

Global excess deaths during the pandemic range from 7 to 13 million lives lost according to new estimate

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Last week, the *Economist* published a special report, a modeling study looking at excess deaths attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic globally. As of May 2021, they concluded, there have been 7.1 to 12.7 million excess deaths worldwide. Their central estimate places the toll at 10.2 million people—three times the official figures—who would have otherwise been living today, had the world's governments responded in earnest to the threat posed by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

As the *Economist* explained, the number of fatalities officially reported country by country grossly underestimates the actual figures. This is a result of the lack of testing to confirm the cause of death and a lag in registering deaths. Inundated health systems also mean people who died at home have never been counted. Using “excess deaths,” a process that counts the number of people who die in a region and compares it to historical baselines, statistical models can be developed to address the question of the actual death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic.

They write, “Using known data on 121 variables, from recorded deaths to demography, geography, and mobility, we have built a pattern of correlations that lets us fill in gaps where numbers are lacking.” However, for the same reasons mentioned, many countries cannot provide reliable figures for excess deaths. Much of the available data was extracted from the data set kept at the Kohelet Economic Forum, an Israeli think-tank, with the World Mortality Dataset project.

According to Sondre Ulvund Solstad, the *Economist*’s senior data journalist, “The challenge becomes estimating excess deaths where they are unknown. You don’t just want to spit out a number and say, here is the truth, because the truth is you can’t know the exact number of excess deaths. The data doesn’t exist. So, what we have done and have invested tremendous effort in doing is to provide ranges that capture the variations that is possible...we tried to collect as much data as we could on all sorts of indicators so that if some data was missing at least, we would have some moderate data that could fill in.” He also explained that when data was missing, it was recorded as such, noting that “it says something in itself.”

He added that lack of data is most severe for low- and middle-income countries. “In these places, testing is less widespread mostly because it is expensive and not something elected officials there like to prioritize. We also suspect that in some countries

governments would not want to prioritize testing because it would reveal how bad the pandemic really is.”

After the pandemic ravaged through Wuhan city and Hubei province in China, the coronavirus swept through the “rich world,” then moving into more isolated and internationally connected developing regions, causing mass amounts of fatalities. “Deaths have been rising for most of the past year [33 out of 52 weeks] and every month. That is not total deaths, but deaths per day. What we are seeing now is another spike by what’s happening in India.”

According to their modeling, India is experiencing 6,000 to 31,000 excess deaths per day, far above the 4,000 daily deaths reported. Their estimates are corroborated by other epidemiological models that place the numbers in the same range. If these are correct, then just in 2021 alone, more than one million have perished in India from COVID-19.

Solstad explained, “Unfortunately, India is not an outlier. Many countries’ modeling suggests they have been hit much harder than India. For instance, Peru, which is one of the worst hit in the world, has seen deaths per person per million population about 2.5 times what we currently estimate as to the case in India.”

The *Economist* model estimates that as of May 10, 2021 deaths in Asia ranged from 2.4 to 7.1 million excess deaths while the official COVID-19 deaths are around 0.6 million. Russia, by example, has an excess COVID-19 death rate of more than five times the official report. While Latin America and the Caribbean have reported 0.6 million COVID-19 fatalities, the number of excess deaths is 1.5 to 1.8 million.

In Africa, the range peaks at 2.1 million deaths, though the official figure stands at close to 130,000, an estimated death rate 14 times the official numbers. With a reported 55,000 COVID-19 deaths, South Africa has recorded 158,499 excess deaths. Health officials believe 85 to 95 percent are directly attributable to SARS-CoV-2, highlighting the difficulty to access tests and health care. Those over 60 have seen excess deaths of over 120,000.

Excess deaths in Europe stand at 50 to 60 percent higher, 1.5 to 1.6 million, than the official COVID-19 death figures. Estimates for the US and Canada combined are between 600,000 to 700,000. They calculated that excess deaths in the US are only seven percent higher than the official COVID-19 deaths, implying that the actual COVID-19 mortality is just over 650,000.

By the numbers, the working class of rich countries has faced the

brunt of the pandemic where “herd immunity” was the de facto policy. But the modeling also tells the story of a very fast-moving pathogen that infects quickly, even the youngest. In a report published in the *Journal of Public Health* on April 12, 2021, a seroprevalence anti-SARS-COV-2 antibodies study conducted on 1,675 blood samples collected from residents in Karachi, Pakistan, from May to July 2020 found that 34 percent of the community’s population had contracted the virus, implying its high prevalence early in the course of the pandemic across many regions.

Solstad explained that age must be taken as a significant factor, meaning that older populations face a much higher consequence from the coronavirus. The estimate of the risk of dying from COVID-19 in Japan, for instance, where the median age is 48 versus in Uganda, where it is 17, is thirteen times higher. Yet, when age is accounted for, the younger population in developing countries faces a higher consequence from the coronavirus than their counterparts in more affluent regions simply because of the lack of health care resources.

The *Economist* notes the study published by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington on May 7, 2021 which estimates nearly 7 million excess deaths globally. They explained that the IHME applied fixed multipliers based on test-positivity rates to obtain estimates. Such a method can fail to match reported excess deaths as evidenced by their estimates for Japan and the US. But they applaud their effort highlighting the need for accurate data, which is woefully lacking. As they write, “Resources should be put into such measures not just to honor the dead and the truth, but also because, without such basic numbers, estimates of other impacts—economic, educational, cultural or in the health of survivors—are hard to understand, or to compare.”

One would think that such a devastating account of the actual toll of the COVID-19 pandemic’s human cost would make the front-page story of the leading press. The editorial boards would insist on opinion pieces that would explain to their readers the failures on the part of their respective governments to prepare for global threats. There may even be a statement by the paper calling for real-time data for every middle- and low-income country to address the grossly inadequate metrics to address medical and humanitarian needs in these regions. The *British Journal of Medicine* (BMJ) published a critical essay in February declaring the handling of the pandemic as tantamount to “social murder.”

Yet, there has not been any mention of this scathing report, which underscores the malign neglect pursued by the capitalist elite. The lives of these ten million are immaterial for them. The pandemic has shown that mass death is highly lucrative for the financial oligarchs. They increased their combined wealth by 60 percent, from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion in 2020. The number of billionaires rocketed to 2,775, the highest rate of increase in history. In short, the coronavirus has been a critical instrument for amassing ever greater piles of wealth.

As the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (IPPPR) noted, almost every wealthy nation chose not to heed the World Health Organization (WHO) warnings at the end of January 2020, when the virus was declared a global threat. The wasted month in February 2020 helped seed the pathogen

throughout every region of the world, leading Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to declare the coronavirus epidemic a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Over the intervening months, wave after wave of horrific COVID-19 surges compelled many countries to implement lockdowns to stem a complete collapse of their health care systems, with bodies piling up in the corridors and backroom of hospitals and morgues. Health care workers without proper equipment, staffing, and emergency supplies were sent back into the deluge to shore up the crumbling edifice. Presently, Amnesty International has placed the figure of health care workers lost to COVID-19 at over 17,000.

While the wealth of the billionaires shot up, the pandemic led to the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression. In April 2020 alone, 20.6 million jobs were wiped out in the United States. According to a collaborative study from the University of Chicago and Stanford, it is estimated that 32 to 42 percent of the COVID-induced layoffs will be permanent. Despite the push to reopen the economy full throttle, the current trend indicates that, as even President Joe Biden acknowledged, the US economy has a “long way to go,” with growth reportedly constrained by the shortage of workers and raw materials.

According to a report published on January 25, 8.8 percent of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, which amounts to 255 million full-time jobs, impacting hardest regions like Latin America, Southern Europe, and Southern Asia, amounting to \$3.7 trillion in labor income lost. Estimates suggest that 2021 will continue to see losses in working hours equivalent to 90 to 130 million full-time equivalents. The IPPPR forecasted that the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world economy will amount to \$22 trillion. The World Bank has estimated that an additional 150 million people may be pushed into extreme poverty this year.

After a year of death, human suffering continues to unfold on massive scale. Collapsing health systems are struggling to care for patients desperate for oxygen. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 vaccines trickle down all too slowly for the billions anxiously waiting for these lifesaving treatments. As the BMJ noted, the “vaccine gap between rich and poor countries is growing by the day.”



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