

Lockdown Easing - Is It Safer to Visit a Coffee Shop or a Gym?

The New York times looked into this and using anonymised mobile phone location data from April 2019 they measured how crowded businesses get.

They found:

1. Fast-food restaurants tended to be small and busy with a high number of weekly visits per square foot.
2. Gyms have fewer visitors per square foot, but visitors linger, increasing the chances that they will interact and spread the virus.
3. Sit-down restaurants and bars need to take special care when reopening. These venues draw large crowds with long average stays.

This data could, however, be biased. For example, businesses in lower income areas with fewer smartphones may appear to have less foot traffic. The New York Times looked into this and found no appreciable bias in the measures which they were using.

This anonymised location data did not give any insight into how customers interacted or how many surfaces they touched. It was also unclear whether they were inside a building or moving outside. To overcome these limitations they asked people to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how often they interacted with people or touched shared surfaces at various businesses and also how much occurred indoors or outdoors.

They found what they termed risky industries such as beauty and nail salons and suggested that these businesses would have to be particularly careful to maintain social-distancing measures.

There was surprising differences between many businesses. It was found that people spent more time at electronic stores than they did at lawn and garden stores. They concluded a display of new phones and gadgets was an invitation to mill around whereas looking at fertilizer was not. They also found that people were more likely to spend time searching through charity shop stores than they did at a cheap general store.

There was also a variation within hours - customers at breakfast restaurants were far more concentrated and produced a higher risk in the same space at that time.

They also concluded that the super-spreader businesses might seem like bad news but in fact as they occurred within a small portion of the economy, a lot of economic activity could be resumed with very minimal risk.



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Florists were among the lowest risk, but toy stores, bookstores and sporting goods stores were in the top quartile of risk.

It is therefore clear that it is not possible to have a blanket shop reopening and common sense and local knowledge are just as important. It is clear that governments face an almost impossible task of deciding how lockdown can and should end.

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