

# THE PRINCETON PACKET

Friday, March 27, 2020

[www.princetonpacket.com](http://www.princetonpacket.com)

**SOLUTIONS**

**By Huck Fairman**

## Coronavirus and its cousins

**B**y now, awareness of the severity of the coronavirus has reached everywhere, even the White House. In the U.S. the number of cases has passed 15,000 and will continue rising. The number of deaths has passed 200, and that too will rise.

The economic and social impacts, as well as the health challenges, will also be severe. As Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health warned, “Things will get worse before they get better.”

Worldwide, more than 306,000 cases have been reported, with more than 13,000 deaths (and 86,000 cases recovered) in 177 countries.

The reported progress in China and South Korea is encouraging, however. Recently in the former, no new cases were reported.

In our country, the social responses have also been encouraging. As we saw in World War II, residents have reached out, sacrificed and helped those in need. The 2008 economic crisis has given us some guidelines for what to do economically and financially.

But while the coronavirus, or COVID-19, is extremely serious, scary and uncertain, it is not alone in its threatening communities, nations and the international networks.

Beginning with the industrial revolution, mankind has been slowly changing the planet’s atmosphere – speeding up its impact more recently. While this does not present the immediate threats that COVID-19 does, it does over the next decade or so threaten even more, if slowly increasing, death and devastation.

The 2018 California wildfires, fed by dry conditions and heat, killed 97 and destroyed communities. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 killed over 1,200. The East African cyclones and floods killed 1,300 and devastated the land. Our own Hurricane Sandy killed 147 people and caused over \$70 billion in destruction. The 2004 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia killed over 227,000. While this was not climate-related, it is an example of the devastation that both nature and man can visit, if we do not anticipate and prepare.

Over roughly this same period, Brazil has allowed farmers to devastate its Amazon rainforest, “the lungs of the planet,” according to some. Drought in many countries has reduced food supplies, allowed wildfires (Australia and California) and prompted migration (Asia, Africa, South and Central America.) Water supplies have also been reduced in Asia and Africa. If the Himalayan snow packs and glaciers dry up, literally billions of people will not have adequate water supplies.

The impacts of the climate crisis are many. One thing the coronavirus crisis has reminded us is that if the threats are deemed serious, urgent and widespread enough, people will respond. Already, around the world, necessary emissions-reduction changes are being adopted by many. The question is, as it is with coronavirus, will it be soon and comprehensive enough? The cost of waiting on coronavirus can now be seen in lives and economic disruption. It is to be hoped that experience will spur people and their governments to head off its spread, but also prevent the worst climate crisis devastation. We have been warned that the rising ocean levels will inundate New York, Miami and other cities and towns (as we are seeing in Venice) around the world. We need to both reduce emissions (as ironically coronavirus is doing with the reduction in travel and industry) and prepare for the impacts of the increased heat already in our atmosphere and oceans.

But there are other crises out there. Perhaps they are not as immediately demanding as corona is, but their impacts are surprisingly wide spread.

In 2018, 48,344 Americans killed themselves. Since 1999, the suicide rate has climbed 35%. In 2017, 1.4 million Americans attempted suicide. We don’t know when and where the death rate of COVID-19 will level off – perhaps when a vaccine arrives in the next year or so – but in terms of sheer numbers, suicide way out does coronavirus, so far.

In their new book, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, Princeton University economists (and couple) Anne Case and Angus Deaton analyze a persisting problem: what causes so many white middle-aged males to kill themselves (from 1999 to 2017, an extra 600,000 deaths beyond the predicted.)

Their conclusions are that a combination of economic stagnation (amid plenty for many) the reduction in religious connection, and the transfer of payments by employers to the costs of medical benefits have reduced workers’ incomes and sense of well-being. In short, both the healthcare and employment systems have failed many working-class white males without college degrees. (And indeed 28 million Americans have no health insurance.) Too often, Case and Deaton detail, “corporate governance ... puts shareholders’ interests ahead of workers’ ...” And again, at the moment, the numbers falling victim to those failings far outdo corona. The authors observe that “we are better at addressing fast-moving crises than slow-building ones.” It is to be hoped, however, that growing awareness of each of these crises can lead to needed solutions.