



The Bizarre Refusal to Apply Cost-Benefit Analysis to Covid Debates

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Glenn Greenwald: Hey, everyone, this is Glenn Greenwald back with a new episode of System Update exclusively on Rumble. And I wanted to discuss a really interesting, to me at least, topic that I attempted to discuss on Twitter and ended up confusing/ angering so many people that my name trended all night because of it, because of how people reacted. And in fact, that's actually a broader point that I wanted to note is one of the reasons I was so interested in doing the video channel is precisely because it's so much better to be able to discuss topics, especially complex ones in this format where I can walk through the rationale and examine the evidence rather than putting it on Twitter where it's easily distorted. A lot of times an article or a question or a point doesn't rise to the level of a fully written article. And so this was intended and is intended to be a venue where I can discuss more complicated questions without the distortive lens that Twitter allows. So let's dive right into it. It really has to do with the question of how we're conducting our Covid policy and debates and specifically an extremely irrational component to the debates that we are conducting. And the analogy I attempted to use was that in so many other instances, we're capable of engaging in a cost benefit analysis where we don't just look at one side of the ledger and say, if we do this, people will die. And therefore automatically because life is so valuable, we have to do whatever we can to avoid that. We ask not just what the costs are to not doing that policy, but also what the costs are to doing the policy and whether the cost of doing that policy outweighs the cost of not doing it, even though we know people are going to die. And for me, the most vivid analogy is how we think about the question of cars and the policies that we enact governing the use of cars. This simple argument is the following. We know for certain that a huge number of people are going to die every year because of car crashes. In fact, it is the leading cause of death around the world for everybody under 50. So it's not just that huge numbers of people are losing their lives through the use of cars, but the number of years lost is even more tragic and even more extreme because so many young people are dying in car crashes as opposed to, say, cardiovascular disease or Covid where it's still tragic, but people who are older are dying and therefore there's a lot less life lost. And this is what I find so

interesting, we have it within our power very easily, in fact, just through some policy choices to prevent all of these car deaths, all of these deaths from car collisions. There are a lot of alternatives to prevent those deaths and keep those people alive. We could ban all cars. And then obviously the people dying in car crashes will instead be alive. We could allow only people with very urgent needs for the society to be licenced by the state to drive, so say ambulances, to take very sick people to the hospital or people who have to drive to deliver our food supply. And that would significantly reduce the number of people driving, which in turn would save a huge number of lives. So you can no longer drive for recreation or just to go visit a friend. The only people licenced are permitted to drive are people who have an urgent need to do so for the society. We could also radically lower the speed limit instead of 55 or 65 or 75 miles an hour on highways. We could lower the speed limit to 25 and that would save an inordinate number of lives. And yet we don't do any of those things. In fact, not only don't we do them, there's nobody advocating for those things. I've never heard anybody advocating for the elimination of cars. Maybe you could find somebody on environmental grounds who would say that, but no one says we should get rid of cars because that way, no people will no longer die in a car accident. And no one says we should only allow people with urgent needs to drive and prohibit everyone else, even though we know doing that would save a huge amount of lives. And while some people sometimes debate whether the speed limit should be 75 or 65 on highways or 40 or 30 in a residential zone, nobody says we should just lower the speed limit in all cases to 25 mph on the grounds that doing so will save a huge number of lives. Why is that? Why do people not advocate those policies, even though they know that by not advocating them, by opposing them, they're inevitably going to cause huge numbers of people to die? Is it because they're just sociopaths and if you don't want to ban cars or if you don't want to lower the speed limit to 25 mph, then it means you don't value human life because, you know, by opposing those things, huge numbers of people are going to die. Of course not. It's because we apply a cost benefit analysis. And even though nobody likes to explicitly say this because it sounds crude, this is in fact what we as a society are always saying about the policies governing car deaths, which is we know that the policy we're choosing to allow cars to allow everyone to drive, to allow people to drive 55, 65, 75 mph. We know that's going to cause a huge number of human beings in our society to be killed. But we think it's worth it for those people to die because the benefits of allowing cars, convenience, the ability to go more places, the economic benefits to ourselves and our society make those deaths worth it. And although it sounds crude when you put it that way, that is the judgement we make all the time. Constantly we say, yes, we know that this policy will cause people to die. We know we have it within our power to prevent those deaths, but we choose not to because the cost of those policies that prevent those deaths is too high. So we prefer to allow those people to die. We make those decisions continuously. We don't ban planes even knowing that some people are going to die in planes or helicopters. What we don't do for some reason, some of us, is permit this rationale to be used in the debate over how to treat Covid where for many people the only acceptable argument is we can't allow reopening of schools. We can't allow people to go out without masks. We can't allow them the freedom to decide whether they trust the vaccine or not. Because if we allow those things, people will die and only sociopaths would want people to die. There's no space in their minds for asking that question. What are the costs of preventing those deaths? What are the costs from those policies of keeping schools closed? Of keeping businesses locked out, of preventing people from going out of their homes? And that's the argument I want to review, because I think it's an extraordinarily defective part of our discourse that has led to some and continues to leave even in a post vaccine world to some extremely irrational choices. And yet the emotions surrounding Covid deaths prevent the kinds of debates that we often have in so many other cases, beginning with car crashes. So let's look at the data for car

crashes from the CDC and from the World Health Organisation. I think it's incredibly revealing. So here is a CDC report from December of 2020. And the title of it is Road Traffic, Injuries and Deaths- a Global Problem. A Global Problem. And this is what it says, quote, Road traffic crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States for people ages one through 54. And they are the leading cause of non natural death for US citizens residing or travelling abroad. It says it's much worse for people who are economically deprived. And then it concludes by saying, yet each year, vehicles are involved in crashes that are responsible for millions of deaths and injuries. Each year. It's not just deaths, but also horrific injuries, people being left quadriplegic or paraplegic because of the use of cars. That is the CDC in December of 2020, pointing out how grave and leading a problem it is. It then goes on to give global statistics and it points out that, quote, Each year, 1.35 Million people are killed on roadways around the world. 1.35 Million human beings every year die of crashes because of cars. Crash injuries are estimated to be the eighth leading cause of death globally for all age groups and the leading cause of death for children and young people. Five to twenty nine years of age, more people now die in car crashes than from HIV and AIDS. So if you're one of these people showing how much you deeply care about the health of children by demanding that schools remain closed for going on soon to be two years, why are you not demanding that cars be banned on the grounds that millions of people and hundreds of thousands of children every year are dying and being maimed because of these instruments, these automobiles that you believe should continue to be allowed to be used and continue to function more or less as they do, even knowing that you're responsible for huge numbers of deaths. Let's look at more of this data. Here's the CDC offering suggestions for how safety can be used when it comes to cars. And they offer obvious things like always use a seatbelt, make sure children are properly buckled, wear a helmet when driving a motorcycle, do not drive while impaired, very rational and reasonable precautions. But notice what's not on this list. They're not saying we should ban cars. They're not saying we should restrict cars only to people who have proven to the government that there's an essential use to them. They're not saying we should lower the speed limit to 25 mph. Why? Why aren't they advocating that, knowing that by not advocating that they're consigning huge numbers of people to their deaths every single year? And if you're somebody who wants to keep cars going and wants the speed limit to be 55 or 65, how do you justify that you support those policies, knowing that you're going to cause huge numbers of people to die both in the United States and around the world and be the leading cause of death for children in that age group? Now, obviously, we could ban cars, as I said, but here's a study and there are many of them from 2009 from the American Journal of Public Health analysing the effects of reducing the speed limit, reducing the maximum speed limit. And as you would expect, the study found that every time you reduce the speed limit, it saves a huge number of lives. The stats are there, but the conclusion is reduce speed limits with more enforcement, could immediately reduce speeds and save lives. And yet there's an increase in road fatalities attributable to the fact that America is not reducing the speed limit, but actually is increasing the speed limit. So we know that we're going in the wrong direction from a perspective of saving lives. We're moving toward increasing the speed limit, not decreasing it, even though we know people are going to be killed. Here's some examples from the Arkansas Democrat Gazette in 2020, the headline says: Panel OKs moving ahead with 75 mph speed limit on some roads. The article says, quote, A commission approved study recommendations paving the way to increase the speed on rural interstates to 75 mph. The move will also boost the speed limits on some urban interstates to 65 mph, moving it up from 60. Here's a poll in 2019 from the Cleveland Plain Dealer that finds that their readers overwhelmingly support raising the speed limit to 75 mph, a policy that we know will kill people. The article says a majority of our readers favour a 75 mph speed limit along the Ohio Turnpike and rural highways. Here's a study where they raise

the speed limit in Michigan and then in 2020 concluded as the headline shows, Crashes and injuries spike after Michigan boosts freeway. Both boost freeway speed limit to 75 mph. And there it breaks it down what the exact statistics are, that in 2017 they raised the speed limit just five mph. State records show average speeds have increased two mph, just two mph, and more drivers are going over 80 mph while crashes, injuries and fatalities increased at a higher rate on the freeways than other roads in 2018, the first full year after speed limits were raised. So you see the rationale, we know the policies we're supporting are going to cause enormous numbers of people, including children, to die, we support them anyway. Why? Because we look at the other side of the ledger and we realise how much will be lost in life, how much will be lost for society by banning cars, or by only allowing some people to drive or forcing everybody to drive 25 mph and turning a one hour trip into a three hour trip, a three hour trip into a nine hour trip, how much we will suffer in terms of our lives, the economy and everything else. And we decide we'd rather have those people die than lose all the benefits that cars provide. That is basic cost benefit analysis. Here is a non-governmental organisation based in Europe that talks about just the basics of what a cost benefit analysis is. It's used for the economy, is used for social programmes, for social policy, and it gives a very simple definition. It's a tool that measures in ways various impacts of a project or policy, it can bear, compares project costs, capital and operating expenses with a broad range of social impact. For example, travel time savings, travel costs, impacts and other modes. Climate, safety and the environment, also impacts on property values and economic impacts can be analysed. And then it says the tool supports decision making and various policies across areas like transport economics, cycling, rail, highways, waterways, airports, renewable energy, spatial development, water management and tourism. In other words, we use this rational risk assessment in every single aspect of our public lives. Except Covid for some reason, and that was the question I was asking, why, when it comes to Covid, do we throw this rational framework out and say that anything that might lead to more deaths, even two deaths, three deaths, we should do close schools, keep people in their houses, lock things down, lock businesses down, and never think about the countervailing costs to those restrictive measures, how many lives that might be killing or taking, how much harm that might be causing emotionally, psychologically, developmentally, economically. Where is the application of that cost benefit analysis that we do in every other realm to the Covid debate? Let's look at as people are demanding that schools stay closed, as people demand that more mass mandates be introduced even with the vaccines, as people demand that businesses stay closed, that we socially distance. Let's look at the costs that people who take this position, this incredibly irrational position, the ones who got angry at me when I raised the analogy of cars and caused my name to trend, let's look at the cost that they refuse to acknowledge. This is a comprehensive article from the BBC from January of 2021, the headline of which is Covid: The devastating toll of the pandemic on children. That's who's being cited now as the reason we have to keep society closed because the children can't get vaccinated and we don't want them to die of Covid. This article asks what the devastating toll of the pandemic is for children, but not because children are dying of Covid. That's not the devastating toll they're talking about. And there's an obvious reason why, which is it's extremely unlikely that a child will contract Covid and die. Extremely unlikely. The numbers are very, very small. The devastating toll on children is taking place from this prolonged, sustained lockdown, school closures and every other measure that has been taken in the name of stopping Covid that, as this article headline says, is exacting a devastating toll on children. This is how the article begins, quote, Children are not likely to get seriously ill with Covid and there have been very few deaths, but children are still victims of the virus- and our response to it- in many other ways. From increasing rates of mental health problems to concerns about rising levels of abuse and neglect and the potential harm being done to the development of babies, the

pandemic is threatening to have a devastating legacy on the nation's young. The pandemic meaning the restrictions imposed for almost two years now, not the virus itself. It goes on to say, closing schools closes lives. The closure of schools is, of course, damaging to children's education. But schools are not just a place for learning. They are places where kids socialise, develop emotionally, and, for some, a refuge from troubled family life. Professor Richard Russell Viner, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Children's Child Health, perhaps put it most clearly when he told members of Parliament on the Education Select Committee earlier this month, quote, When we close schools, we close their lives. He says the pandemic has caused a range of harms to children across the board from being isolated and lonely to suffering from sleep problems and reduced physical activity- alongside school closures all children's sport is currently banned, as it has been at various places during the pandemic. One thing I think you'll notice is that the people who dismiss all of these harms to children, these incredibly serious harms emotionally and developmentally that come from not being able to go to school oftentimes are people who don't have children. And maybe therefore, they don't care as much about the effect on children, they're willing to sacrifice children's mental health in order to feel more protection for themselves, or maybe they just because they don't live with kids, don't see the effects on them emotionally from watching them be taken away from their friends and have only para social relationships because they can't go physically to school. The article, the BBC article, goes on to state, but it's not just the closure of schools. The stress the pandemic has put on families, with rising levels of unemployment and financial insecurity combined with the stay-at-home orders, has put strain on home life up and down the land. The NSPCC says the amount of counselling for loneliness provided by its Childline services has risen by ten percent since the pandemic started. Neil Holmer, who has been volunteering for the service since 2009, has never known anything like it. "It's had a devastating impact," he says. The experience of this 16 year old is typical of the calls that come in. "I feel really sad and lonely. Most days I find myself just lost in my own thoughts and feeling numb." So it's not just the problem of losing a huge chunk of your education because online education, as any person with kids know, is not the same as going to school, but also the developmental, the social benefits, the cost of being isolated in homes, locked down in homes, often abusive homes where the parents are suffering from their own depression and anxiety orders from not being able to go out, the financial harm that comes from shutting down businesses in our society, all of which is having a never before seen and very difficult to quantify, but certainly devastating toll on children that many people insist not be talked about because the only thing that matters is preventing more Covid cases. The last section of the article, it lists numerous problems for children, it's headline: Mental health problems on the rise. And it says: Unsurprisingly, there are clear signs the upheaval in children's lives is having an impact on their mental health. The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2020 report, is the official stocktake of the state of children's well-being. It has been tracking more than 3,000 young people over the last four years. Its latest findings found overall that one in six children, one in six aged five to 16, had a probable mental health disorder, up from one in nine, three years previously. Older girls had the highest rates. You can see in actual charts, like this one, the blue is from 2017, mental health in children in 2017 and the red is 2020 and it breaks it down by age group boys on the left and girls on the right. And it goes ages five to ten and eleven to 16. And you see in every one of these categories girls and boys, young girls, older girls, younger boys, older boys, mental health has increased problems, has increased significantly in 2020 because of the conditions that Covid lockdowns are imposing. These are real costs, just like the costs from banning cars are real. And it is immoral to say nothing of a rationale to refuse to assign value to them when talking about things like whether we should reopen schools and return to normal now that we have what is clearly an effective vaccine. Now, I've been working on this

question about what are the countervailing cost of Covid restrictions going all the way back to the beginning of the pandemic. In April of 2020, I interviewed two mental health experts, one of whom was Andrew Solomon, who wrote probably the most celebrated book on depression and has been studying depression and mental health disorders for most of his adult life. And this, remember, was back in the beginning of the pandemic when we were told we may have to lock down for a few weeks or a few months to flatten the curve. This is a year and four months ago. Listen to what he said about the likely effects of these measures of isolation, of social distancing, of not going to school, of not being able to go to work back 16 months ago.

GG in Video: Well, but we're isolated from the rest of the world. What do you think are already the mental health impacts of that? And what do you anticipate them being as it really does become months in reality as opposed to just perception?

Andrew Soloman: Well, I think there are enormous mental health impacts all around. I think they're worst for people who are self isolating, in real isolation. I mean, you have a few people with you, I have people with you, I know people who are not in relationships, who don't have children, who live alone and who are stuck in small New York City apartments that they're never allowed to leave for what looks like it might be months on end. In general, I think we have tended as a society to prioritise physical health over our mental health. And while I think in this instance, the physical health dangers are very real, I think the lack of focus on mental health is equally troubling. There are people, who in this degree of isolation, are going to escalate into depression because, as you said, isolation is a generating factor of depression. Some of those people will commit suicide because people commit suicide in desperate times and under desperate circumstances, that means that effectively we will have people dying of Covid who don't even have it, they'll be dying because of the circumstances around it and because of this self-imposed isolation.

GG: That's pretty stark. And again, I don't think any of us anticipated back then that these lockdowns and isolation and school closures would endure for a year and a half going on two years. But those are the costs that have to be taken into consideration in any rational cost benefit analysis when we're debating what next to do. Now, the costs of Covid itself are often wildly misstated, wildly exaggerated, especially when it comes to children. And all you have to do to know that is look at the data from the Centre for Disease Control, the CDC, the most recent data that we have on their website as of today as I make this video. Here's their page from August 18th entitled Provisional Covid-19 Deaths by Sex and Age, so it's counting how many people are dying from Covid with the Delta variant in the Delta environment by age and by sex. Here is a chart that is incredibly revealing. It counts the overall number of deaths from Covid in the United States starting from January 1st 2020 all the way through August 14th 2021. So about five days ago, six days ago- very, very recent data that obviously includes the Delta variant. For children under one years old, in a country of 330 million people, the total number of deaths is 89. 89 from Covid. For children, zero to 17, so every non adult in the United States, the total number of deaths from Covid 361. 361, you go down the last one to four years old, 45 people in total throughout the whole pandemic in the United States have died, five to 14 years old 123- 123. 15 to 24 years old, you got into the older age group, still just a 1078. Now it's true more children are being hospitalised when you open the society more, but the death toll is very small. And so when you look at the actual effects and people say, well, we don't know the long term effects of Covid on children, that's true. We also don't know the long term effects of the vaccines that we're taking because by definition, they can't be tested. But what we know is the data and we know that the chances, even with

Delta, even now, of children dying from Covid are extremely small. But the cost on their emotional well-being, their psychological help, their developmental abilities, their social abilities, their emotional fulfilment, their ability to be happy at home, their financial future, all of which is being devastated, the more we keep schools closed, the more we keep the society locked down, this chart shows very starkly the extreme correlation by age. It shows that if you take 18 to 29 years old, that age group as the reference group, if you are 85 or more years old you are 15 times more likely than that age group, 18 to 29, to be hospitalised, nine times more likely if you're 75 to 84 and six times if you're 65 to 74 and it goes down. And if you're zero to four or five to 17 year old, less than one time as likely as this already pretty invulnerable group of 18 to 29. Deaths, deaths from Covid are way, way more stark from an age perspective. If you're 85 years old, you're 600 times more likely to die of Covid than the 18 to 29 group. If you're 75 to 84, 230 times more likely. 65 to 74, 95 times more likely. And then you go to children and again with that reference group of 18 to 29 who aren't dying at a very high rate it's less than one time. So Covid is still very much, with Delta, a disease that is overwhelmingly killing very old people and people with comorbidities and very rarely killing children, which of course doesn't mean we assign zero value to it, but it certainly means that we shouldn't exaggerate the likelihood that if kids go to school, they're going to die of Covid or to end up in the ICU. The chances are extremely small compared to the costs that were in some sectors supposedly not permitted to discuss or analyse for some reason. So that was really the video I wanted to walk through, because this rationale is extremely important for how we make choices everywhere. And there is a certain segment of not just the United States but the West that I believe has gone almost insane, but certainly way over to the excessive irrationality when it comes to this fixation on one side of the ledger, do everything possible, including keeping schools closed, possibly for two years, just because there may be a couple of kids who die, which sounds crass, but no more crass than let's have cars even knowing it will kill people, but they just simply refuse to look at the remarkably significant and difficult to quantify and at this point, unknowable cost of the policies they're advocating- more lockdown's, more restrictions, even more mass for children who block the ability to understand how emotions function and the ability of kids most of all to go to school. Those costs are devastating. They're serious. And it's way past time that we start considering them and not allow people to tell us that those who want to look at both sides of the ledger are being sociopathic. The people who refuse to look at both sides of the ledger are being extremely irrational every bit as much as someone who says let's ban cars and aeroplanes because those kill people.

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