

The Pandemic and Children: Millions of Wasted Lives

Economic Perspective John Teevan July 22, 2022

“Millions of wasted lives.” That is how the *Economist* described the global disaster of national pandemic responses on children of whom it says, “two years will be lost.” How did this happen? Easy. There was a desire to prevent Covid deaths among school children, their parents, and grandparents. However, the impact of closing schools was not considered in terms of its cost to the children which was knowable then and it's better known now. (About half of this essay is based on or quoted from the *Economist* July 9, 2022. p59-61).

Globally over two years about 150 million children missed more than half of all in-person schooling. The poorer the country or region, the more school was missed. Correspondingly, the more days of school were missed, the more students fell behind. Up to 15 months have been lost in middle income countries (which have statistics), but the global average is about eight months of lost schooling.

Not surprisingly, poorer regions are having more difficulty catching up. Happily, many in more prosperous nations or regions have regained about a third of what was lost but that is little help to the poor. Latin America (especially Mexico) and Southeast Asia (especially the Philippines) have had the worst losses.

The United States presents quite a contrast. Some regions reopened schools a full year before other regions. Of the pre-pandemic 55m children in American K-12 schools about 28% (15m) are Hispanic and 15% (8m) are African American. The Black and brown children tend to live in urban areas and were disproportionately locked out of schools longer though that would not include Texas or Florida. “In parts of the United States unions have fought hard to keep schools closed long after it's clear that this would harm children.”

It was known by mid-2020 that the death rate among children was, mercifully, especially low. If even 1% of those 55m children had died that tragic number has to be weighed against the loss of a year or two of school to virtually all of those 150m. That certainly was worth it in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic was new, and it may have been worthwhile in the fall of 2020 as well. But when to quit? Spring of 2021? Fall of 21 when many opened? The Omicron variant was especially contagious, but it came around January, 2022 when almost all schools were back in session and the vaccines were prevalent.

Just when America is convulsed with discussions of disparate impacts of racism, we have had an exceptional example of disparate impact in education. Big cities and big states have tended to keep Black and brown children out of school longer. The *Economist* estimates that globally this will cost \$21t of earning power for the affected school children.

Mr. Saavedra of the World Bank said, “**School closures have caused perhaps the worst educational crisis for a century** and certainly since the world wars.” He worries that too few countries have recognized the scale of disaster and that the true cost will not be visible for years to come. “I do not see societies taking this seriously.” No one wants any more shootings of blacks by police, but should we limit our concern to violence? An additional wasted year of schooling for millions of Black and brown children is worthy of much more serious concern.

Globally we estimate that 70 million have fallen back into severe poverty. That is not related to the disease of the pandemic as much as it is to our over-zealous response of locking down the economy aggravated seriously by Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. While disrupted supply chains and empty shelves are a bother in rich nations, the lack of food and other basics threaten the very lives of the poorest.

We can take heart that the vaccines have prevented about 20m deaths based on a model the *Economist* uses to estimate excess deaths globally (July 9, 2022 p85). The trickiest trap, whether it's the pandemic, climate change, or poverty, is not recognizing the problem. Responding correctly to the problem with a coherent strategy that is free from political maneuvering, or the demands of special interest groups is almost impossible. Ask Dr. Birx.

The over-confidence of our leaders coupled with a bitter approach to differing ideas and a lack of humility (most recently seen in the resignation of Boris Johnson in Britain) make the political promise that, “If you give me your vote, I will keep your world stable and prosperous” ring tragically hollow. There is one whose promises are valid. He deals with the very basics of life. Not just food, but food for the soul. We safely trust him.