‘A little different, a little broken’: How COVID-19 has changed us

By Joe Lawlor

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Two years after the state’s first recorded case of COVID-19, more than 2,100 Maine people have died and hundreds of thousands have been infected with the disease.

The pandemic appears to finally be waning, or at least is in remission. But over two years, COVID-19 has disrupted society, fueling workforce shortages and economic shifts, cutting off travel, shutting down schools, feeding political divisions and more.

Much has changed since March 2020.

“The world just feels a little different, a little broken,” said Joshua Rubin, an anthropologist teaching at Bates College in Lewiston. “We have the challenge of reckoning with that breakage.”

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And some of these changes to society – how we live, work and play – will become permanent. COVID-19 has altered society, in bad ways and perhaps in some unexpected good ways.

Some of the ways we have changed can be measured, such as reduced births and a shrinking workforce. But other aspects of life are more difficult to calculate, such as how we navigate friendships, working from home, social gatherings, love and marriage.

Rubin said one of the first aspects society must come to grips with is loss. Nearly 1 million American families have lost someone who won’t be there to celebrate birthdays, holidays, weddings or even to play a game of cards with or share an evening at the movies.

“What overwhelms me is the incalculable loss of almost a million people,” Rubin said. “It’s very difficult to reckon with the social and emotional toll of that kind of loss. Will America let people grieve?”

Despite a growing sense, or hope, that the pandemic’s toll may be ending, there are no clear answers about what the future will bring. Predicting what would happen with the pandemic has proved nearly impossible.

President Biden, on July 4, 2021, declared the United States “closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus.” That prediction – after a massive vaccine rollout – turned out to be untrue.

Within months, a deadly fall and winter of two variants – delta and omicron – at times resulted in U.S. deaths per day 10 times the amount that occurred in late June and early July of 2021.

Now, cases, hospitalizations, deaths and other metrics – such as sampling of wastewater systems – all show a substantial decline in COVID-19 that could lead to a prolonged lull or a new phase in which the virus becomes endemic, a persistent but manageable part of life.

Tools to fight the pandemic are now available. Maine’s vaccination rate of about 75 percent is among the highest in the nation and therapeutic drugs will soon become widely available. Biden, during his State of the Union address last week, said people will soon be able to get tested for COVID-19 and, if positive, immediately have access to free pills at local drugstores that reduce the odds of hospitalization by 90 percent.

Even as COVID-19 potentially becomes less disruptive, some of the changes brought by the pandemic are becoming permanent parts of American life.

**REMOTE WORK**
Working from home is here to stay. Some employers may require a hybrid schedule – such as working two days per week from the office. But the five-days-per-week job that can be done remotely will likely continue to be at least partly from home.

“If you, as an employer, are requiring workers to be in the office on a Friday afternoon, good luck,” said Nate Stevens, partner and broker of The Boulos Company, a commercial real estate company in Portland.

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He said work from home started out as a safety measure for employers during the pandemic, but now it’s considered an “employee attraction, employee retention” measure. He said even if employers desire some benefits from everyone being in the same office at the same time, it’s more likely that employers will permit hybrid schedules of working two to three days at the office, and the remainder at home.

“If you want to be competitive for a limited supply of qualified employees, you need to offer a hybrid plan,” Stevens said. Two surveys of businesses conducted by The Boulos Company show that more than half of employers will offer some work-from-home options.

The nature of office work will also change, as there will be less need to drive to in-person meetings when Zoom meetings will work.

“Zoom has become a very efficient tool and it’s not going to go away,” Stevens said. “We realized real quick: We don’t need to have people drive all the time to go to meetings when you can do a Zoom meeting to have a check-in meeting with the team.”

Stevens said he doesn’t expect to see downtown office space empty out in Maine. Companies still need space, and Maine’s relatively short commute times are less of an incentive to completely ditch the office compared to major cities where hourlong commutes are more common.

CITIES AND TOWNS

Changes in the way we live and work are altering the future of cities and towns, too, said Kristina Egan, executive director of the Greater Portland Council of Governments. But the future depends on how society responds, she said. For instance, the work-from-home phenomenon has the potential to change transportation, urban and village centers and public transit.

“We are seeing a decrease in peak hour commutes, which has great implications for climate change, for the amount of time we spend in cars, to traffic,” Egan said. “More people are traveling at all times of the day.”
The downside is that public transportation – buses, ferries and trains – have taken a hit in ridership and don’t seem poised to come back without improved service. More people are coming to Maine, too, putting a squeeze on housing by driving up demand while supply remains static.

“We have such an amazing quality of life here that if people have the option of working in New York, but actually living in Maine, that increases housing demand here,” Egan said.

Egan said how local governments respond is going to be key. If cities and towns enact policies – such as zoning changes – to encourage housing density in town centers and invest in public transportation, they could help create vibrant spaces and manage growth.

“The future is really our choice to make,” Egan said “We can welcome more housing in places where it makes sense, without creating more traffic and sprawl.”

One of the appealing features of Maine, Egan said, is the “New England town” way of life that makes it unique compared to other parts of the United States. But that could be threatened if there’s a lot of suburban sprawl because towns and cities did not welcome more housing in their downtowns.
Part of what’s driving Maine’s real estate boom is the number of out-of-state buyers, which increased from 29 percent in 2020 to 34 percent in 2021. Madeleine Hill, president of the Maine Association of Realtors, said she expects a plateauing of out-of-state buyers in 2022 after the initial rush to do so last year.

“There’s no crystal ball. Real estate is ever-changing. No trend is permanent,” Hill said. But Hill said she does see that the flexibility of working from home is allowing home buyers to consider living in a number of places – even those currently living in Maine looking to relocate – that wouldn’t have been possible previously.

EDUCATION

Perhaps no sector of society was disrupted more than schools, which closed in March 2020 and shifted to a hybrid format for the 2020-21 school year. Schools returned to five days per week last fall, but students confronted disruptive quarantines, mask mandates and regular surveillance testing for the virus.

Andrew Dolloff, Yarmouth schools superintendent, said K-12 schools learned some valuable lessons during a difficult two years. Dolloff said Yarmouth used federal funding to beef up support systems, such as more school counselors, speech therapists and educational technicians.

“We were seeing such an increase in student needs, not only academically, but socially and emotionally, and so we increased staffing in those areas,” Dolloff said. “We found it to be extremely helpful.”
Third-graders at Mabel I. Wilson School in Cumberland Center eat lunch at their spaced-apart desks in the classroom in March 2021. Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

After having so much remote school, there’s a stronger appreciation for face-to-face learning, Dolloff said.

“People are seeing the value of having in-person instruction over any other type,” Dolloff said. That being said, if students need to be out of school for a prolonged period, remote learning has resulted in better ways for students to stay connected. And now there’s greater certainty on when the end of the school year will be, so that when there are many snowstorms, Yarmouth can have remote learning days instead of snow days.

Rubin, the anthropologist, said he sees in young college students a wary, sometimes fatalistic, approach to life after having their lives upended the past two years.

Students have not only missed out on in-person school, they also saw graduations, proms, dances, sports and many activities curtailed or canceled. How pandemic disruptions during their formative years play out in the future is one of the questions researchers are sure to study.

“Two years of disrupted life will impact these kids in unknown ways for the next five years, or 20 years,” Rubin said.
HEALTH IMPACTS

While research is still in the early stages, Dr. Cliff Rosen of MaineHealth said between 10 percent and 40 percent of people who have contracted COVID-19 may end up with long-lasting symptoms.

The societal impact of what is known as long COVID is just starting to be felt, said Rosen, of the Maine Medical Center Research Institute and principal investigator in Maine of the RECOVER research project. RECOVER is a four-year national study of 18,000 long-haul COVID-19 patients, comparing them to control groups. The Maine component, which will eventually follow about 100 patients, is funded with a $1.5 million grant.

If 20 percent of confirmed COVID-19 case in Maine end up with long COVID-19, that's roughly 40,000 people suffering from long-term symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog, shortness of breath, chest pain and headaches.

And that could easily be an undercount, as there are many people with COVID-19 who don't show up in the official counts, such as people who take at-home tests, never bothered to get tested or were asymptomatic while first infected.
“This has huge, huge societal impacts,” Rosen said. “Just the claims for short-term disability as a result of long-haul COVID-19 will be staggering.”

Rosen said aside from contributing to workforce shortages, the psychological and physical impacts on patients with long-term symptoms will be enormous.

“We still don’t even really know what long COVID is. There’s a lot of ideas about what it is,” Rosen said. One theory is that the virus persists in some people’s fat cells.

He said hopes that by researching long-haul COVID-19, scientists can learn how to properly diagnose and treat the disease.

Marie Follayttar of South Portland is one of the patients participating in the study and said not enough attention is being paid to the long-term impacts. Follayttar said she is being treated but knows that other long-haul COVID-19 patients lack access to treatments.

“There’s going to be a lot of people yelling for help. Are we going to listen to them?” Follayttar said.

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