

# Pandemics and Borders

**R**estrictions on border crossings have been widely implemented to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, but do they actually do any good? There are reasons to be skeptical, as Ilya Somin explains in “**The Case against COVID-19 Pandemic Migration Restrictions.**” These measures actually do little to stop the spread of disease, but they impose severe harms on those caught up in them.

## LEGAL AND HEALTHY

Marijuana legalization has swept the country, with either medical marijuana laws or general adult “recreational” legalization having been adopted by most states. In “**The Public Health Effects of Legalizing Marijuana**” (Research Briefs in Economic Policy no. 285), D. Mark Anderson and Daniel I. Rees undertake a comprehensive review of the literature. They find that legalization does not appear to increase marijuana use among underage teenagers but that there is some substitution from alcohol to marijuana among young adults, producing real benefits for road safety and reducing drunk driving.

## CONSUMER CONVENIENCE

Do tech companies unfairly advantage themselves by integrating various products and so-called self-preferencing? It’s a common complaint going back to the antitrust case against Microsoft at the turn of the century. But it’s an ill-founded complaint, as Ryan Bourne and Brad Subramaniam explain in “**The ‘Big Tech’ Self-Preferencing Delusion**” (Briefing Paper no. 136).

## SELF-SANCTIONED

American home prices have been skyrocketing. One contributing factor is America’s protectionist policy for many of the materials used in construction, such as lumber.

These tariffs are a needless barrier to housing affordability, according to Alessandro Barattieri and Matteo Cacciatori in “**American Protectionism and Construction Materials Costs**” (Briefing Paper no. 133).

## KEEPING REGULATORS ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW



In November 2021, the President’s Working Group on Financial Markets released a report on stablecoins, a kind of cryptocurrency, summarizing its recommendations for regulating them. Those recommendations go further than is necessary and there is a more restrained alternative, as outlined by George Selgin in “**A ‘Narrow’ Path to Efficient Digital Currency**” (Briefing Paper no. 134).

## BAD APPLES

Invented by the Supreme Court in the late 1960s, qualified immunity is a judicial doctrine that shields state actors from liability from their misconduct, even when they break the law. This doctrine has deeply pernicious effects, including for the police themselves, since it severely undermines public trust and confidence when bad cops face no accountability. These effects are explored in a new comprehensive study of the available data, “**How Qualified Immunity Hurts Law Enforcement**” by James Craven, Jay Schweikert, and Clark Neily.

## CONGRESS COUNTS THE VOTES

What is the appropriate role for Congress in certifying the results of a presidential election? With reform discussions under way, some critics have said Congress should scrap the Electoral Count Act altogether on the theory that Congress has no real role to play

at all. Thomas A. Berry responds and defends the need for a reformed Electoral Count Act statute as both proper and constitutional in “**The Legitimate Role of Congress in the Electoral Count**” (Briefing Paper no. 135).

## THE REAL PROBLEM

Was the 2008 financial crash the result of unregulated free markets? The conventional wisdom is widespread, but it has a dubious factual basis, as explained by Norbert Michel in “**Systemic Risk Regulation and the Myths of the 2008 Financial Crisis**” (Brief-

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ing Paper no. 132). Expanding bank-like regulations to non-bank institutions, as many have advocated, would not have actually addressed the root causes of the financial turmoil.

### INEFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

The collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan after two decades of war felt like a catastrophic defeat for the U.S. policy of nation-building and military intervention. But was Afghanistan an outlier? In **“When Interventions Fail: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Latin America”** (Research Briefs in Economic Policy no. 289), Leticia Arroyo Abad and Noel Maurer consider a number of U.S. interventions in the Western Hemisphere, analyze their long-

term effects, and find a sober lack of beneficial gains to be had.

### GET HOME SAFE

Ridesharing apps like Uber have long been defended on the intuitive basis that they reduce drunk driving accidents. In **“Uber and Alcohol-Related Traffic Fatalities”** (Research Briefs in Economic Policy no. 288), Michael L. Anderson and Lucas W. Davis conduct a first-of-its-kind study using proprietary Uber ridership data to estimate the effect. They find that ridesharing reduces total U.S. alcohol-related traffic fatalities by 6.1 percent and reduces total U.S. traffic fatalities by 4 percent.

### ON THE MARGINS

The United States has a bewildering range of transfer and welfare programs, subject to endless tinkering by policymakers. Can change, in

and of itself, harm current beneficiaries? That depends heavily on labor market factors and the nature of the programs in question, as explored by Jeffrey Clemens and Michael J. Wither in **“When Is Tinkering with Safety Net Programs Harmful to Beneficiaries?”** (Research Briefs in Economic Policy no. 290).

### W IS FOR WARY



Expanded preschool programs are perennially popular, but do the much-touted educational benefits stand up to scrutiny? There are reasons to doubt it,

according to Colleen Hroncich in **“Universal Preschool: Lawmakers Should Approach with Caution”** (Policy Analysis no. 924). “Children are not widgets,” she reminds legislators who too often forget it. ■

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from social coercion. The tyranny of the majority, he called it. Madison worried about the same thing. John Stuart Mill worried about it. Turns out, however, it can be tyranny of the minority. Even relatively small groups of people that are ready to whack you online, demolish your reputation, and flood the search engine so that you’re labeled a racist.

The first thing a potential employer sees is demands that you be fired. Even small minorities of people can make life a living hell for dissenters and cause a widespread chilling

effect. And at the moment, two-thirds of Americans say that they are chilled. That they are reluctant to state their true beliefs about politics for fear of social and professional consequences. Two-thirds, and it’s also about 60 percent of students on campus. It’s hard to compare, but from the best evidence, that’s about four times the level of 1953, the height of the McCarthy era. One reason for this is that in the McCarthy era, there were a couple of things you couldn’t say and you could otherwise be pretty safe. In the canceling era, you don’t know when

you’re safe and when you’re not, and that’s on purpose. They want to make us our own policeman so that we’re always afraid that we’ll step on a new land mine.

So we now have both the widespread chilling problem and the disinformation problem. We have severe stresses on the epistemic environment, our ability to sort truth from falsehood. And they’re not problems that are within the traditional bounds of how we think about free speech. So this book in a way is a ladder up to the next kind of conversation that is now beginning. ■

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According to estimates by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, policyholders pay somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of the full-risk price. The consequence isn’t only a bad deal for taxpayers but is also the exact moral hazard Congress had been trying to avoid. When people don’t have to bear the full cost of the risk, the result is excessive building in risky places.

In recent years, for the first time in a century, private flood insurance has appeared on the market. Unfortunately, this development appears to be largely the effect of cross-subsidies from the NFIP, rather than a true market development. Unless and until a real market develops, the NFIP should refocus on its stated goals of avoiding subsidies and ensuring that the risks are internalized for property owners.

“The NFIP was an important decision by Congress to move away from providing ad hoc disaster aid to flood victims at taxpayer expense,” concludes Van Doren. “But lawmakers’ commitment to a subsidy-free system has been imperfect from the beginning, and they have backslid further from that in recent years. The NFIP needs to reembrace the goal of insureds paying actuarially fair premiums.” ■