

TOP

From Twitter to the ozone layer, the coronavirus pandemic's impact has seeped into every stratum of daily life across the globe.

Here are 10 of the most significant lessons we've learned so far.

By Julia Fraser

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Importance of health precautions, preventive measures and preparedness — and damage caused when these issues are politicized

Shortly after the first cases of COVID-19 hit New Zealand, the country issued a nationwide lockdown that lasted for seven weeks. By early May, community spread of the virus in New Zealand seemed to have ended— only to break out again in August. A second strict lockdown, lifted in October, has kept the virus at bay so far. In the U.S., health precautions became political. People stood in front of the City-County Building in Pittsburgh protesting stay-at-home orders and mask-wearing requirements. A motorcycle rally in Sturgis, South Dakota, attracting more than 460,000 tourists with few attendees wearing masks, dispersed the virus well beyond the small town.

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Importance of a unified, coordinated public health message

Only seven people had died of COVID-19 in Taiwan as of the end of November. After quickly shuttering its borders as the virus exploded in China, the country banned the export of surgical masks and set up a contract tracing system, and medical officials held briefings daily. People bought into the centralized and coordinated response, lives were spared and the economy chugged along.

The U.S. responded to the virus in a patchwork of weak, incremental measures—every county and state recommended or rejected different precautions. People traveled across state lines, and more than 285,000 people have died from the virus in the U.S.



Masked and ready for work, Sidney Davis, a Port Authority of Allegheny County bus driver, makes a stop in Downtown Pittsburgh on April 3.

Jared Wickerham

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Importance of health professionals, service workers, food processing workers and others who became “essential”

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on a group of workers who allowed life to continue for those who stayed at home. Supermarket workers, bus drivers, at-home care workers, nurses, food processing workers and many others showed up to work, often without access to adequate personal protective equipment and exposed to unsafe work conditions. Most have not received additional compensation, according to a June 2020 report on essential workers and hazard pay during the pandemic by the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit think tank. Many of these workers are among those hardest hit by rising income inequality and the decline of unionization across the country. Their struggle will continue after the pandemic ends.



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Importance of voting access (e.g., adequate number of poll workers and mail-in ballot options)

In June, Georgia’s primary election meltdown of malfunctioning voter machines, long lines and voter suppression in predominantly Black districts exposed fissures in the election process. Battleground states like Wisconsin reported a shortage of poll worker recruits, according to a report by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis. And attempts were made to limit the expansion of mail-in voting in states such as Texas and to make mail-in voting more difficult in other states, including Pennsylvania. Despite these efforts, the November election saw record-breaking turnout. But such voter suppression tactics threaten the nation’s standing as a leader among liberal democracies.

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Necessity of addressing inequality

The legacy of the pandemic will be exacerbated inequality. The economic shock and soaring unemployment deepened existing socioeconomic and racial disparities in the U.S. and throughout the world. Those at the bottom of the economic tier face increasing financial hardship and educational barriers. Nearly 60 percent of low-income households say their child may face digital obstacles with their school work, according to a survey on K–12 schooling during the coronavirus outbreak conducted in April by the Pew Research Center. There has been a sharp difference in deaths from COVID-19, adding to persistent racial disparities. Black Americans, for example, have died from COVID-19 at more than twice the rate of white Americans, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Importance of good journalism

Spreading well-reported news proved essential as the virus reached across the globe. COVID-19 disinformation flooded the internet, creating confusion about medical facts for people around the world. Compounded by scientists’ evolving understanding of COVID-19 and data about the virus, journalists faced new challenges in reporting accurate information to the public. Newsrooms stepped up despite decades-long cuts to their staffs, reporting the latest research, case counts, economic impact and fact-checking rumors to help stop the spread of the virus and disinformation.

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Necessity of good teachers and schools to family life and the economy

The pandemic brought the classroom home to students around the world. For parents working from home, it meant juggling work meetings with keeping their child on task. For parents who still went into work, they had to solve the complex puzzle of arranging child care during a pandemic. Working mothers and, in particular, single mothers have been more likely to lose their jobs and more likely to bear the burden of closed schools. The impact on women's roles in the household, future job opportunities and earning potential will outlast the pandemic.



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Importance of internet access – for work, school, medical appointments, arts and entertainment

Zoom became a verb during the pandemic. The web conferencing app and others like it made working remotely possible for millions of Americans. It allowed friends living across the world to meet for happy hour, patients to consult their doctors and musicians to stage virtual concerts. When schools and universities closed, students continued their studies virtually. But for the nearly one in five Allegheny County residents without an internet subscription—and others across the country like them—logging onto the virtual world is a struggle, leaving them left behind or left out.

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Possibilities that still exist for healing the planet despite the damage done by human activity

When the world locked down, highways were deserted and the buzz of aircrafts in the sky went missing. Estimates suggest that global greenhouse gas emissions fell roughly 10 to 30 percent during April, according to a report on COVID-19's impact on climate change in the journal *Nature Climate Change*. Experts warn that these drops are only temporary. But a post-pandemic corporate world with more remote work and less travel would be cheaper and use less fuel. Countries could line their economic recovery plans with “green” policies such as investing in low-carbon technology to extend climate gains from the pandemic. **h**

