Covid-19 and the ethics of risk

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How can we fairly distribute risks across individuals and groups within societies? Jonathan Wolff, Sridhar Venkatapuram, and Nicole Hassoun consider

Life is full of risks, some welcomed, some distinctly unwelcome. The pandemic has increased risks for everyone, raising vital questions about their fair distribution. Aside from managing personal and family risks, we are also forced to consider the circumstances under which society can legitimately expect some people to take risks they might not understand or would prefer to avoid. Most prominent among these are threats to the physical health of certain groups of people, such as health workers, delivery drivers, teachers, and shop workers, although the mental health and economic wellbeing of many others are also at risk.

Several general frameworks for thinking about the fair distribution of risk have been proposed. The first is the most obvious. No one should have to experience a risk of harm unless they consent. This is the *rights against risk* theory. But it has at least three problems. First, we can't always get enough people to consent to accept a risk (for example, no one works in grocery stores during lockdowns even if wages are increased). Second, offering already vulnerable people money to take exceptional risks can be exploitative. Third,

A third approach applies social *cost benefit analysis* to risk. Only allow the risk of harm to others if the expected benefits outweigh the costs. This is not a trivial condition. Reckless risk taking, where the probable costs greatly outweigh the probable benefits, is all too common. However, the converse—always allow a risk if the expected benefits outweigh the risks—is highly problematic. It could lead to a situation in which all the benefits go to one already privileged group, and all the costs go to the under-privileged. For example, the tradeoff of the economy versus health is more accurately some people's economic wellbeing versus the health of others. Indeed, this was the situation in lockdown, with low paid workers facing higher risks while serving those fortunate enough to work from home.

Finally, a fourth theory appeals to a hypothetical social contract. Employing John Rawls' theory of justice, it asks you to imagine the risk related principles you would agree to if you didn't know how you would be personally affected. It could be you running the risk, or others taking it on your behalf. What would you agree to? Our proposal, building beyond the other theories, is this:

Don't impose the risk unless the benefits outweigh the cost (irrespective of who gets either).

Try to find qualified volunteers or people who will accept extra pay to run the risk but not on exploitative terms.

If the adverse event happens, compensate insofar as possible.

Take special care to minimise the risks in question.

Applying these principles to covid-19, frontline workers should receive extra

Most people probably consider the pandemic a natural disaster. It is anything but. Collectively, we have failed to address the threat of pandemics and the problems that vulnerable people face, which are long standing, predictable, and extraordinary. While many governments have been grappling with national security risks, including biological threats, we have been very slow to think about the fairness of how we collectively create and distribute risks across individuals and groups within societies.

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