

# Peer pressure can help fight COVID-19

Most people think peer pressure leads to bad outcomes, and often they are correct – like when some teenagers use peer pressure

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to convince their friends to smoke or to use drugs. But other times, peer pressure leads to good outcomes. I first realized this when my daughter was in high school. Her friends exerted peer pressure on each other to read books and play musical instruments. As a parent, I was happy to see my kid engaging in these worthwhile activities and I was thankful for the peer pressure that encouraged her in this direction.

This kind of positive peer pressure can be harnessed to help us convince more people to get COVID-19 vaccines. So far, peer pressure hasn't been thought of as a way to nudge people to get their shots. Instead, the government has relied on providing direct incentives. For instance, many state agencies are giving their employees a \$200 bonus if they receive a vaccination. The governor should

be commended for trying to harness incentives in a way that encourages, but does not force, people to get vaccinated. The governor also announced a program that rewards people for getting a shot with either lottery tickets or gift certificates. These incentives are probably all a very good idea, and I will be interested in reading research studies that examine how effective each of these incentive programs were in encouraging more people to get vaccinated.

Governor Hutchinson also asked private companies to offer incentives to their workers to encourage vaccinations, and firms have had varied responses. Tyson Foods pays its employees for the time it takes them to get vaccinated. Some healthcare groups have moved beyond merely encouraging employees to get shots, they have started to require it.

Now that our state government and private businesses are providing incentives directly to people, it is time for them to start thinking about indirect methods of encouragement. We certainly need to try something else since Arkansas has such low vaccination rates and far too many people are dying (and getting

seriously sick) as a result. Both public and private sector employers should start harnessing the power of positive peer pressure to indirectly influence their workers. If successful, the peer pressure will increase our vaccination rates and save lives.

For instance, a state university could create groups of staff members who frequently interact with each other. The administrative assistants in a college could be one group, grounds keepers could be another, and so on. The university could give a day off to all of the group members if everyone in that group provides evidence that they got their shots. With a day off on the line, employees will pressure each other to get their shots. This peer pressure will lead to a good outcome by creating an environment where more people will get vaccinated. Of course, private sector firms can create similar groups among their employees and adopt the same type of policy.

Peer pressure, that much maligned tool for altering incentives, can lead to good outcomes. It persuaded my daughter to read books, and hopefully it can encourage some people to get life-savings inoculations.