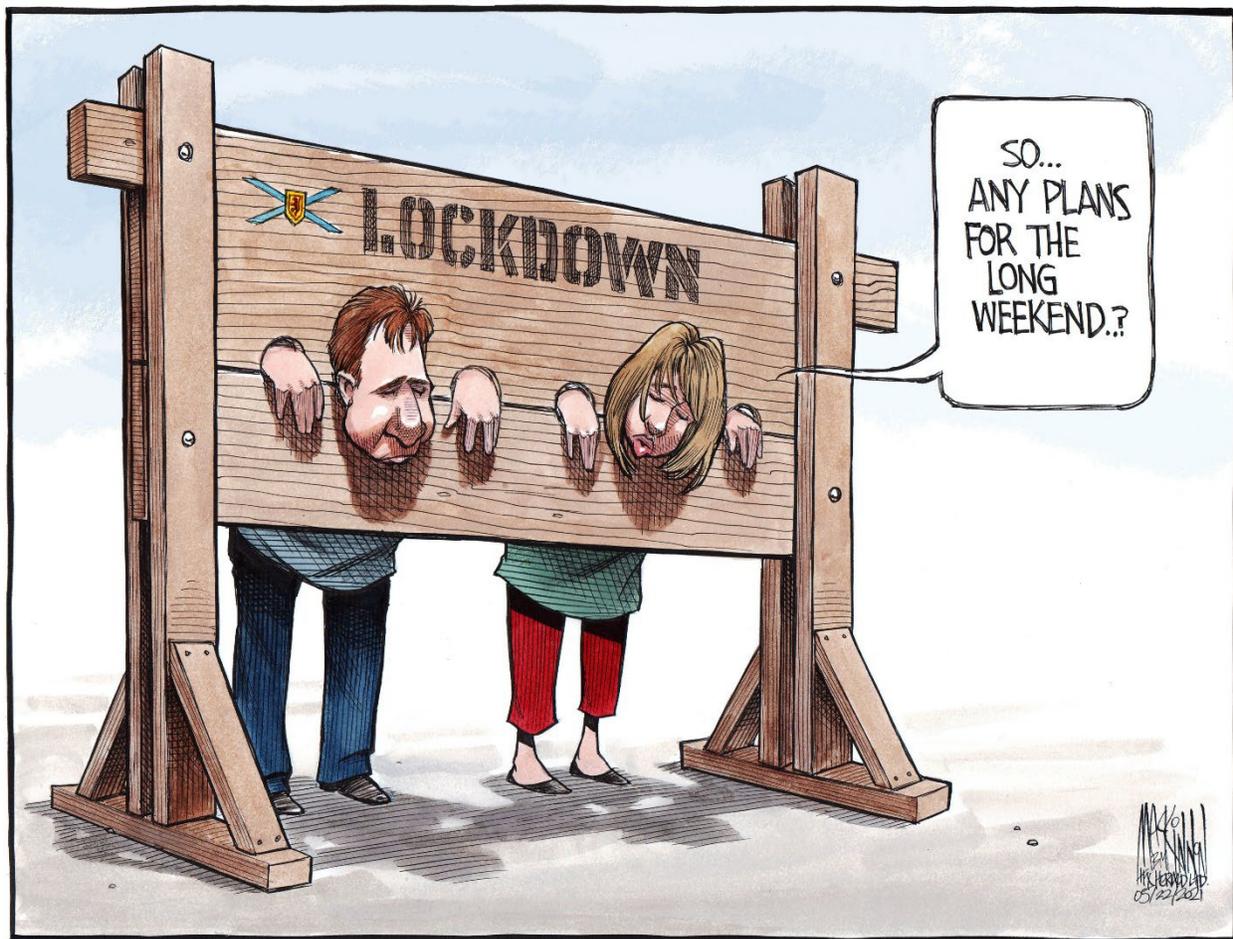


LINDA PANNOZZO: 'Flattening the curve may shorten your life'

Anti-COVID measures stunting development of a generation of kids, psychologist argues

Contributed | Posted: Jan. 25, 2022, 6 a.m. | Updated: Jan. 25, 2022, 6 a.m. | 4 Min Read



LINDA PANNOZZO • Guest Opinion

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When the pandemic was first declared two years ago, followed by the lockdown, I almost immediately wondered about what the fallout would be. All policy decisions come with hidden costs — consequences that can end up being bad for society — and they are outcomes that are often not counted or even considered, but should be.

Public health policies are no exception.

Dr. Simon Sherry is a psychologist and professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax. In an interview, Sherry tells me that since the start of the pandemic, poor mental health in Nova Scotia has become “statistically normal.” For some, the pandemic and the restrictions have exacerbated pre-existing conditions, but he says there has also been a concerning increase in new onset cases among those who never had mental health problems before.

Sherry says that public health measures have “required people to engage in avoidance, isolation and vigilance, which is a provincewide prescription conducive to developing mental illness.”

Sherry also says that while we’ve been counting and widely reporting what’s easily countable: positive tests, new cases, hospitalizations, ICU admissions, and deaths, we have “actually failed to count what is more important.”

“What’s being missed, which is enormously important, is the impact that this pandemic is having on the psycho-social development of our children and adolescents. We are raising kids who are socially and emotionally starved. We’re raising kids who are disconnected from recreation and socialization and sports and experiences that are fundamentally important to them. There’s a very real risk that with all of the closures and restrictions, we’re starting to push children down a completely different trajectory in their lives because, as these experiences accumulate, it’s harder to bounce back from them.”

Sherry says the misery and poor outcomes are not evenly distributed, but concentrated disproportionately among those who are disadvantaged and “don’t have the resources to buffer the stress that we’re all being subjected to.” Socio-economic disadvantage also leaves people more vulnerable to serious outcomes from COVID-19 itself. “Poverty appears to raise the risk for COVID-19 through hardships such as increased exposure to COVID-19 in workplaces, the stress of poverty undermining immunity, barriers to health-care utilization, and poverty-linked comorbidities, such as obesity or diabetes,” he explains.

According to Statistics Canada, during the first year of the pandemic, 73 per cent of excess deaths under the age of 65 were not a result of COVID — the disease — but of overdoses and accidental deaths involving alcohol and drugs.



Dr. Simon Sherry is a clinical psychologist and a professor in Dalhousie University's department of psychology and neuroscience and department of psychiatry. - Nebal Snan

Sherry says we have developed a narrow focus and a disproportionate fear of COVID-19, and we are ignoring the public health impact that the restrictions themselves are having.

“During Wave 1, when COVID-19 was novel and misunderstood, the restrictions were harsh but mostly necessary,” explains Sherry. “Vaccines are a very useful addition to our COVID-19 mitigation toolbox, especially in terms of reducing severe COVID-19 symptoms, but he says, “two years in, there needs to be a shift to considering other important outcomes.”

Sherry says we should shift from a focus on death tolls to years of life lost due to death that is premature.

“We can predict how many years of life are lost when we remove children from schools, sports and recreation, workers from jobs, and family from each other... and these predictions of years of life lost are ugly,” he says. Studies suggest millions of years of life lost are projected because of school closures, increases in marital problems, domestic violence, mental illness, addiction and social isolation.

In other words, “flattening the curve may shorten your life,” he says.

At this point in the pandemic, Sherry says we have to shift our focus and our thinking. “There’s much more to life than avoiding disease, and we cannot have a myopic focus on just case-containment. There’s no sense in having kids who are COVID-safe but mentally ill. At this point, what our kids and our brains really need would be fun, novelty and connection.”

“So, I think a much better messaging track would be: be brave and move forward.”