduct public events, and release updates to older work whenever new information presents itself. The current body of our work on COVID-19 [appears here](#). This is one of the most critical contributions our institution can make to our nation and global community, and we are optimistic that it will act as a beacon of hope for those laboring to make the best of this challenging reality.

The reopening of America and the world will likely be a long and dangerous process, and it will be immensely challenging. It will require new thinking, tough choices, and new models for making decisions. But Brookings stands ready to support this effort, especially as we as a society begin to truly come to grips with the conditions and the prudent phasing for loosening social distancing restrictions and balancing the need to protect the public health while also restarting the economy and social institutions. It simply could not be more important in this present moment.



WHY FOCUS ON REOPENING BEFORE RECOVERY?

First and foremost, an important question must be answered: why focus on reopening before the recovery and renewal of society? At a fundamental level, it is quite simply the most pressing question—and thus the greatest challenge—of the moment.

Across America and the world, COVID-19 has shut down businesses of all shapes and sizes and plunged the global economy into a state not seen since the Great Depression. Throughout, public health experts have driven the absolute necessity of social distancing and “stay-at-home” orders aimed at flattening the spiraling infection curve and bringing down the appalling death rate. The effect on institutions and the general public has been dramatic. At the same time, business leaders and politicians alike have pleaded for a reopening of society—one that would allow everyday citizens to return to work as soon as possible. The truth is this: both sides are inherently correct, yet neither has produced a plan that accomplishes its underlying goals without significant sacrifice on the part of society. Therefore, what is ultimately needed is the formulation of an equilibrium between saving lives and saving livelihoods.

Indeed, if framed and initiated properly, reopening efforts can set the conditions for a more fair, just, and comprehensive recovery that embraces real reform and engenders a visionary re-imagining of America and global society. Political, private sector, and civil society leadership will need to be at the center of this reopening conversation, and it will have to be a collective and nationwide undertaking. While we are seeing this now in niche instances throughout the United States, they are sadly fleeting as most communities go it alone and work to identify highly localized, and often under-resourced, means of

protecting their communities. One small business leader recently commented that “the cavalry never came,” meaning she and most other small business entrepreneurs have felt themselves to be on their own during this crisis, all while having to square the circle between public health and economic reopening.

In the context of this reality, the most important issues continue to be to the persistent health considerations that will factor into every reopening decision. These include having a fully operational capacity to test and trace, the widespread availability of therapeutics, and the deployment of a working vaccine until “herd immunity” is realized in society. Here, the facts must be held above all else, and scientists and public health officials alike need to be heard and listened to. You, the reader, will hear about this in many of the papers that follow. At the end of the day, there is still much debate on when and how these considerations will be achievable, but they are still the bare minimum for a safe and full reopening of society.

The other key consideration relates to whose guidance we should be treating as authoritative. Is it the White House’s guidelines? Or perhaps the many health professionals offering guidance on a complex number of issues? Neither group has offered binding recommendations, and definitive guidance is clearly lacking both in America and the world on how to respond to this moment—especially as disinformation reigns supreme and experts are disparaged and dismissed for their views. Nevertheless, best practices are beginning to emerge, and for the sake of our survival as a society we must begin to collect and synthesize this information—and, most importantly, listen.



***From crisis comes opportunity,
and in support of the public
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strategies through a lens of
bettering society as a whole.***



POINTS OF CONCERN AND POCKETS OF SUCCESS

As the global community has slowly responded to COVID-19, there have been numerous points of concern, but also pockets of success. A lessons-learned approach is thus particularly vital to this type of challenge. For those of us in America, a central question is: what can we learn from those ahead of us on the pandemic curve, and those dealing with this crisis in a different way? And for those around the world: what does success look like and where can it be found and emulated?

Here in the United States the situation is dire. As we release this work, the U.S. has suffered over 100,000 deaths as a result of COVID-19, which amounts to more than the combined dead in America's wars in Vietnam and Korea—years of foreign wars, in those instances—but now right here in America, and in only months. Federal responses have been slow, inefficient, insufficient, and poorly led overall, including frequently conflicting and even dangerous messages about therapeutic drugs and reopening strategies. State leaders—namely mayors and governors—have been the principal source of hope throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as they have sought to generate impact and protect their citizens. But even they have been limited in their capacities to respond because of a disappointing incoherence at the national level. Some immediate lessons have become clear, however, with the [recently released Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) best practices offering a strong step forward in delivering definitive, clear guidance on how to consider reopening as a nation.

For one, social distancing does indeed help “[flatten the curve](#),” which in turn keeps more people safe as well as minimizes the strain on our already overloaded healthcare system. This issue is of

course absolutely central to the whole reopening debate—the evidence is quite clear on the merits of social distancing and is not meaningfully up for discussion. Indeed, we must maintain social distancing even in an environment of limited public reopening until more comprehensive healthcare considerations can be implemented (namely the test and trace, therapeutic, and vaccine capabilities mentioned earlier). Most experts, [including at the CDC](#), define this as at-minimum six feet of distance between individuals and subsequent restrictions on gathering in large groups, to included crowded events of any kind. This is a challenge to implement amidst even a staggered public reopening, but it is possible.

In addition, COVID-19 has highlighted the significant need to implement consistent yet comprehensive hygiene considerations throughout both business and society. If our communities are to truly reopen, individuals must regularly wash their hands and be cognizant of touching their faces throughout the day, for instance. While this is something we should be doing regardless of the presence of COVID-19, the crisis underscores the need in stark terms. Furthermore, while the “six-foot rule” is at its core about reducing transmission risk, personal hygiene can also play a major role in minimizing the threat of infection. What's more, [disinfecting surfaces is a priority](#), particularly for high-touch surfaces such as doors and countertops. And though environmental transmission accounts for potentially [as little as 6 percent of COVID-19 cases](#), every bit counts in combatting this terrible disease.

Masks and face coverings are also major components of this issue. The latest research has, on a consistent basis, indicated that COVID-19 can



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be spread well [before symptoms begin to occur](#). This means that masks and the “source control” that they provide at all times is essential to containing the spread of the novel coronavirus. It is about keeping others safe just as much as it is about protecting oneself from the disease—though as with other considerations discussed here, they are both only one component of the solution and ineffective when used absent other methods. In fact, even the much discussed N95 respirator mask is not perfect, though it does offer superior protection to other forms of face coverings.

On this topic, while some communities have railed against mask requirements in general, the greater issue pertains to availability and overall supply of this personal protective equipment (PPE). The U.S. stockpile [has not met demand](#), with some states even [turning to foreign sources](#) to meet local need. Only time will tell if this situation is meaningfully resolved, both for the current COVID-19 crisis and in preparation for future threats.

Finally, one of the most critical healthcare considerations and best practices in responding to COVID-19 pertains to screening. This is a complex issue, particularly for a free and independent society, yet this is where lessons learned from abroad—particularly in Asia—come clearly into play. Of all areas of the world, East Asian and Southeast Asian nations have seen the most successful responses, though even they have had their [fair share of challenges](#). South Korea, for instance, implemented well-followed social distancing procedures, but also had highly sophisticated testing capabilities and a significant internal mask supply that allowed Seoul to clamp down on the spread early. Singapore, which followed the same model, has had similar success, though the risk of rapid COVID-19 spread remains high and ongoing in both countries.

In China, [screening and quarantine were often mandatory](#), with citizens even being forcibly relocated from their homes or hospitals to locations that would minimize their risk of spreading the disease. To be clear, this is neither a humane nor

a workable model for most liberal democracies, yet there are still lessons to be learned from how China went from the nexus of the outbreak to a nation capable of reopening in comparably short order. Quite simply, individuals must integrate screening procedures into their daily lives if reopening can occur. Though less effective than a mandatory medical screen or test, self-screening via questionnaires, websites, or apps can be a powerful tool for both establishing best practices for mindfulness surrounding COVID-19 while also strongly encouraging individuals to assess their own symptoms and question—on a regular basis—if it’s truly safe for them to be in public. While the [Apple-Google COVID-19 exposure notification app](#) was still in development at the time of this writing, this product may very well succeed in introducing users to better practices and could even offer a new pathway to safe-harbor rights of privacy against seemingly invasive tactics. Self-screening can be easily integrated into the workforce as well—indeed, [some hospitals are already doing so](#).

Healthcare sectors—both in America and globally—have already pioneered many of the best practices mentioned here, and with strong success overall. We would all do well to emulate their achievements across both public and private enterprise, and throughout society more broadly. And while it may seem self-evident and unnecessary that this study restate these societal imperatives, no credible and inherently safe movement toward a comprehensive reopening can occur without a whole-of-society embrace of these measures. For those relatively few who demand their “unalienable rights” to do as they please at this moment, it is useful to remember that voluntary societal discipline and self-sacrifice defines the best of democracies, not impulses for individualized, self-serving anarchy. With unalienable rights, citizens also bear undeniable responsibilities. It is exactly because of our freedom to choose that citizens should embrace these basic measures—these minimum standards—if we are ever to return to something recognizable as “normal” for our country and for the countries of the world.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Embracing best-practices and lessons learned will be essential for a successful reopening of both America and the world. Yet, it is only one aspect of the full reopening conversation. From crisis comes opportunity, and in support of the public good we must look at reopening strategies through a lens of bettering society as a whole. This includes assessing the means of integrating societal improvements into the policies aimed at mitigating COVID-19. And while we will address these matters in greater detail in a coming Brookings study on recovery, reform, and renewal, it is important to recognize that optimizing reopening actions with long-term recovery strategies will be essential. Indeed, if we do this right, America and the world will be better equipped not only to handle pandemics, but also the immense challenges generated by other large-scale issues such as climate change, income inequality, urbanization, and technological innovation.

First, reopening should be seen, foremost, as an investment opportunity—investing in our citizens and in creating the basis for long-term societal recovery. While there will be inevitable costs associated with reopening, considering how these expenses can be investments will be crucial. Just as many construction companies are taking advantage of lower foot and vehicle traffic to fix roads and rebuild infrastructure, the [driverless car industry](#) is utilizing these same conditions to test new technologies and innovate on existing ones. It is this type of “silver lining” thinking that will allow people to return to work in optimal conditions once the health considerations have been accommodated. As a goal, creating a better society post-COVID-19 should not seem far-fetched. Rather, it is essential that we

find the means to invest in our collective futures just as we seek to spend our way toward reopening. Nearly every dimension of reopening, and indeed our long-term recovery, exists as an opportunity for wise and insightful investment. Future generations may just depend on the work that takes place today in this arena.

Equally as important in the reopening conversation is identifying the means of creating greater equity and equality via solutions that implicitly better the underlying causal factors that feed into those issues. As my colleague Rashawn Ray says in his paper, for instance, “Racially equitable healthcare access means that Black people and other racial/ethnic minorities have the same chances of being tested for COVID-19, receiving antibody tests, participating in clinical trials, and obtaining vaccines when they become available.” As he goes on to note, that is not happening today—something that is completely unacceptable and must factor into policies aimed at reopening society. Indeed, this terrible moment may have presented us with an unparalleled opportunity to address the systemic inequality within American society and the overall body of Brookings’s work takes inequality head-on.

This issue is also particularly relevant to reopening our restaurants and hospitality industry, which have weathered the brunt of the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19. These businesses [often employ lower-income workers](#)—those who have also been on the front lines of COVID-19 from the very beginning. As companies think about both reopening and implementing a process for keeping their workers safe, they must also assess the means of supporting these workers and their families through compassionate policies that

give them greater access to healthcare, additional educational opportunities, and ultimately the means to elevate themselves within society. Efforts such as these will not solve issues like racial inequality overnight, but it would be an unacceptable missed opportunity not to explicitly state this as an overriding goal in this challenging time.

Solutions that improve our shared climate future are also critical to this moment. At the time of this writing, renewable energy is [poised to overtake coal](#) for the first time in U.S. history, with the impacts of COVID-19 in fact playing a major role in realizing this development. And while this is less a result of new green energy policies and more due to the higher cost of operating coal plants in a low-energy environment, it is still a meaningful step forward for climate-friendly policies and environmental justice. Sadly, at the very moment small businesses are in desperate need of capital to remain solvent, coal companies, through aggressive lobbying in Washington, [have received tens of millions in stimulus loans](#). As factories and businesses think about reopening, now is the time to assess how renewable energy sources can be used to support what will inevitably be a surge in electricity use. The recent weakening of environmental regulations and pollution rules will be difficult to walk back in the short term, but either way, we must think on ways to support the health of our environment as we recover the health of our people.

Though COVID-19 may be a terrible crisis to overcome, it pales in comparison to the inevitable impact climate change will have on the world if nothing is done to curb greenhouse emissions and hurtful environmental practices.

Both in the energy sector, but also in healthcare and many other industries, artificial intelligence and emerging technologies can offer meaningful solutions for combatting COVID-19. From big data analytics and machine learning to advanced 5G networks, emerging technologies are already reshaping society in new and powerful ways. The realities of COVID-19 only accelerate the need for incorporation and innovation in this space,

especially in the context of research on vaccines and other therapeutics to combat this disease as well as contact tracing and self-screening efforts. It also highlights the utility, and perhaps danger, of automation. Put simply, robots are not susceptible to COVID-19. Here, again, the needs and the futures of workers must be front of mind as we think about how best to reopen society. As the world is forced online to a degree never before seen, the generation and utility of data have also never been more important. This has potentially profound implications for the role of artificial intelligence in the coming decades.

This reality also presents equity concerns: as all of society is forced indoors, not all individuals have equal access to high-speed internet. Furthermore, this “digital divide,” [as my colleague Nicol Turner Lee puts it](#), presents profound challenges for our education system in particular. Students of all levels have been forced into distant learning environments and “virtual classrooms,” or have new educators via home schooling administered by their parents or other family members. Yet, limits on broadband internet greatly impact the ability of many families to meaningfully support such a system, never mind the inadequacies of being taught by individuals with potentially little to no training to teach. Indeed, as my colleague Darrell West says in his paper:

There are clear inequities in access to broadband connectivity and digital resources by race, income, education, and geography, and this complicates community reopening. Many individuals [do not have access to high-speed broadband](#) and this limits their ability to utilize telemedicine, online learning, and e-commerce.

Especially in this context, the inestimable value of our teachers is on full display at this moment, as are the inadequacies of our current education system that undervalued these same individuals—both figuratively and financially—only a few short months ago. We must consider how to better support



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our teachers and our schools, both through new technological developments that provide internet access to more families as well as through policies that allow for additional resources to our cherished educators who are teaching the next generation. As with inequality, these flaws in our education system will not be resolved in short order or through minor policy adjustments, but it is vital that we think now, during this moment of opportunity, about how to improve these models in the context of reopening schools alongside society. Indeed, getting students back into the physical classroom is the precursor to many families being able to go back to work at all.

For businesses and organizations, including the Brookings Institution and other think tanks, there are also important lessons to be learned, especially via the recent nationwide process of transitioning and sustaining a work-from-home workforce. Theories about “telework” and “telecommuting” have been widely studied and accepted for many years, but the practical application has been limited. Indeed, few companies outside of Silicon Valley were willing to incorporate this practice into their policies for fear of mismanagement and lowered productivity, among other concerns. No more. What many of these same organizations are now finding is that this transition was both easier than expected and had little to no impact on their productivity. As organizations consider reopening or “return to campus” strategies, two central questions will be: Does the entire workforce actually need to return? And how must the organization’s infrastructure be modified for what might be a relentless return of this disease in successive waves in the years to come?

Questions also arise immediately about “acceptable work attire” and flexible work hours. For instance, many individuals and businesses have allowed for modular work schedules and more casual attire out of respect for the “home office environment” and working alongside family members. Yet are these accommodations only valid during COVID-19? It’s an important question and the debate surrounding this issue is far from over, though especially as work schedules and attire continue to be [major sources of inequality](#), we would all do well to take

those conversations seriously and consider how best to support our employees and workers in the future. There will be [substantial disparities between businesses](#)—especially those that require more “routine” labor, such as the manufacturing industry—but policies that best support our workers will be policies that best support the nation in the long-term.

Finally, throughout this challenging moment, we have been forced to reassess and reconsider what is truly expected of our public servants and elected leaders in moments of national emergency, and even catastrophe. This is perhaps the defining consideration of the COVID-19 crisis, and we have many examples worthy of emulation—and others worthy of condemnation. What has become clear is that when in crisis, even in this era of globalization, people turn to their elected leaders and oftentimes to local officials and experts for answers. Only these individuals can truly frame what this crisis looks like at a societal and national level—they are “above the fray” and see the issues most clearly. At least, that is the hoped-for perception. Social distancing and lockdown have created widespread feelings of isolation and hopelessness, compounded by widespread uncertainty over our collective economic future. Authority figures peddling disinformation, capitalizing on fear, and sowing societal discord have made an already difficult situation nearly impossible for segments of our population and for many people in the world.

This is why effective leadership is so important at this moment. Just as plans and policies can provide guidance and hope for everyday citizens, leaders—through both word and deed—are the ones who will truly see us to the other side of the crisis. They must be selfless, compassionate, and empathetic and exude a degree of character, grace, virtue, and, very importantly, decisiveness that inspires all who must follow them. Absent this, base impulses of dissent trending toward anger and hysteria begin to seep into society.

Now, in the context of COVID-19, leaders must remember these human dimensions and work



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as best as they can to achieve societal unity while seeking to alleviate the emotional burden placed upon society. As I previously stated, more individuals have died of COVID-19 than have been lost in nearly all of America's wars, and in a matter of weeks, not years.

Those losses introduce psychological and societal trauma, never mind the significant economic burden and mass unemployment. It is what makes this topic of leadership so important—someone or some people must provide stability and hope if we're to preserve our national "soul" in the moment of intense crisis.

As my colleague Bill Galston says in his paper:

To restore public confidence, today's leaders will have to balance economics with epidemiology, facts with social psychology, and individual liberty with the common good. History will judge them kindly if they rise to this occasion. If they do not, the United States will suffer a blow from which it will be difficult to recover.

I endorse Bill's assessment entirely. At the beginning of this essay I wrote, "science will save us," and indeed it will. But only leaders will create the environment of social cohesion within which science will have purpose and meaning. In short, leadership will give science its chance.



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