


LSE Festival 2021 | COVID-19 is the consequence of our cruelty to animals

*As long as we continue to farm animals intensively, says **Aysha Akhtar (Center for Contemporary Sciences)**, viruses will make the leap from animals to humans. Another pandemic is inevitable unless we change our behaviour – and the next one could be much worse.*

This is a response to Jonathan Birch's LSE Festival talk, [Humans, Animals and Pandemics: What Needs to Change?](#) Join in the discussion below.

Jonathan Birch argues that the precautions that the world has taken to prevent pandemics have so far proven to be wholly disproportionate to the actual risks. And he is correct. For many years, scientists, including me, have [predicted this pandemic](#). But public health officials did not heed our prediction. I worked for many years in the office of Counterterrorism and Emerging Threats of the US Food and Drug Administration, working with numerous public health agencies to prepare for a pandemic such as this. But our preparation was solely focused on stockpiling vaccines and drugs. Not once did we discuss how to prevent a pandemic from occurring in the first place.



Now here we are. This pandemic has disrupted billions of lives, killed millions, and caused worldwide economic devastation, particularly for the already poor and vulnerable. We could have prevented this. We knew the causes. As Jonathan says, human behaviour is the root cause of our increased risk for infectious diseases.

The human species has been unkind to other animals who share our planet. And now we are suffering, too, in ways no one deserves. COVID-19 shows how our [cruelty](#) towards animals can hurt us. [Two-thirds of emerging pathogens](#) come from other animals—and that's no accident. As we disrupt ecosystems and encroach upon natural habitats, and as our demand for animals for food, skins, fur, exotic pets, laboratory subjects, and entertainment increases, so do our risks of [infectious diseases](#).

Industrialised meat production is among the [most dangerous enablers](#) of zoonotic infectious diseases. For every human on this planet, there are about 10 land animals raised and killed for food at any one time. The sheer number of animals kept confined on factory farms, the logistics of managing their waste on an enormous scale, breeding practices that fail to prioritise genetic diversity and transportation methods that maximise animal stress come together to create the perfect breeding grounds for deadly new viruses.



A pig on an intensive farm in New Zealand. Photo: [Farm Watch](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

[Studies have shown again and again](#) that the confinement of animals for food is directly responsible for the explosion of deadly new strains of bird and swine flus. One notable bird flu, H5N1, as Jonathan points out, has a mortality rate of 60 percent. Fortunately, that virus, though extremely lethal, has not thus far proven to be very contagious among humans. But that virus is still out there—continuously mutating in factory farms.

A feature that makes viruses difficult to combat is their ability to adapt to new environments through rapid genetic mutations. Viruses can mutate [2% of their genome](#) in a matter of days, a process that takes the human species up to eight million years. Already there is [concern](#) that the vaccines against coronavirus may prove to be far less effective due to the new mutations found in mink factory farms (in which the animals endure conditions very similar to those for meat, eggs, and dairy production). New strains of bird and swine flus have been sweeping across factory farms for decades and continue to do so, at an [ever increasing rate](#).

To prevent further spreading of COVID-19, we have been told—and rightly so—to create distance, avoid others who are sick, lower stress, and to exercise, but our treatment of animals in factory farms is exactly the opposite.

What have our government and public health officials learned? Are they taking a more proactive step to prevent the next pandemic that is proportionate to the risk? Nope. Their plan is just more of the same: surveillance. Surveillance can help and is certainly necessary, but it is fraught with difficulties, including scientific and infrastructure limitations and international cooperation. Surveillance has been around for a long time now, but it didn't stop this pandemic from happening and it does not address the root causes of pandemics. After this pandemic is over, we cannot afford to "go back to normal." If we want to prevent another, and possibly far worse, pandemic from occurring, we must take a hard look at our behaviours and fundamentally change how we relate with the other animals with whom we share this planet. We can start by taking the very practical steps that Jonathan lays out.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.

