



When Public Health and Government Officials Violate their Own Precautions: Lessons for the Next Crisis

On September 19, 2024, the *New York Times* reported that Dr. Jay Varma, former New York City senior advisor for public health, was captured on hidden camera discussing his participation in sex parties¹ and at least one rave² in the summer and fall of 2020. At the same time, Dr. Varma presided over some of the strongest public health restrictions in New York City, including limitations on the number of individuals who could gather privately, visitor restrictions in hospitals, and closures and bans for public school and funerals.

Dr. Varma is not alone. Other influential scientific advisors and politicians themselves were found to be in violation of policies they supported, devised, or implemented. Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London repeatedly met a woman outside of his household during the UK lockdown.³ Gavin Newsom participated in a dining event at the upscale French Laundry restaurant while these events were prohibited in California.⁴ Boris Johnson notoriously participated in #partygate while the UK experienced COVID-19 restrictions.⁵ There are many other examples.

In the wake of these revelations, surveys show substantial declines in trust in physicians and public health officials.⁶ Specifically between 2020 and 2024, the percentage of the public with a high degree of trust in physicians decreased from 71.5% to 40.1%. Another study found over

24% of Americans have no trust at all or very little trust in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and 21% for state public health agencies.⁷ The contradiction between public health officials and government leaders' policy, rhetoric, and behavior reveals 4 lessons.

First, restrictions utilized during COVID-19 were antithetical to human nature. The aforementioned individuals violated policies in part because socialization, companionship, and intimacy are important human values. Yet, these considerations were under-discussed during the pandemic, and policymakers failed to embrace the principle of harm reduction. Rather than prohibiting activities, providing a safer alternative for these desires and emotions may have helped preserve trust.

Second, these examples illustrate the broader tension in public health between restrictions and resources. In times of crisis, public health can either utilize aspects of the police or carceral state to preclude or prevent actions, including fining or imprisoning individuals who gather against the rules or fail to mask. Alternatively, public health can work to empower individuals to embrace safer choices by providing paid sick leave, free tests, or services. In all instances, where hypocrisy was demonstrated, it is because public health chose the stick and not the carrot.

Third, the lack of evidence generation regarding these rules and policies is concerning. It is reasonable for public health and government officials to implement time-limited policies in times of crisis without evidence, but it is problematic if these policies continue, year after year, or if they are implemented in a way such that evidence can never be generated. A recent paper by Eran Bendavid and Chirag Patel⁸ highlights how we will never know which pandemic policies helped. The authors constructed a dataset of various pandemic policies, across nations, and rates of COVID-19 spread. They then created 99,736 models with varying iterations of included covariates and analytic plans, to try to gauge reliable estimates of the impact of various policies such as border closure, masking requirements, and school closures on health outcomes. The most common result of their analysis is null associations—the intervention was not

Funding: ORMJMP.

Conflicts of Interest: VP receives research funding from Arnold Ventures through a grant made to the University of California, San Francisco, and royalties for books and writing from Johns Hopkins Press, MedPage, and the Free Press. He declares consultancy roles with UnitedHealthcare and OptumRX; he hosts the podcasts Plenary Session, VPZD, Sensible Medicine, writes the newsletters Sensible Medicine, the Drug Development Letter, and VP's Observations and Thoughts, and runs the YouTube channel Vinay Prasad MD MPH, which collectively earn revenue on the platforms: Patreon, YouTube, and Substack

Authorship: VP is solely responsible for writing this manuscript.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Vinay Prasad, MD, MPH, Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, UCSF Mission Bay Campus, Mission Hall: Global Health & Clinical Sciences Building, 550 16th St, 2nd Fl, San Francisco, CA 94158.

E-mail address: vinayak.prasad@ucsf.edu

associated with more or fewer COVID cases, but often the authors got both answers. The intervention increased or decreased the number of COVID cases, depending on the analytic plan. Bendavid and Patel⁸ show that there is more noise than signal, and it is unlikely we will ever have consensus on which pandemic policies helped and which were ineffective or counterproductive.

Fourth, these public health officials and politicians remind us of the law of unintended consequences. School closure had an uncertain or trivial impact on viral spread,⁸ but has led to massive learning losses. Learning losses appear to have washed away 20 to 30 years of hard-fought improvements in education. The impact of this on children as they reach adulthood is entirely unprecedented and concerning. Similarly, the unintended impact of the disclosure of violations like Jay Varma and others remains unknown. The public is rightfully indignant about the hypocrisy of leaders, and trust may further decrease as additional examples are brought to light. Lack of trust in public health is a vulnerability for a future emergency.

Rebuilding trust in public health will be a decade-long project and demands continued introspection among public health and political leaders. Although it is tempting to fault misinformation and disinformation as the root causes of mistrust in public health, it is plausible that discrepancies between the policies and behavior of officials have accelerated public distrust. Admission of these shortcomings is a prerequisite to building trust. In the future, public health should be cautious with implementing restrictions antithetical to human nature in a manner that prevents their evaluation. Staggered implementation, cluster randomization, and stepped-wedge are alternative designs that may help clarify the impact of policies. Ultimately, like many human endeavors, integrity and solidarity are needed for

good leadership. Public health officials and policymakers should refrain from setting policies that they themselves cannot obey.

Vinay Prasad, MD, MPH
*Department of Epidemiology and
Biostatistics, University of California
San Francisco, Calif*

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