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OPINION

15 doctors send message to Michiganders on wearing masks, following science

A coalition of Michigan public health experts Published 12:31 p.m. ET Oct. 6, 2020 | Updated 2:17 p.m. ET Oct. 6, 2020



The Michigan Capitol building in Lansing on Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2019. (Photo: Kathleen Gray, Detroit Free Press)

Editor's note: This oped is signed by 15 of Michigan's top public health experts.

On March 10, the first case of COVID-19 was officially diagnosed in Michigan. Within weeks, we were one of the top hotspots in the nation in cases, hospitalizations and deaths. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer responded quickly and forcefully with a number of emergency orders. However, on Oct. 2 — after 126,000 more cases and nearly 6,800 deaths — the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in a split decision that Whitmer did not have the ongoing authority to issue executive orders addressing COVID-19 under a 1945 law dealing with state emergencies.

When this ruling goes into effect, the Michigan Legislature, other state departments and agencies, and county/city governments will have an even more important role in controlling the pandemic. The good news is that objective epidemiologic research, including on the impact of the governor's response thus far, provides clear answers on a path forward. The bad news is that many state legislators (including Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey) and local policymakers want to abandon sound science-based policies, such as mask mandates, and thus recklessly endanger the health and lives of Michiganders.

More: [Michigan Supreme Court rules against Whitmer on emergency powers but effect unclear \(/story/news/politics/2020/10/02/michigan-supreme-court-rules-against-whitmer-emergency-powers/3596332001/\)](#)

More: [Michigan's AG office: We will no longer enforce Whitmer's orders through criminal prosecution \(/story/news/local/michigan/2020/10/04/attorney-general-nessel-not-enforce-whitmer-orders-through-criminal-prosecution/3616500001/\)](#)

We are a group of Michigan experts in medicine, public health practice, epidemiologic science and policy evaluation. Collectively, we have over 300 years of experience in research and service in the public interest, including service in both Republican and Democratic administrations. Although we come from different disciplines and backgrounds, we are unified in our scientific understanding of what policies must be in place to minimize both the health and economic carnage from the pandemic.

In a legal amicus curiae brief, we explained to the Michigan Supreme Court that the governor's actions were firmly rooted in science and saved thousands of lives. The novel coronavirus has characteristics that make it extremely difficult to control in community settings, including that over 30% of people with the virus are infectious without experiencing symptoms or illness. Every single Michigander — 10 million people living in all 83 counties — is at risk for contracting the virus, experiencing serious, lingering illness or death, or unknowingly passing it onto others. COVID-19 is already the third leading cause of death in Michigan in 2020, behind cancer and heart disease. And lurking behind the number of cases, hospitalization and deaths are significant racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities.

Epidemiologic modeling reveals a significant reduction in the growth of new cases following the implementation of Whitmer's social distancing and other emergency measures. Within just a couple weeks of the stay-at-home and other directives, Michigan experienced a marked reduction in new cases, hospitalization and deaths. University of Michigan researchers estimate that approximately 28,000 more cases and 3,500 more deaths would likely have occurred by June 1 without the governor's emergency measures.

More: [Whitmer explains how she'll know when state of emergency is over — and why it isn't yet \(/story/opinion/contributors/2020/09/18/gretchen-whitmer-covid-state-of-emergency/3478403001/\)](#)

More: [Face masks, social distancing still required in Michigan, top state official says \(/story/news/health/2020/10/05/michigan-health-department-masks-dr-gordon/3628690001/\)](#)

Whitmer's science-based approach to the COVID-19 pandemic mirrors the approach of 43 other states that responsibly implemented a similar set of emergency public health orders. A recently released national peer-reviewed study found that states' adoption in March and April of four fundamental social distancing measures — large event bans, school closures, restaurant/bar/gym closures; and shelter-in-place orders — significantly reduced the daily growth rate of COVID-19. Without the adoption of these four policy measures, it is estimated the virus would have spread exponentially, with millions more cases nationwide.

Recently published research on trends in COVID-19 also found that the timing of statewide emergency orders requiring people to wear face masks/coverings was associated with a significant reduction in the daily COVID-19 growth rate. Estimates suggest that by the end of May, between 230,000 and 450,000 cases of COVID-19 were averted by face covering mandates in 15 states.

In sum, ongoing control of the spread of coronavirus through state-level policies that require masks in public places, limit indoor and outdoor gathering sizes, and require physical distancing, density controls and other precautions in businesses, offices, schools, gyms, salons and other venues is the only way to keep this insidious virus from multiplying.

Like all families in Michigan, we appreciate the devastating toll that certain emergency measures may temporarily have on Michigan's economy. But keeping the virus under control is the only way we can continue to keep the economy somewhat open, and send our children back to school. A poll of leading economists in the U.S. revealed that the vast majority agree we cannot get our economy back on track until the spread of infections is low and kept under control through public health interventions.

There are many other science-based policy prescriptions and recommendations that have emerged from rigorous research on COVID-19. In the policy aftermath of the recent court ruling, we urge Michigan legislators and local/municipal health authorities to use this research to pick up and run with — not drop — Whitmer's lifesaving policy baton. We expect all people in public service to respect the science that clearly reveals how to keep Michiganders safe and healthy. And as researchers and public health experts who live and work in Michigan, we stand ready to provide nonpartisan advice and guidance to policymakers regarding the best path forward.

Controlling a pandemic should not be about politics or partisan ideology; we cannot throw our hands up in defeat. Controlling a pandemic should not pit public health interventions against the economy. We know the policy tools that are needed to control the pandemic and how to make it successfully to the other side of this historic crisis. The most important tool is good governance that is responsive, vigilant and science-driven. We need policymaking that is rooted in both science and the value of protecting our public's health.

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