

HEALTH

Starvation Timetable in a Pandemic

Global Health

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr. JUNE 19, 2015

Starvation is a real threat during an extended pandemic, but it is very hard to predict when and where it will start, researchers report in an unusual new study.

A severe outbreak could lead to widespread starvation as food distribution breaks down. A pandemic could leave too few farmhands, truck drivers and warehouse workers healthy enough to work, along with dwindling numbers of people available to maintain the electric grid, water supplies, and phone and computer networks.

Researchers at EcoHealth Alliance, a New York research group, used mathematical models to gauge the effects under various scenarios. Their study was published this month in *The Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*.

Assuming a pandemic hit the United States in seasonal waves over at least two years and caused work absenteeism averaging 20 percent, rather than substantial deaths, almost no one would starve after three months, the researchers concluded.

In a little over a year, however, half the country would be starving, said Andrew G. Huff, a specialist in food supply protection and co-author of the new study.

The 1918 Spanish flu is the closest historical parallel, and death by starvation was not widespread in the United States then, Dr. Huff said. But he noted that it did occur in a few remote areas, was common in Alaskan Inuit villages, and was part of a broad crisis in parts of Europe torn by World War I.

Although starvation resulting from Ebola was widely predicted in West Africa last year, especially in quarantined rural areas, it was averted by aid agencies distributing food.

But in a worldwide pandemic, Dr. Huff noted, “there is no one to bail other countries out.”

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