

Show Solidarity by Staying Home

By Andrew M. Lindner

We will always remember the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 for the tragic loss of life, the economic hardship felt by many, and the social isolation borne of necessary physical distancing. But it should also be remembered as a time when Americans demonstrated extraordinary acts of courage, acted with kindness and generosity, and rediscovered a sense of social solidarity with their neighbors.

There is no better example of this kind of heroism than health care professionals, grocery store employees, and other essential workers who put themselves at risk of a deadly virus every day for our benefit. Many of the rest of us are doing our part in smaller ways by donating money or sewing masks or simply by reaching out to those in need of some human connection. Of course, the most important way all of us are contributing is by following state stay-at-home orders and practicing physical distancing guidelines.

We may be stuck in our houses and apartments, but there is a growing feeling that we are all in this together. A recent survey of 8,000 Americans conducted by Centre for Experimental Research on Fairness, Inequality and Rationality (FAIR) found that, in the midst of the pandemic, people's sense of solidarity with others and willingness to put society's interest before their own had increased.

Despite all these positive efforts, we have protests across the country and planned for Wednesday in Albany, calling for an immediate end to the very practices that have substantially reduced the death toll of COVID-19. At some of the demonstrations in other parts of the country, protesters have gone without masks, waved swastikas, and chanted to "lock up" public health officials. Go back to business as usual, regardless of the cost to human life, the protestors argue.

Many households and small businesses are suffering financially right now. All of us are eager to see the economy re-open, jobs return, and schools re-open in a responsible and timely fashion. Moreover, the rights to free speech and lawful protest are central to a functioning democracy.

However, these protests fly in the face of not just state government officials, but also impartial scientists, public health experts, and good sense. Wearing a mask in public is not tyranny. And recklessly re-opening restaurants and bars while two thousand Americans per day are dying from this virus is not an expression of unfettered liberty – it is bad judgment.

Fortunately, most Americans, even those who have lost family members or their jobs, understand that we must put the health and safety of society before our own self-interest. For now, that means maintaining physical distancing until we can re-open the economy without inviting a second surge of the virus.

Andrew M. Lindner is associate professor of sociology at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY