



Covid-19 is mysterious, but it doesn't mean humans have no control over it

by Joshua P. Cohen

On Friday, July 30th, David Leonhardt in the [New York Times "The Morning"](#) wrote about how mysterious Covid-19 is. He emphasized the "boom and bust" nature of waves, arguing that human behavior appears to make little difference. Certainly, there are mysteries to unravel surrounding Covid-19, some of which result from the intrinsic non-linear, exponential nature of outbreaks, where small variations can have major impact on outcomes. But, contrary to Leonhardt's view, there are numerous examples in which human behavior does matter, and matters greatly. And, one doesn't have to venture far - like Australia or New Zealand - to find evidence of this: A comparison between the U.S. and Canada. For all the policy mistakes made in Canada - especially in British Columbia and Alberta - the nation as a whole has done a far better job at containment with a much more consistent set of mitigation policies than the U.S., and it shows in all Covid-19 indicators. Several provinces have done exceptionally well in driving transmission down to very low levels (Including New Brunswick and Nova Scotia), and human behavior was the difference; before and during the vaccination campaign.

When Leonhardt tries to make the point that humans have little control over the virus, he references the trajectory of the Delta wave in India and the U.K.

Regarding India, Leonhardt says that the Delta wave is now "fizzling out" after soaring to almost unimaginable heights in April. Leonhardt suggests that the initial rapid decline is inexplicable, as if to say it had nothing to do with mitigation measures put in place in April and May throughout India. Surely, social distancing measures made a difference. It is after all an infectious disease, with a virus that feeds on contacts. Moreover, Leonhardt's use of the term "fizzling out" is puzzling, in reference to a country that has plateaued at around 45,000 cases a day and has an official death count of approximately 550 a day. Moreover, the cases are located primarily in a few states that have used less stringent containment measures.

On the U.K., Leonhardt cites a chief economist at J.P. Morgan, David Mackie, to not only downplay the impact of the Delta variant, but also to offer a fabricated, revisionist account: "The current Delta wave in the U.K. is turning out to be much, much milder than we anticipated." In May, the consensus view among many public health experts was that Britain had done such a

good job vaccinating that it had built up a sufficient wall of immunity. Yet, unexpectedly, a major Delta wave hit, with, thus far, tens of thousands of hospital admissions and several thousand deaths. Vaccinations have helped to blunt the impact of the Delta wave. But, it's folly to imply that this is somehow a "mild" wave that the U.K. is experiencing.

Covid-19 is a mysterious virus and it does unexpected things. But this does not mean that humans have no control over the virus. And this control extends beyond vaccinations.