

Coronavirus: Why lockdown may cost young lives over time

March 27 2020, by Alan Collins and Adam Cox



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

COVID-19 will [cause a lot of deaths](#) if we don't curb the spread of infection successfully by [lockdowns and other recently announced measures](#). The pandemic is anticipated to disproportionately impact older people in the "baby boomer" generation—those aged between 55 and 74. In terms of fatalities, individuals over 70 years old are at the

greatest risk, alongside those with underlying health conditions.

But what about the young? Some in the millennial and generation Z groups have bluntly described the pandemic as a "[boomer removal](#)" on some social media channels. There have also been cases of [young people](#) ignoring social distancing rules and [throwing wild parties](#), both in Europe and North America—creating an escalating conflict between generations.

This may be partly fueled by long, simmering resentment among the young of perceived widespread [boomer entitlements](#), such as easier access to property ownership, secure pensions and affluent retirement. Their neglect of climate change impacts is another trigger.

But there are other legitimate reasons for concern. In the long run, we may see [death rates](#) among young as well as old people go up as a consequence of long periods of lockdown and isolation—something we must mitigate against.

Economy and death rates

It is extremely difficult to estimate the net impact on death rates from the COVID-19 crisis. We know that lockdown measures will save thousands of lives. This isn't just in terms of reducing infection, but also due to improved air quality and a reduction in traffic accidents. But we also know that the pandemic will have a [severe impact on the economy](#) over a [number of years](#). This is also likely to cost lives.

Past downturns and crises have led to increasing unemployment but also growing mental health problems and [spikes in suicide rates](#) in many countries. In the UK, 6,507 people killed themselves in 2018—that's nearly twice the number of deaths seen in Spain from the [coronavirus](#). And research estimates that the 2007 [economic crisis](#) in Europe and

North America [led to more than 10,000 extra suicides](#).

What's more, in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, before the UK government offered financial help to support employees, many firms conveniently made people redundant and activated rapid plant or outlet closures. A number of studies have shown that substantial job displacement in other contexts [significantly increased mortality rates](#) over time, possibly through stress and income shocks.

Generally, the young have been more resilient to these problems, [enjoying greater success in reemployment](#) following job loss. They are also better placed to [migrate to places](#) with stronger economies. At the moment, though, poor economic prospects are becoming globally widespread—most likely for some time to come. And research has shown that poverty kills, with poor people [dying nearly ten years earlier](#) than rich people in the UK.

Current mitigation

The UK government has already increased and redirected resources to the National Health Service (NHS) and civil emergency authorities. It has also put forward a substantial [business](#) and [labor market](#) rescue and mitigation package.



Poverty kills. Credit: Matthew Woitunski, [CC BY-SA](#)

While these measures will go some way to sustain business continuity and income for company employees, they are not yet comprehensive in coverage. At the time of writing, the package excludes many [young adults](#), including those who work as freelancers, are self-employed or in "gig" economic sectors. More of the young also rent their accommodation, or live where they work (such as nannies).

And if lockdown measures including closed shops and restaurants

remain active for several months, this will cost the economy. Despite the Bank of England lowering interest base rates to 0.1%, their lowest ever level, this is unlikely to cause an uplift or acceleration in investment plans anytime soon.

While the government's package of measures [comprise some 15% of current UK GDP](#), this may well turn out not to be enough. It will need to inject huge additional sums into the NHS and other direct expenditures for managing the virus.

Inevitably, the crisis will [cause the economy to further contract](#) and the scale of the dip in economic activity could be unprecedented in peacetime—decimating the quality of life and labor market prospects of the young in particular.

Despite this, Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister, has boldly suggested the country will be able to "[turn the tide](#)" of the crisis in three months. It is not entirely clear if he means peak infection or the end of the crisis, but this view seems unduly rosy. The Spanish flu pandemic (1918-1920) [featured three peaks](#), so getting to the other side quicker may simply lead to the upside of a second peak a bit faster.

Living with threat

Young people are [already struggling with depression](#). There is now a new dread to add to the list of existing crises—climate change, Brexit, housing and pensions. That's another zoonotic virus pandemic. The economy will have to develop resilience to that, and it will come with a considerable price tag.

What's more, for those identified as "key workers", this is a time of very high job stress. Will younger key workers get burnt out? The risk is that they may consider complete career, lifestyle and location changes going

forward. If so, without incentives to stay put, it would further degrade the UK's resilience to a similar crisis.

It is reasonable to ask what the likely scale of these negative consequences will be across the generations after the crisis. Is there anything we could do now to help flatten the expected spikes in unemployment, poverty, mental health problems and suicide in the aftermath of this crisis?

We think that access to retraining and education without the associated burden of debt will be important. The government should also consider writing off existing education debts and create measures supporting geographical relocation within the UK and across borders. This would provide a basis for enabling freedom—socially and geographically.

The government should obviously do whatever it can to protect as many lives as possible. But it is important that the challenge of COVID-19 isn't framed simply in terms of lives at risk from the virus versus the economy. Prolonged periods of unemployment, the stress of job fragility and poverty can also claim lives. Timely thought and action is needed to reduce that risk too.

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