

Virus deaths nearly doubling Milan's normal mortality rate

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The torrent of Italian death data reveals that the region around Milan reported almost as many coronavirus fatalities in March as it would normally have done from all other causes.

The Mediterranean country of 60 million people is living through its worst disaster since World War II.

It registered 12,399 COVID-19 related deaths last month—thousands more than officially reported by any other country.

But the tolls being read out daily by health officials in Rome can often seem hard to quantify.

The civil protection service disclosed a record 969 deaths for last Friday.

That sounds like a lot—but how does that compare to the number of people who usually die in Italy in a day?

AFP tried to figure this out by comparing 2018 data from Italy's official statistic agency ISTAT—the last available for all regions—and the coronavirus deaths reported by the civil protection service in March.

Italian officials acknowledge that their coronavirus data are incomplete because deaths from COVID-19 related causes outside hospitals are not counted.

The number of people who died after catching the virus without ever being tested is unknown.

So is the number of people who died of other causes because they could not get treatment from hospitals dealing with a ceaseless flow of COVID-19 patients.

Some newspapers are asking why jumps in March deaths reported individually by some cities do not appear to be reflected in the national tally.

"The death count does not add up," the Il Fatto Quotidiano said Wednesday.

Here is what the official figures do show.

969 is a lot

The northern Lombardy region that includes the financial capital Milan turned into the global epicentre of the pandemic when Italy overtook China's official death toll on March 19.

Lombardy is Italy's industrial heartland and includes heavily-affected cities such as Bergamo and Brescia to Milan's east.

The region has 10 million people and recorded 99,542 deaths from all causes in 2018—a rough monthly average of 8,300.

It reported 7,176 coronavirus deaths in March.

All countries' monthly deaths vary depending on the season.

United Nations data show Italy recording the highest number of deaths in January and the lowest in June.

March turns out to be a statistically average month.

This suggests that Lombardy's official toll from COVID-19 last month—7,176—was just under 15 percent shy of the number of people who would have statistically been expected to die in March without the epidemic.

Bergamo Mayor Giorgio Gori said Wednesday he does not trust the official figures and thinks the real toll may be twice as high.

The mayor tweeted a newspaper analysis suggesting that the COVID-19 toll in the Bergamo province was "between 4,500 and 5,000, and not the 2,060" officially reported.

He also cited a local statistics agency analysis showing that 26 percent of Bergamo province's 1.1 million people had the virus.

"I fear that the real figure is higher," the mayor tweeted.

Deaths are still rising

Lombardy was reporting about two-thirds of Italy's virus deaths when the rate of officially registered infections was still soaring daily in the early part of March.

Neighbouring regions with high death tolls have been reporting lower infection rates throughout the crisis.

AFP's comparison of the data reflects that.

The neighbouring Emilia Romagna region reported 1,640 COVID-19 deaths last month.

That corresponds to around 40 percent of its estimated monthly deaths average of 4,150 for 2018.

The Piedmont region around the industrial city of Turin reported 854 COVID-19 related deaths.

AFP estimates that it would have otherwise had around 4,486 deaths.

A report authored by an Italian expert at the European Society of Anaesthesiology also looked at the data and found that Italy's official toll

"will continue to increase at the maximum rate for several days to come".

Report author Davide Manca of Milan's Polytechnic Institute said Lombardy's real number of deaths could be double that officially reported.

"In some areas, deaths are four or five times higher than the five-year average for the same period," the professor told AFP.

"This is very important to understand: The official death figures are not the real death figures."

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