

Having a Better Pandemic in Charleston, SC

On Thursday my wife and I boarded a plane from Newark, NJ to Charlotte, NC. Although Governor Murphy is slowly relaxing the lockdown restrictions that have been imposed on New Jerseyans, it is an incremental process. Each minor restoration of a freedom lost is quietly celebrated. Restaurants will soon be allowed to open for outdoor dining. Hair salons will reopen with limited capacity, but no news yet on dentists. The sequence is slow and opaque.

We're in the minority, believing living in a free country includes selecting your risks. Frequent hand washing, masks in public places and social distancing are completely reasonable and courteous. Those at high risk of serious illness are generally in well-defined groups. If you're worried, stay home. Destroying so many small business owners' life's work deserves more consideration than it's getting.

We await each new missive from the governor without much idea of their framework or schedule. Little is said of the destruction to New Jersey's already precarious fiscal outlook, but we know eventually the Coronavirus bill will come due. Expect much complaining as ruinously high property and income tax rates are tweaked even higher.

NJ has suffered around 12,000 deaths, 80% of whom were over 65. It doesn't need saying but I shall anyway, that each death is tragic and my heart goes out to every family. Related but not comparable is that 1.2 million NJ residents have filed for unemployment.

The fatalities didn't cause the job losses. We shut the economy down to prevent more deaths. Suppose without lockdown, it would have been twice as bad. The lockdown meant 12,000

people survived who otherwise wouldn't have. Let's suppose this lucky group is also 80% over 65.

In this scenario, the ratio of jobs lost to coronavirus fatalities avoided is 100:1. Versus working age fatalities it's 500:1. These ratios have no optimal value, and some may find the concept crass. But they do seem high.

Since we long ago flattened the curve and a vaccine is a 2021 event at best, life needs to rapidly adapt to whatever new normal is.

Newark airport was eerily quiet. Everyone is required to wear a mask. The TSA estimates passenger volumes at 15% of normal, which looked about right. There was virtually no line at security, even for the non Pre-check crowd. Most airport stores were closed. Restaurants had plastic wrapped their seating to further dissuade visitors, even though no meals are on offer. It was rather sad.

On hearing we'd be flying, most friends commented on the risk of infection. Modern aircraft have HEPA air filters which are apparently fine enough to catch the virus. Fear is constraining all kinds of travel, but most have nowhere to go. Pandemic restrictions in some form are everywhere.

But the choice to endure lockdown in New Jersey from early March would have few takers. For several weeks even walking in a forest or park was forbidden. We vowed then to visit somewhere else, almost anywhere, once my wife's obligations as an online pre-school teacher were complete. North Carolina, a rental car and a plan to drive south to Charleston, SC and then beyond, beckoned.

When we exited the plane at Charlotte, two passengers walked 40 feet and sat down at the first bar they'd seen in three months.

Coronavirus has constrained life in South Carolina too.

Museums are closed, but restaurants are open for indoor seating with socially distanced tables. As we were walking through historic Charleston, we excitedly pointed through a window at four people sitting at a restaurant table indoors. The diners looked back, regarding us with some amusement.

South Carolina has less than a fifth as many cases as NJ, and 8% of the fatalities, adjusted for population. Of course, NJ has fared worse than anywhere except neighboring epicenter New York City. So just traveling away from NJ was likely to be an improvement.

Visitors to Charleston are way down. Our original hotel reservation was canceled because the owners suddenly decided to carry out renovations.



Nonetheless, life in Charleston is more agreeable and probably our new normal. We ate our first meal out in three months. Tables were generously distanced and the waiter wore a mask. Turns out he and his girlfriend fled Queens, NY two months ago. We understand.