

How Skateboarders Can Save the World From COVID-19

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Abstract. Skateboarders tend to be young and healthy with a disregard for authority and societal norms. During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, they tended to disregard social distancing directives from politicians and public health authorities. While our immediate reaction may be to condemn their behavior, it's possible that their defiance may help society and save lives by building up herd immunity in the safest possible manner.

It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.

Benjamin Franklin

Think for yourself and question authority.

Timothy Leary

The skateboarders by my hospital have never socially isolated themselves in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the very first day after social isolation was mandated by our Governor, the skateboarders were at the skate park in full force. After the schools were closed, even more skateboarders were at the park. A week went by, then two weeks, then a month. Still, the skateboarders did what they do: ride their boards up and down the inclines, slide the rails, and play their music.

It's not that they couldn't have known about the social isolation rules. The President had been on TV, Twitter, and Facebook daily announcing the rules. Our Governor was all over the media nonstop. All the newspapers blasted out the same news: everyone must socially isolate or more people will die. Social isolation will save lives. COVID-19 can kill you if you get it. Plus, the schools were all closed, and the retail hangouts for teenagers were closed as well with clear signs announcing the need for social isolation. Yet the skateboarders just kept skateboarding.

As a father of four, a former coach, and a primary care physician, it is in my nature to be tolerant of a wide range of ideas and behaviors. The last thing anyone wants is a righteous, judgmental doctor. Therefore, my approach has always been to try to understand, not judge. Yet these skateboarders for some reason got under my skin. This throng of tattooed, irreverent kids with their boom boxes blaring was just too much. My self-righteousness rose in full force as I gave my best efforts at sending stern looks of disapproval. Didn't they realize they were breaking social isolation? Didn't they care about their community? My eyebrows were furled downward, and I even frowned slightly. Surely, they would feel ashamed after receiving that look! Yet not surprisingly none of them even looked back at me or acknowledged my existence. I was a dinosaur to them- an old man of no consequence.

Day after day, this pattern of my stern looks being met with complete disregard repeated itself. But then I started thinking, and tried to understand, not judge. I knew that the only good answer to a highly contagious disease with no cure was herd immunity.

Furthermore, given no vaccine, the only way to achieve herd immunity was person-to-person spread. How could this be done in the lowest risk manner possible? It had been clear since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that young, healthy people rarely got even a little bit sick from a SARS-CoV-2 infection. Could it be that these kids were the best, safest path to herd immunity?

The major concern by public health officials was that the young and healthy, as typified by these skateboarders, could unknowingly cause harm to others even if they didn't get sick themselves. Schools had all been shut down supposedly to decrease the risk of children spreading the virus to high risk people at school or at home. But then I started reading about the kids in New South Wales that caught SARS-CoV-2 but didn't infect any of their teachers (1,2). Quickly following these reports were additional research studies showing that children posed very little risk to others (3,4). Maybe these young rebels weren't doing a bad thing by skateboarding. Just maybe they were helping us all by building up the community's immunity to the virus.

Then, my disdain for the skateboarders was further challenged as the news from Sweden came out. Rather than imposing a strict lockdown, Swedish authorities primarily recommended voluntary social distancing. They did impose some restrictions such as distance learning for schools, but for the most part kept their economy and society open. While their mortality rate from COVID-19 wasn't the best in Europe, it was close to average. If a second wave of COVID-19 occurs in the fall, as many predict, Sweden likely will fare extremely well. They will have herd immunity, whereas countries imposing strict lockdowns, facemask regulations, restaurant closures and the like will not (5).

The final straw came when I realized that these skateboarders were a lot like I was back in high school. As teenagers, my group of friends always questioned authority. I remember studying Socrates in high school and learning about the value of questioning. I recall that Socrates suggested our questioning should be primarily directed at those in authority (6). As teenagers we also learned that Benjamin Franklin said "it is the first

responsibility of every citizen to question authority (7).” And of course, when growing up in the 60’s and 70’s, Timothy Leary’s guidance to “think for yourself and question authority” sounded like great advice to me (8). Maybe it was time to break out of my set ways, and let the questioning begin. When facing a big problem, like a global pandemic, what’s needed is more, not less, questioning of authority.

Medical, scientific, musical, and artistic breakthroughs have always been made by those willing to challenge conventional thinking (9). Although defying authority is different than questioning authority, these kids reminded me that the majority opinion isn’t always right. On the other hand, questioning authority stimulates thought, challenges assumptions, and results in better solutions (10).

Maybe the skateboarders were wrong. But maybe, just maybe, they were right.

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