

Globe and Mail Opinion

Is the case for vaccine mandates like the case for seatbelt laws? No, it's much, much stronger

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Did you know that half the people killed in traffic accidents in any given year were wearing their seatbelts at the time? I've been doing my own research, and it's true.

The obvious conclusion from this shocking statistic: seatbelts don't save lives. Why, you're just as likely to be killed with your seatbelt on as without!

Obvious, and obviously wrong. It would be true, if the victims were as likely to be wearing seatbelts as not. But in fact more than 90 per cent of all passenger-vehicle occupants are seatbelt-wearers; of those involved in accidents, upward of 80 per cent.

If seatbelt-wearers outnumber non-wearers by four to one, but account for roughly the same number of deaths, it suggests seatbelt-wearers are about one-fourth as likely to die in an accident as non-wearers. That shocking statistic turns out to be not so shocking as all that.

This little tutorial in basic mathematics is for the benefit of the apparently growing numbers of vaccine opponents, or at least opponents of vaccine mandates (though in truth there is a high degree of overlap between the two). These include some of our most prominent citizens, which only goes to show that some of our most prominent citizens are incapable of basic maths.

You seem them swapping anecdotes on social media: a headline here, an excerpt from a study there. Sometimes the story is about the seemingly large percentage – 30 per cent! Forty per cent! Even 50 per cent! – of some group or other of COVID victims who had been vaccinated. No kidding? Recall our little tutorial. If 90 per cent of the adult public have been fully vaccinated, then even if the vaccinated account for half of those infected it still means the unvaccinated are nine times as likely to be infected as the vaccinated.

Or look! Some countries that have high vaccination rates still have high numbers of cases! Yes, that's true. But all sorts of things could account for that: Vaccine rates are only one of many predictors of infection rates. So far as the two are related, moreover, the direction of causality is unclear. It's not surprising to find some countries with high infection rates also have high vaccination rates – the point of getting people vaccinated, after all, is to bring the infection rates down.

Conversely, some countries that had very low infection rates through the first year of the pandemic have also been slow to roll out vaccination campaigns: there just wasn't the same sense of urgency. Finally, some countries with very high early vaccination rates, such as Israel and the United States, let down their guard too quickly, relaxing the restrictions that had been preventing the disease from spreading and allowing it to rebound – mostly among the unvaccinated.

Sometimes it is enough for opponents that any vaccinated person could have caught the disease. Here's Gwyn Morgan, for example – former president of EnCana Corp., member of the Order of Canada etc., etc. – in the C2C Journal, citing “increasing reports that fully vaccinated persons are getting and transmitting the virus” as “demolishing the very foundation” of those “divisive and draconian” vaccine mandates.

The evidence? Ten players on the Ottawa Senators tested positive. A COVID outbreak on a Canadian Forces base. Not to mention “Canadian rock legend Bryan Adams!” All were vaccinated. All got infected. But no vaccine has ever been 100 per cent effective, and no one has ever claimed they were. They don’t need to be. Past a certain point, enough people have enough immunity that the virus cannot find enough new hosts to replicate itself.

Immunity, it is true, can come from previous infection as well as vaccination. But infection carries risks, not only of serious disease and death, but of providing the virus fresh opportunities to mutate. By contrast, what are the risks of vaccination? They are not zero – again, no one ever said they were. But they are negligible.

The Public Health Agency of Canada, like other public-health agencies, has been keeping track of all “adverse events” following vaccinations against COVID. These are, note, following vaccination – they are not necessarily because of it. But even if they were, the numbers are vanishingly small.

As of Nov. 26, the latest date for which figures are available, they totalled 27,747 – out of about 60 million doses administered. Of these, just 6,443 were classified as “serious.” That’s roughly 1 in 9,300. Even if we attributed every one of those to the vaccine, we’d have to compare the result with the risk of “adverse events” from the disease. The death rate from COVID, for example, relative to population, is nearly 200 times as high as that following vaccination.

To have reservations about a new vaccine in advance of its administration is understandable. But over the past year more than eight billion doses have been given worldwide: the largest trial in the history of humanity. If there was some hidden danger lurking within, it would have shown itself by now. All vaccines have side effects, but there has never been a vaccine whose side effects showed up more than two months after administration.

The statistical evidence could not be clearer: Vaccines save lives. In Ontario, for example (the figures are representative of other jurisdictions), an unvaccinated person is currently 4.5 times more likely to be infected than a vaccinated person; 14 times more likely to be hospitalized; and 30 times more likely to be put in intensive care. It turns out vaccines are even more of a lifesaver than seatbelts.

But here’s the thing. A crankish libertarian – I count myself as one – might understand that seatbelts save lives, and still object to being required to wear one, on personal freedom grounds. That’s perhaps tenable when it comes to seatbelt laws, since the only life in peril from not wearing one is your own.

But vaccines not only make it less likely that you will be infected, suffer or die: They also make it less likely that you will infect others, to suffer and die – and infect still more people – in their turn. (And yes, despite what you might have heard, the evidence is also clear that vaccines reduce transmission rates.) This is hardly a theoretical concern, in the midst of a pandemic that has already claimed nearly 30,000 Canadian lives.

So if anything the case for vaccine mandates is even stronger than it is for seatbelt laws. The cost to personal freedom – a jab in the arm – is slight. The risk of adverse side-effects is negligible. The savings in human lives is provably enormous. How on earth could so many otherwise sensible people have persuaded themselves otherwise?