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Did So-Called ‘Johns Hopkins Study’ Really Show Lockdowns Were Ineffective Against Covid-19?

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Have you seen the so-called “Johns Hopkins study” that’s been making the social media and Bill Maher rounds lately? Some folks have been asserting that this “Johns Hopkins study” somehow showed that Covid-19 “lockdowns” have been essentially useless. If you haven’t seen what they’ve been referring to, could it possibly be because there’s been so-called “a full-on media blackout” of this so-called “Johns Hopkins study,” as an article for *Fox News* has claimed? Or maybe, just maybe, this “Johns Hopkins study” didn’t receive much press because it wasn’t exactly what some people have been claiming that it is.

If you’ve noticed, some have been repeating the name “Johns Hopkins study” as if it were some kind of magical phrase like “open sesame” or “MMMbop.” In actuality, it’s not really appropriate here to call what’s being circulated a “Johns Hopkins study,” which might suggest that Johns Hopkins University has somehow commissioned or endorsed the study. Nevertheless, some people and social media accounts have been pushing the whole Johns Hopkins name:

Yeah, the University itself didn’t write the paper, because buildings can’t type on laptops without crushing them. Heck, the paper even stated that, “views expressed in each working paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the institutions that the authors are affiliated with.” Therefore, if folks really want to mention Johns Hopkins, they should instead be referring to this working paper as being “from a professor at Johns Hopkins University,” as Maher did in this past week’s episode of his HBO show *Real Time with Bill Maher*:

As you can see, Maher dropped the Johns Hopkins name without even mentioning the professor’s name: Steve H. Hanke, PhD, a Professor of Applied Economics at Johns Hopkins University and a Senior Fellow at The Cato Institute, an American libertarian think tank. Maher also didn’t specify that two of three authors weren’t even from Johns Hopkins University: Jonas Herby, MS, whom the working paper described as a special advisor at Center for Political Studies in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Lars Jonung, PhD, who is a professor emeritus in economics at Lund University, Sweden.

Moreover, Maher didn’t clarify that the three authors were economists rather than medical, epidemiology, or public health experts. Isn’t that a bit like three proctologists telling you how the

economy is doing? It's not clear how much economists alone would understand the complexities and subtleties of medicine and public health. After all, if you were to end up in the emergency room with an injury, "don't worry an economist will be around shortly to re-attach your arm" may not be the most comforting thing to hear.

Oh, and note that Herby, Jonung, and Hanke themselves used the term "working paper" to describe what they had put together. Simply calling it a "Johns Hopkins study" glosses over this important distinction. A working paper is not the same as a peer-reviewed study published in a reputable scientific journal just like how a YouTube video of you getting pelted with sausages would not be the same as a full-length Hollywood movie. Basically, anyone who has access to the Internet, a laptop/smartphone, and opposable thumbs, can post a "working paper" on a website. So while it is clear that meerkats alone did not write and post this working paper, take anything that it said with 17 Ugg boots full of salt.

This working paper did make some bold claims. For example, it concluded that "lockdowns have had little to no public health effects, they have imposed enormous economic and social costs where they have been adopted. In consequence, lockdown policies are ill-founded and should be rejected as a pandemic policy instrument." By the way, what did the authors consider lockdowns? Well, according to the working paper, "lockdowns are defined as the imposition of at least one compulsory, non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI)."

Holy changing definitions, Batman. By Herby, Jonung, and Hanke's definition, even face mask requirements would be considered a "lockdown," right? After all, face masks are a NPI since you don't eat or inject face masks into you. Yet, how many times have you heard when wearing a mask, "how's that lockdown of your face going?" Sure, a face mask may prevent your nose from wandering away from your face and partaking in a rave, before returning to your face in the morning. But other than that, face mask requirements really don't restrict your ability to move away from your home. This doesn't quite jibe with the *Dictionary.com* definition which describes a "lockdown" as "a security measure taken during an emergency to prevent people from leaving or entering a building or other location." So unless you are wearing a ridiculously enormous face mask or one with BDSM chains attached to your friend, wearing a face mask shouldn't prevent you from leaving or entering most buildings.

OK, changing definitions aside, did this working paper really provide enough evidence to support its bold claims? In a word, no. In two words, heck no. The authors claimed that they performed a systematic review and meta-analysis. That should mean that they should have considered and included all published peer-reviewed studies relevant to the topic at hand. Yet, this working paper did not include or even acknowledge many such studies that have shown the benefits of NPI's such as face mask wearing and social distancing without explaining why the three authors excluded such studies.

Of the 34 "studies" included in the review, 12 of them were actually working papers. In fact, 14 of the "studies" were actually from economists with only one being from epidemiologists. This is odd since most of the key NPI research studies have been conducted by epidemiologists, medical researchers, and other public health experts. To qualify as a meta-analysis, a study needs to fulfill established criteria, which includes demonstrating that you've included all of the studies that

have been published. Without providing clear evidence that you have done so, instead of “A Literature Review and Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Lockdowns on Covid-19 Mortality,” would a better title of this working paper have been “Stuff that We Selected to Support Our Point of View?”

Not only that, others have pointed out various flaws in the working paper’s actual analyses. For example, here’s what Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, an epidemiologist, tweeted:

Later in the tweet thread, Meyerowitz-Katz suggested that some cherry-picking was going on with the working paper:

And when you do a review of the literature and select a paper to be included in your so-called “meta-analysis,” it’s not a good sign when the authors of that paper *disagree* with your interpretation of their paper:

Claiming that NPIs “have had little to no public health effects” simply goes against what’s been observed and documented throughout this Covid-19 pandemic. Just look at the rather stark differences among how countries have fared during this pandemic in terms of Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Countries that have followed the existing scientific evidence such as New Zealand, Taiwan, and South Korea have had much fewer deaths and hospitalizations than countries that have frequently veered away from the science such as the U.S., the U.K., and Brazil.

These certainly weren’t the only problematic issues with the working paper. But why go deeper into them since there’s been a so-called “media blackout” of this paper, right? At least, that’s what Joseph A Wulfson, a media reporter for *FOX News*, tweeted in ALL CAPS:

Yep, Wulfsohn claimed in an article for *Fox News* that “There has been a full-on media blackout of the new study outlining the ineffectiveness of lockdowns to prevent Covid deaths.” Really? A full-on media blackout? Apparently, many of us didn’t get the memo. In his article, he asserted that “the Johns Hopkins study received no mention on any of the five liberal networks this week. According to Grabien transcripts, CNN, MSNBC, ABC, CBS and NBC all ignored the anti-lockdown findings after having spent much of the pandemic shaming red states with minimal restrictions and events deemed by critics as ‘superspreaders.’”

Uh, there were plenty of non-political and non-partisan reasons not to cover this working paper. Obviously, media outlets can’t cover everything that anyone happens to post on a website. Otherwise, you’d be getting daily updates on what’s been posted on the FartShare website. It’s not clear what a “full-on media blackout” even means or how exactly it would work? How in the world would someone corral all legitimate journalists everywhere and tell them not to cover something? Would there be a secret sign, emoji, or set of semaphors? And would space lasers somehow be involved? Telling real journalists not to write about something probably would motivate them even more to write about it.

This whole “Johns Hopkins study” situation is like *déjà vu* all over again. Back in April 2021, I covered for *Forbes* how some people were pushing a so-called “Stanford study” that wasn’t

exactly from Stanford and wasn't even really a study. So be wary whenever people emphasize the name of any particular academic institution associated with a study rather than focusing on the study itself and who specifically performed it. Universities consist of many different professors and other academics who have varying levels of expertise and experience and the academic freedom to pursue whatever research they choose. Just because someone is from a given university doesn't necessarily mean that the person knows what he or she is talking about. Again, instead, evaluate the person's background and what specifically he or she is saying.

Sure a "Herby, Jonung, and Hanke working paper" may not sound quite the same as a "Johns Hopkins study." But in this case, the former would be a whole lot more accurate description than the latter.