

**Why Won't They Take the Vaccine?  
What Happens Next – 11.27.2021**

What Happens Next is a podcast where an expert is given just SIX minutes to present his argument. This is followed by a Q&A period for deeper engagement.

Today's topic is Why Won't Working Class People Take that Damn Vaccine?

Our speaker is Chris Arnade.

I met Chris 25 years ago when we were both trading Emerging Market bonds at Salomon Brothers.

When Chris retired from Salomon/Citigroup, he took up photography. And he took pictures of working-class people and others who were troubled like drug addicts and prostitutes. And he took his work on the road, all over the US and then around the world.

Chris started blogging and then wrote a book entitled Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America.

The people who listen to this program are for the most part living in the front row. Our listeners have done very well in life, they've graduated from college, got a job, been promoted and have had successful careers.

The back row is the opposite. They did poorly in school, they work from time to time and their careers go up and down, often at risk to the economic cycle and Chinese exports. Most back row people think of themselves as losers.

I want to learn from Chris, why doesn't this community of working-class Americans want to get vaccinated? And what can we do to persuade them to change their minds?

Does this rejection of vaccines reflect an anti-elitism attitude, and why is there such anger and frustration with our leaders and institutions?

With that I turn to Chris Arnade, please begin your Six Minute Presentation.

Chris Arnade:

I'm Chris Arnade. I used to be a bond trader, and for the last 10 years I've been hanging out with normies, doing what is basically ethnography light, spending time in back row communities, which are people without high school degrees.

I've been Walking America. I walk sometimes 20 miles across a city, and during the process I often hang out at McDonald's, Hardees, Walmarts, in bars, Applebee's, and I talk to people.

It's taking me into a lot of communities with high unvaccination rates. People tell me they're unvaccinated. I don't ask. They tell it to me almost as seamlessly and as quickly as they tell me their name or their occupation.

It's become part of their identity, being unvaccinated is very core to a lot of people. I'm talking about people over 50. Being unvaccinated is not a light decision. It's a decision they've come to and they're sticking with; its very core to their identity in a way that perhaps you might think about someone's religion. They're very, very proud of it.

Who are these people? The demographics of the unvaccinated I've met, it's very similar to the non-voters: Minorities are overrepresented. Everybody in this demographic is basically somebody who I think you could describe as a loser, somebody who's had a rough life, things haven't gone their way, and they don't see themselves as having had an easy life.

Why are they unvaccinated? I try to let them tell me. I don't probe them. There's a massive mistrust in the system, elites or experts, in particular there's a justified cynicism of the system as a whole, and they view this as a way to push back and make their mark, and this is their hill they're going to die on, and they're going to define themselves by it.

Certainly, the kind of early COVID policy in particular, the whipsaw nature of it has contributed to their views. I'd say the anvil that broke the camel's back was probably when the public health officials said after three months of intense lockdowns that it was okay to protest, that in fact it was justified to protest.

The inability early on to talk about the origins of COVID. They're like, "Hey, there's a COVID lab in the city that it came from. Why can't we talk about this?" So, there was a lot of cynicism built around the policy.

The elites say to do this, they're going to do the opposite.

People under the age of 50, their risk profile is different, is what I would call weightlifting bros. These are back row people, who spend their life in the gym, on Reddit chat rooms, who have a very healthy mistrust of the nutritional system.

I think the consequences of this is that there's going to be 20% of the population roughly, mostly lower income, mostly poor, who are not going to change their mind about vaccination. No amount of carrot or stick is going to get them to change, so I think policy needs to address this.

There is absolutely no way that someone like me, an elite, is going to get them to change their mind. It's going to actually do what I call pushing them into a corner and doing what I call owning the stigma. It's something you see in addiction.

When people embrace being deplorables, losers embrace being losers, the unvaccinated are going to embrace their positions, dig their heels in, and actually probably make even more reckless choices, so the only way it can come from it is it has to come from people like them, and that's a big public policy outreach. That's going to require a lot of money.

That means going into communities, basically finding the equivalent of the alpha male in a bar, getting them to change their mind through very systematic conversations, dispelling rumors

that are out there, and topple one domino at a time. You're not going to get a whole chain of these to topple.

Larry Bernstein:

A few weeks ago, President Biden said he's losing patience with the unvaccinated. How do the unvaccinated feel when they hear that their president is losing his patience?

Chris Arnade:

It's kind of like the deplorable comment. It's giving the anti-vaccinated a stronger incentive not to get vaccinated. Don't make it political.

Larry Bernstein:

Last week, on What Happens Next, Tim Bale from the University of London spoke on the show. Tim talked about Brexit, and in particular he said that for the first time a substantial number of previous non-voters decided to vote. They thought this was the most important decision of their lives and they voted in support of Brexit.

They became leavers. And they defined themselves as such. And Chris, now you're saying that being unvaccinated is a marker of self-identity. I understand why the leaver decision can be a self-identifying trait in England, but why is not getting vaccinated an aspect of identification? For me, I identify as an American, as a Jew, as a Bulls fan, but I don't identify as a vaccinated person. Why do you think the unvaccinated identify as such?

Chris Arnade:

A lot of vaccinated people have formed it into identity. You go to Facebook pages and I can certainly tell you the whole theater around COVID is very much an identity in the vaccinated.

It's very jarring because I spend my time as a traveler who goes between classes. I have to learn the local masking dialect. If I go into a bar in a working-class town, if I walk in with a mask, I immediately lose credibility. I immediately lose my ability to blend in.

It's a faux pas I can't get over. And so, similarly, it's shocking to me to find out that similarly if I walk in by accident without my mask into an upscale coffee shop in a nice neighborhood, I get yelled at.

I think there is a meaning gap in the United States, and that meaning gap is particularly true in the lower classes. What might give them meaning, place, faith, and nation has been dissolved over the last 30, 40 years, has become less important, and there's this identity gap.

I said recently if vaccination status is the peg you hang your hat on that's talking about a deeper fundamental problem that we need other pegs. We need the faith again.

It's particularly troublesome for working class whites. Working class blacks and minorities we allow them to identify through race. We allow them to have ethnic pride. Working class whites are not allowed for historical reasons to celebrate their whiteness, to celebrate their ethnic heritage. Maybe Polish can be proud to be Polish, maybe Germans can be, but less and less when we were children, and so they don't really have any avenue other than owning the elites

as a pathway to identity. But the deeper question is why are people identifying? Why are people willing to die on this hill?

Larry Bernstein

Are the unvaccinated saying something like "the disease is dangerous but so is that vaccine. It's been a year and a half now and I haven't gotten sick. I must have natural immunity."

Chris Arnade:

The majority of them I say back into rationalization, but there is a healthy one third that get the rationalization by misunderstanding the risk profile, and that again that's complicated by the weightlifting bros who are out there throwing data that fits them.

Getting vaccinated for an athletic 28-year-old is a very different question than being vaccinated as a 60-year-old overweight guy. I think we can talk about misinformation and conspiracy theories among elites, but let me just tell you when you go into these working-class neighborhoods you hear some wild shit pretty regularly. I've heard someone literally tell me they think it's going to turn them into zombies. Someone said Ms. Betty got the jab, got a stroke, died. I'm sure that story's been making the rounds in this small town now. There's also the attitude you said, which I've heard people say, "Look, man, I've been working at the Walmart through this whole thing. I didn't get it. I should've gotten it." I must have some natural immunity.

10 years from now, we're going to look back at those first eight months as completely fucking it up, the policy class.

Now, I'm not so sure they could've done differently, but again I can't underemphasize how much credibility was lost when after lockdown, lockdown, lockdown. You can't barbecue. You can't go to church. You can't go to funerals. You should protest. You have to do it. You have to go protest.

Again, normies, things filter down. They're busy, life is crazy. They're not news junkies like us, but every once in a while, something breaks through the news cycle because it's just so jaw dropping like, and that was a what the fuck moment.

And I think that really hurt the credibility and the early politicization of the whole process because of the election also turned it into a political hot potato. The way a lot of people look about politics is like the way most of us look at sports. We're fans, we're not players. We don't have an active role in here. This is something they have an active role in. They can actually say, "Nope, I'll show your fucking ass. I'm not going to get vaccinated."

Larry Bernstein:

We hear that white working-class Trump voters are opposed to the vaccination. Do you notice anything unusual about that clientele that's different than the others?

Chris Arnade:

My demographic by choice is skewed to the working class. The white working class in general voted for Trump and the minority working class didn't. And that's generally kind of how it plays out in the vaccination sense. The white people, in general, who are unvaccinated mostly voted Trump.

It's an overlapping Venn diagram, not by a relationship other than both, it's the same demographic. The minorities are overrepresented.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about African Americans next. Biden is their guy, and they're on team Biden. Biden's their leader but he losing patience. Does that matter?

Chris Arnade:

While most African Americans who vote, vote for Biden. I'm talking about the demographic, they're mostly non-voters. There's a lot of high-profile black athletes who are not vaccinated. While that doesn't necessarily change anybody's mind that gives them just another little nudge to support them.

Larry Bernstein:

Are the medical experiments at Tuskegee still important or is this African American demographic even aware of that history?

Chris Arnade:

They don't put it in the language of, "Tuskegee happened, therefore I have a cynicism towards the medical community." They say, "they use us like lab rats." And again, I have sympathy for the black minority community, because there's not a lot of trust of institutions. If institutions are telling you to do blank, and they're not going to do blank, because that's just suspect. Remember Trump said to get vaccinated.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think if Obama did a national tour to encourage African Americans to get vaccinated, would it have any influence?

Or alternatively, someone like LeBron or Michael Jordan?

Chris Arnade:

No outsider, talking head on TV is going to change anybody's mind. It's got to come from the community. Like the Trump voters just completely dismissed that Trump said to get vaccinated. If you mention to them, they'll just kind of like gloss over, "Oh yeah. "He had to say it, he's the president." Or, "They put a gun to his head." I really have trouble emphasizing how core it is to people, man. It's like, you got a dog with a Frisbee and he ain't going to let go.

Larry Bernstein:

In your opening remarks, you mentioned that when you meet someone for the first time in a working-class bar that they give you their name and then almost immediately they mention that they're unvaccinated. Why is that?

Chris Arnade:

Within the first three or four introductory statements like, Oh, You new around here?" "Yeah, I'm new around here." Me, "Where are you from?" "Oh, I'm just from like five doors over. Oh, I grew up here, but you know, it's been rough ever since the COVID has happened. I mean, that's why I chose not to be vaccinated. I don't want any of that in my arm, man. I don't want that stuff in my system. What about you?" I'm like, "Well, I'm vaccinated." "Why would you do that? I try my best to just listen.

I'll say things like, "Hmm. I don't know, man. It sure seems to me like it's a pretty simple thing to do. And it really dramatically keeps you out of the hospital, probably. It really sucked to get it and go to the hospital. And you have kids, right?" "Oh, yeah." "Hmm. You probably, you wouldn't want to die with them." And then someone will overhear the conversation and go, "Oh no, they put rat poison in that."

It's very shocking to walk between these spaces, to hang out with people who are three times shot, with antibodies and wearing masks versus I was just in a bar the other night near Albany. It was a real dive bar. And it was all older locals sitting around in a circle type bar. And this young couple came in, both wearing a mask and everybody yelled, "Yo, take off your mask! You don't need to wear that in here!"

COVID policy very much favors the elites. This isolation just takes away one of the few core meanings that the back row has which is hanging out and being a regular. Being a local, going to your bar, going to the vape store, going to the bowling alley, going to the McDonald's, being a member of a community. And when we took that away from them, we did a lot of damage to people.

They don't have the words; they're not going to use the language I'm using here. But they would tell you that the whole politicization of COVID was started by the elites in the first place and targeted them and so this is their only way to get back at that.

Larry Bernstein:

I recently listened to your presentation from Episode 3 of What Happens Next. It was on April 5, 2020, You said it will easy for me sitting in my big house producing a podcast while the poor are struggling. If you put three generations in a trailer, someone's going to get hurt. And then Chris, you said, when I had you were back on my program like six weeks later and there had been violence in many urban communities, you said, "Well, I hate to be right. But yeah, the violence doesn't surprise me, because it was like a powder keg ready to ignite."

You said that, if there are nine people living in a room with only one bathroom, it just can't last. And if you know it's not going to last, if you know you can't follow strict six-foot distancing and living in these tight confines, do you have to rationalize your behavior and say, "we can't do this. it's the conditions and then they rationalize their decision?"

Chris Arnade:

Yeah. I think very much so. In their minds has been political and aimed at them.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned in your opening remarks about elite hypocrisy. You can't go to a funeral; you can't go to church. You can't go to work, but you absolutely must protest and that's bullshit.

Chris Arnade:

When people see a clear double standard that plays out amongst race or class, that's when real political anger is spurred on. I remember when I heard the announcement, I was like, "What?" I'm for racial justice. I'm for political protests. But the 180-degree pivot by scientists, epidemiologists, who were overstepping their boundaries and saying, "Now racism is a greater epidemiological threat; therefore ..."

Most people tried to follow the social distancing world. Because nobody knew what was going on early on. But the flatten the curve became like ... remember they filled in a skateboard park with sand so kids couldn't play outside.

Larry Bernstein:

They blocked the baskets on playground basketball courts.

Chris Arnade:

Those things matter to people. If you hang out in the South Bronx, playgrounds are the only public space where people can get away from things and hang out with their friends. You can't take that away from people without having awful consequences. They viewed it as being political all the time. And so, it locked them into a mindset of "whatever the establishment says, whatever the smart people say, I'm going to do the opposite."

Larry Bernstein:

What is causing their antipathy to the elites and to their advice?

Chris Arnade:

If everybody's felt like their boat was rising, if their towns weren't falling apart, if they didn't feel like losers, then I think there'd be a lot more public trust in institutions.

Larry Bernstein :

There has always been a back row America. There's always been losers. There were hobos in the 30s. Remember that drunk on the Andy Griffith TV show?

Chris Arnade:

The gulf now is easier to see. After the 2016 election, I looked at what I call OOT counties. Obama, Obama, Trump counties. I had almost been to all of them. There are 43 or so. Not

because I knew there were going to be OOT counties. I didn't know. It was prior to the election. But because of things, issues of addiction.

One of the things that has also stood out about it, they were all counties that either population had held steady for the last 20 years or was dropping. There was this outflow. When your community is building up and doing well and you stay, that's different than when you stay and you're always wondering should you have left? You look at the downward trajectory, you see people saying, "Just leave, man." It feels bad to be there.

We have an educational meritocracy; we sort people. If you fail, it's your fault. Therefore, you're the loser. In the old system like a monarchy, you were a peasant, but "Hey, I can't do anything about that. I got my place and it wasn't my fault.

Now, the people at the bottom are losers and it's their fault. There's a sense of real shame that we build into the system that makes people feel like a loser.

Larry Bernstein:

Is vaccine availability still a problem?

Chris Arnade:

Anybody who wants a vaccine can get it. There are popup vaccine clinics in Walmart. You have to actively not want to be vaccinated now. There is nobody out there who is not vaccinated because they don't have the time or the money. Look, at some point, if people are not going to get vaccinated, we have to just move on.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned in your opening remarks about using a carrot or a stick to encourage vaccinations. Should we restrict public spaces, like going to a concert or a football game or using a public park? Do you think if we made a vaccination requirement for using public spaces, would that be a sufficient motivator to get people vaccinated? Or would that force them to dig in their heels even further?

Chris Arnade:

I think you're likely to see a version like you see in Austria with riots led by the weightlifting pro types.

Larry Bernstein:

How does this whole vaccination hesitancy fit in with the opioid crisis?

How does the concept of: I don't want to have dangerous drugs in my body jive with taking opiates or injecting fentanyl? But they won't take a vaccine?

Or if the unvaccinated do get Covid, they desperately want to take the monoclonal antibodies, or the new antiviral medications. I just don't get it.

Chris Arnade:

The framework is recklessness and rebellion.



They have a higher tolerance for risk. They take a lot of reckless decisions in what they eat, how they drive, what they drink, how they live, how they work. And so, you know what? COVID is not as big a deal to them.

Larry Bernstein:

In the first few months of COVID there was an outpouring of enthusiasm and support for essential workers. We'd have signs outside, "We love essential workers." And there was affection, at least among the front row. How did the essential workers feel about all this?

Chris Arnade:

"Hey, thank you for finally..." And eventually it was like, "Come on, man. Just pay me more or be a nicer person to me. Stop doing this." There was a short brief of, "I'm glad people are liking us." But then that wore off pretty quickly when they're like, "Can I go barbecue again? Can I go to my grandma's funeral? Can I go to church again? Can my kids go play in the park?"

Larry Bernstein:

We end each episode on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Chris Arnade:

People are not going to lock down ever again. I don't care if there's a ninth wave that's 97 times more deadly. People are like, "I don't care, man. I'm going to go and do my thing."

Public policy needs to take into account externalities. And the biggest externality is how important community is to people. I think we're going to look, 10 years from now, and look what we did, especially to kids, as having been cruel. When historians look back at the summer of 2020, at the protests that turned violent some places, at the outpouring of political marches. They're going to look back and say, kind of what I said at the time was, this is just a bunch of people sick of being locked in their houses. Elites got to do it through epidemiologically sanctioned protests, and others got to do it through non-sanctioned ways. People were just lonely, were sick of being cooped up and just needed a release.

I think everybody involved, economists especially, were very shy to talk about how many deaths we, as a society, can tolerate. Public policy people didn't do that calculation. What is the risk here? How many deaths are worth the externalities that will cause other deaths, down the road? The failure to think more systematically led us do some things. And I think in retrospect will cause more problems than they solved.

Larry Bernstein:

Chris, thank you so much for joining us for a third time on What Happens Next which ties a record held by Patrick Allitt and David Kostin.

That ends today's session.

If you are interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes or if you wish to read a transcript, you can find them on our website [Whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://Whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean and Spotify.

I would like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues.  
Good bye.