



WE ARE ALL AT RISK

**PERCEPTIONS OF
COLLECTIVE RISK AND
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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With that change in messaging came a change in approach both on the individual and systemic level. Mask mandates were dropped along with mask use; air filtration efforts were largely abandoned, all the while (PCR and NAAT) testing became more inaccessible. Instead of incorporating clear air and accessibility practices into our everyday, we returned to the behaviors of a “normal” that already excluded immunocompromised people, and that flat out ignored the fact that COVID is still spreading, still killing, and still disabling. *Everyone is still at risk* for COVID, and the chance of long COVID is even greater with reinfection.

This collectivized risk perspective is a necessary part of COVID-conscious public messaging. Do not mistake this a call to appeal only to people’s individual self interest—it is only a call to reorient our perspective on fragility and solidarity. Collectivized risk is almost always the *best choice of framework* through which to view sociopolitical issues. We have to see ourselves in each other's struggles in order to join them in the first place and to recognize their entwinement. We are and should be dependent on each other for survival, and this recognition is important to risk assessment.

So—wear a mask, fight for masking and air filtration in the spaces you are in, talk to your loved ones about the risk of COVID, and fight to make masks and tests accessible to all. Stay safe—we are all at risk.

Societal perceptions of risk in regards to sociopolitical issues have an important role in shaping behavior and inciting action around those issues. This is a key idea in understanding contemporary COVID misinformation and apathy, though it has broad applicability on other topics. Understanding risk perception must shape COVID-related communications strategies, just as it may be clarifying in personally making sense of the ill-informed logics of COVID minimizers. I will begin by discussing this concept in the context of the climate crisis as a more clear and generally accepted example.

Environmental movements tend to swell when a group of people recognize their own stakes in environmental defense—see the climate striking movement in line with Greta Thunberg. Younger generations tend to be more concerned about the climate crisis because they see themselves as being *personally at risk*.

While communities and countries of the global majority are already bearing the most of the burden of environmental degradation and climate change, the *perception* of personal risk incites more people to action because the risk of climate change is one we see as being shared collectively. Everyone is in some capacity at risk, and where risk is collectivized, collective action is needed. Additionally, when risk is seen as collective, individuals are seen as less responsible for their own hardship. For example, in the US under capitalism, we see houselessness as being an individual risk, not a collective one. Therefore, individuals are blamed for their hardship, and people are not incited to collective action.

To complicate matters, risk perceptions are not always accurate. More people are at risk of houselessness than they may realize, with a marginal loss of income or health making up the difference. An older conservative living on the coast of Florida may not see themselves as personally at risk (and may not even believe in human-caused climate change), but they are absolutely subject to the hurricanes that are being exacerbated by climate change.

The phenomenon of people taking action due to increased risk perception should not necessarily be conflated with *interest convergence*, primarily due to this kind of misalignment with material reality. Interest convergence as a framework argues that change occurs when multiple groups see their own interests reflected in an issue and can therefore act in coalition around it. However, this assumes that the groups in question are (at least often) acting rationally in their own material interests, which is rarely the case in an uncomplicated sense.

Propaganda (from the state, corporations, the media, and other interest groups) plays a major role in shaping risk perception. Additionally, *interest*, as a political motivator, is a weak one when one's material needs are not being met or are at risk. It is therefore more useful to examine what it is that informs and changes people's perceptions of their own material realities, what they see as putting them at risk, and what forces they see as acting in the interest of protecting them from risk.

Disaster is one factor that often changes societal risk perceptions from individual to collective. Especially in environmental disasters, we tend to see the impacts of disaster to the individual as being *not their fault*. Therefore, because the risk of disaster is collective, it requires collective response. This can be seen in the incredible mutual aid efforts that often emerge from environmental disaster zones—just look at the response in Western North Carolina right now.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an interesting (devastating) case study in this regard. While initially viewed as a disaster—and therefore as a collective risk—it has since shifted to being viewed as an everyday individual risk. Despite popular belief, this shift did not occur because of changing science or changing case numbers. In fact, the shift happened because of changing messaging from the state and the media, and a strong push from corporations for people to return to their regular behavior as workers and consumers.

In 2020, people were sold the messaging that while older and immunocompromised people were the most at risk, *everyone was at risk* in some capacity. When the back-to-normal push occurred, people were sold a new, eugenicist message that only immunocompromised (read: disabled) people are at risk. Because we live in a eugenicist society that is comfortable with—in fact, built on—the idea that disabled people will or should die in service of the status quo, we bought that message and ran with it.