

Coronavirus: public confused and suspicious over government's death toll information

May 19 2020, by Stephen Cushion, Maria Kyriakidou, Marina Morani and Nikki Soo



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The decision by the UK government to stop publishing the international comparative death rate in its daily briefings from May 12 attracted widespread criticism. Many people [saw this](#) as an attempt to cover up just how badly the UK has handled the pandemic.

Even David Spiegelhalter, a participant in the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), who originally appeared to question the simplistic use of international comparisons in [an article in The Guardian dated April 30](#), also believes it is important to analyse international data. He subsequently clarified his position.

Our research with just under 200 participants drawn from a representative mix of the UK population, who we are regularly asking to reflect on [media reports](#) of the pandemic, suggests that, by the middle of May, most people were far more aware of the UK's high COVID-19 death rate when compared to other nations than they were [in April](#).

But, crucially, many people did not realise the UK was the worst-hit country in the world, according to the excess death rate [figure](#). This measures additional deaths in a time period compared to the number usually expected. While all measures comparing countries are problematic, the excess death measure is viewed by many [statistical experts](#) as being the most credible.

Knowledge but confusion

When we [asked participants](#) in mid-April to rank the UK's death rate compared to other countries—including Iran, South Korea, France and China but not the US, which we excluded as it had received a lot of media attention as the worst-hit country—many did not realise the UK had one of the highest death rates around the world.

We put the same questions to our participants between May 11-13, asking them to rank from the highest to lowest the countries which had the most deaths due to coronavirus—including the UK, Spain, France, US, Iran and China. We found most correctly named the US first, while two-thirds rightly said the UK was second.

When comparing excess death rates, which the Financial Times' data journalist [John Burn-Murdoch](#), describes as the "gold-standard for international comparisons of COVID-19 deaths", the UK had the highest excess death rate in the world. The UK's 42,000 excess fatalities in March and April 2020 were far higher than the numbers recorded by the US.

Yet when we asked which country had the highest excess death rate out of the US, UK, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and Belgium, an overwhelming majority of our respondents thought the US had the highest excess death rate. Just over one in ten correctly said the UK had the highest excess death figure, while almost four in ten thought the UK had a relatively low excess death compared to other countries (ranking it as either their fourth, fifth and sixth choice).

Public response

We also asked respondents how they thought the media has generally covered the numbers of deaths related to COVID-19 and UK with other countries.

Overall, we found widespread public confusion and mistrust in how the death rate was reported. While some respondents acknowledged the challenges involving in accurately reporting complex figures from different countries, many felt they could have been communicated with greater clarity and precision.

Many participants were suspicious about how the UK death rate had been reported as well as in comparison with other countries. One observed:

"I think originally when they started to announce the deaths on TV, they were only counting people that had died in hospitals which made it very

unreliable and unfair. People had started to think the number was lower but these were only what was being accounted for. Then when they introduced deaths that had come from care homes also it hit home as to how real and how high the deaths were!"

Other participants more explicitly conveyed their mistrust in the use of statistics. One said: "I do believe that the actual figures are much higher than what have been reported. I think this could be because of the false data provided to the media from the government." Another respondent suggested: "Parts of TV media have just blindly followed the government and have tried to play down the number of UK deaths."

Despite the complexity involved in comparing death rates, many respondents saw the value in reporting them. As one respondent put it: "I think it is fair for TV news bulletins to compare the UK death rate to that of other countries. It enables us to gauge the effect lockdown measures are having in different countries as they have all implemented lockdown differently and to varying degrees."

Impact of coronavirus statistics

Although many people have become more aware that the UK has a high death rate, our study suggested there is widespread confusion and suspicion about the figures and comparisons with other countries. This has important consequences for how the public responds to political decisions made in the UK as it may affect how they think the government has handled the health crisis. Outside the UK, for example, the international media have been [extremely critical](#) of how the UK has managed the pandemic.

Rather than follow the government's decision not to compare the UK's [death](#) rate with other countries in its press briefing, our study showed most people want the media to report these figures. But they also want

journalists to more regularly explain the complexity behind them so they can be interpreted accurately and fairly.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Coronavirus: public confused and suspicious over government's death toll information (2020, May 19) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-coronavirus-suspicious-death-toll.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.