

Long Social Distancing

Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-138, “[Long Social Distancing](#),” by Jose Maria Barrero, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México; Nicholas Bloom, Stanford; and Steven J. Davis, University of Chicago

More than 10 percent of Americans with recent work experience will continue social distancing after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, and another 46 percent will do so in limited ways, with older persons, women, the less educated, lower wage earners, and “face-to-face” workers more inclined to social distance.

Important questions regarding the COVID pandemic and the labor force are the degree to which the virus would shift employee attitudes about social distancing at work even after the pandemic ends, and what effect such intentions would have on labor force participation and potential output, as well as on the college wage premium.

Answers to these questions are found in the monthly Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes (SWAA), which the authors have fielded since May 2020 to thousands of working-age Americans with prior-year earnings of \$10,000 or more, yielding individual-level data on demographics, labor force status, working arrangements, concerns about infection risks, social distancing intentions, and more. The authors analyze SWAA data from February to July 2022 to find the following:

- Nearly 13 percent of SWAA respondents say they will not return to pre-COVID activities after the pandemic ends. Instead, they plan to avoid subways, crowded elevators, taxis, ride-hailing services, and dining at indoor restaurants.
- Another 46 percent will continue limited forms of social distancing, a phenomenon the authors coin as “Long Social Distancing,” which is more common among older persons, women, the less educated, and those who earn less.

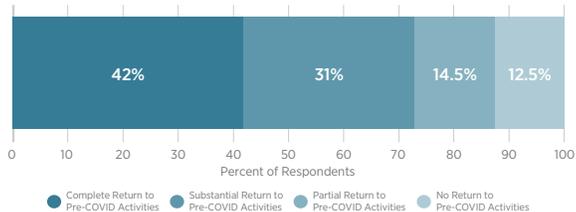
The authors also distinguish among those who are strongly committed to social distancing, which they term “strong-form Long Social Distancing,” to find that:

- Strong-form Long Social Distancing is especially prevalent among those who did not attend college, exceeding 17 percent for this group.
- It rises with age, roughly doubling from the early 20s to the early 60s.
- It is higher for women than men at all ages.
- It is about 3 percentage points higher for Democrats than for Republicans, and higher yet for Independents.
- It is more common when remote work opportunities are fewer.

Figure 1 • Long Social Distancing

13% of respondents plan no return to pre-COVID activities after the pandemic ends, and another 46% plan less than a complete return.

As the COVID-19 pandemic ends, which of the following would best fit your views on social distancing?



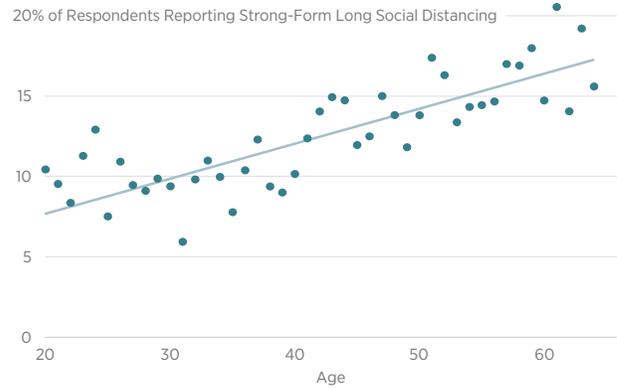
Notes: The title of the chart shows the latest version of the survey question underlying the data. The sample includes respondents from the February 2022 to July 2022 SWAA waves. The SWAA samples US residents aged 20 to 64 who earned \$10,000 or more in 2019 or 2021. In February, the authors randomized across the two years and asked about 2021 starting with the March survey. (Based on a sample of 27,632 responses collected in six waves from February to July 22, inclusive).

Finally, the authors also estimate that Long Social Distancing reduced the labor force participation rate by 2 to 2.5 percentage points in the first half of 2022, or 1.4 points on an earnings-weighted basis.¹ The authors find large effects on the participation of non-college workers, moderate effects on those with some college, and small effects on the participation of the college educated. Further, the authors' estimates imply that Long Social Distancing reduced output by nearly 1 percent and shrank the college wage premium by 1 to 2.6 percentage points.

Bottom line: This research suggests that Long Social Distancing and its effects will persist for many months and perhaps years. The authors acknowledge that this phenomenon is likely heightened by worries—and real effects—surrounding long COVID, a medical condition that can impair worker capacity.

¹ In computing the 1.4 percent figures, the authors weight each person's outcome by his or her earnings. Thus, someone who earns twice as much as the average person gets twice as much weight in the calculation as the average person.

Figure 2 • Strong-Form Long Social Distancing Rises with Age



Notes: The figure plots the percent of respondents with a given age (e.g., 25 or 49) that report strong-form long social distancing and the line of best fit through the data. The sample includes respondents from the February to July 2022 survey waves. The SWAA samples US residents aged 20 to 64 who earned \$10,000 or more using 2019 or 2021 earnings. (Based on a sample of 27,632 responses collected in six waves from February to July 22, inclusive).

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