

Reports question undercounting of COVID-19 deaths in US and globally

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As countries across the world—including Brazil, India, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States—continue to force their populations back to work even as the coronavirus continues to spread, there is increasing evidence that the actual fatalities caused by the pandemic are up to three times the numbers officially reported.

Data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on coronavirus cases and pneumonia cases are among the most revealing. Pneumonia kills an estimated 30,000–60,000 people every year in the US. But from February to mid-May this year there were 89,555 recorded pneumonia deaths. Coronavirus can cause debilitating pneumonia in severe cases and many of the deaths attributed to pneumonia most likely are COVID-19 related.

A similar effect can be seen in the death counts of individual states. In Illinois, the CDC reports 4,856 COVID-19 deaths while reporting 2,149 pneumonia deaths, more than five times the five-year average. In Ohio, the coronavirus has caused 1,969 deaths and pneumonia has killed 2,327, which is 1,507 higher than the five-year average.

And in Florida, which recently fired a state employee who developed its coronavirus tracking database, the number of COVID-19 deaths stands at 1,762, while pneumonia deaths are currently 5,185. The five-year average deaths over the same time period are only 918. If the excess pneumonia deaths are in fact deaths caused by the coronavirus, it suggests that the actual death toll from the pandemic in the United States is at least double the reported rate.

The pandemic is also spreading to the more rural areas of the country. According to data from the *New York Times*, the number of cases in Fayetteville-Springdale, Arkansas is doubling every 6.2 days. The number of deaths in Milledgeville, Georgia are doubling every 5.2

days. Amid this spread, President Donald Trump asserted in a tweet yesterday that, “100,000 [deaths] … looks like will be the number.”

Similar figures can be seen in other countries as the result of updated investigations into the “excess deaths” that have occurred in the various regions. That is, rather than recording those who died in a hospital and tested positive for COVID-19, media outlets including the *Guardian*, *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, the *Hindu*, *Axios*, and *Reuters* tracked the gap between the total number of people who died from any cause in cities, regions and countries across the world and compared that data to the historical averages for the same place and time of year.

This technique helps paint a more accurate picture of the impact of the pandemic, accounting both for the actual number of dead from the disease, as well as those who died from accidents or ailments they would have otherwise survived if health care systems were not overwhelmed by the coronavirus. As it now stands, the pandemic has caused more than 5.6 million officially confirmed infections worldwide, an increase of 1 million in less than two weeks, and caused 350,000 deaths.

The number of excess deaths in just Moscow and St. Petersburg during April, according to a study by the *Financial Times*, is 2,073, or more than three times higher than the official combined count of 629 COVID-19 deaths in both cities. If just these deaths are assumed to be from the coronavirus, it would bring the country’s death toll from 3,807 to 5,880. If the official fatalities are instead multiplied by the ratio of excess deaths to coronavirus deaths found in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the number of people who have died from the coronavirus in Russia would be 11,421.

A similar report in the *Guardian* notes that more than 60 percent of coronavirus patients that died “were not tallied in the city’s official death count from the disease

because an autopsy showed they had died of other causes.” This reporting method has also been used in countries in Western Europe and in the US.

A similar analysis by the FT on data from Turkey’s capital Ankara shows that the true death toll from coronavirus in the country is as much as 25 percent higher than the official count. The Erdogan government ordered plants reopened on April 20 after only a very limited lockdown. This policy has resulted in at least 103 deaths in April alone, and caused the rate of COVID-19 cases among factory workers to be almost three times the country’s average.

In Brazil, studies in April estimated that the number of cases were between eight and 16 times the officially reported figure. As a result, the death count in the country remains greatly underreported. This is reflected most glaringly in data from São Paolo, which has seen a 485 percent increase in coronavirus deaths since as testing becomes more widely available. Yet Brazil is still testing below the median per capita rate of any country, even as fascist president Jair Bolsonaro continues to insist that the pandemic is nothing more than a “little flu” as cases and deaths continue to spike.

India’s state of West Bengal has reportedly not counted 40 percent of its coronavirus-related deaths as caused by the pandemic because of comorbidities among the dead. At the same time, the Delhi government has asked hospitals not to test dead people for COVID-19 if they weren’t confirmed to have it while they were alive, even as the death rates in hospitals exceed official counts due to the coronavirus by 30 percent or more. There is also an increasing danger that the pandemic will hinder efforts to combat other epidemics in India, such as tuberculosis, which infects nearly 2.7 million people annually.

In Britain, the Office of National Statistics reported that it had recorded nearly 54,000 excess deaths in the country through May 15, about 17,000 more than have been confirmed killed by the pandemic. These data reaffirm that Britain is the most hard-hit country in Europe in terms of deaths, and one of the most devastated in the world.



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