

Worldwide grief: Death toll from coronavirus tops 1 million

September 29 2020, by Adam Geller and Rishabh R. Jain



In this Sept. 17, 2020 photo provided by Kapil Chaudhary shows pictures of Joginder Chaudhary and his mother Premlata Chaudhary sitting on a table during a Hindu mourning ceremony held at the family home in Jhantala, Madhya Pradesh, India. After the virus killed the 27-year-old Chaudhary in late July 2020, his mother wept inconsolably. With her son gone, Premlata Chaudhary said, how could she go on living? Three weeks later, on Aug. 18, the virus took her life, too—yet another number in an unrelenting march toward a woeful milestone. (Courtesy of Kapil Chaudhary via AP)

Joginder Chaudhary was his parents' greatest pride, raised with the little they earned farming a half-acre plot in central India to become the first doctor from their village.

For the [coronavirus](#), though, he was just one more in a million.

After the virus killed the 27-year-old Chaudhary in late July, his mother wept inconsolably. With her son gone, Premlata Chaudhary said, how could she go on living? Three weeks later, on Aug. 18, the virus took her life, too—yet another number in an unrelenting march toward a woeful milestone.

Now, 8 1/2 months after an infection doctors had never seen before claimed its first victims in China, the pandemic's confirmed death toll has eclipsed 1 million, according to a count by Johns Hopkins University.

That is partly due to the virus's quickening spread through India, where reported deaths have topped 96,000 and cases are increasing at the fastest rate in the world.

The United States, where the virus has killed about 205,000 people, accounts for 1 out of 5 deaths worldwide, far more than any other country despite its wealth and medical resources.

"It's not just a number. It's human beings. It's people we love," said Dr. Howard Markel, a professor of medical history at the University of Michigan who has advised [government officials](#) on containing pandemics. On a Thursday morning in February, Markel's mother, 84 and infirm, was stricken by an illness later diagnosed as COVID-19. She died before midnight.



In this Dec. 23, 2014, photo Joginder Chaudhary smiles after completing a clinical class at Ningxia Medical University in Yinchuan, China. After the virus killed the 27-year-old Chaudhary in late July 2020, his mother wept inconsolably. With her son gone, Premlata Chaudhary said, how could she go on living? Three weeks later, on Aug. 18, the virus took her life, too—yet another number in an unrelenting march toward a woeful milestone. (Courtesy of Aravind Kumar via AP)

"It's our brothers, our sisters. It's people we know," Markel said. "And if you don't have that human factor right in your face, it's very easy to make it abstract."

Even at 1 million—greater than the population of Jerusalem or Austin,

Texas, more than four times the number killed in the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean—the toll is almost certainly a vast undercount.

Many deaths were probably missed because of insufficient testing and inconsistent reporting, and some suspect concealment by countries like Russia and Brazil.

And the number continues to mount. Nearly 5,000 deaths are reported each day on average. Parts of Europe are getting hit by new outbreaks and experts fear a [second wave](#) may await the U.S.

"I can understand why ... numbers are losing their power to shock, but I still think it's really important that we understand how big these numbers really are," said Mark Honigsbaum, the London-based author of "The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria and Hubris."



In this October 2019 photo provided by Bharat Sangwan, Joginder Chaudhary, left, and his friend and colleague Sangwan volunteer at a medical camp for women. After the virus killed the 27-year-old Chaudhary in late July 2020, his mother wept inconsolably. With her son gone, Premlata Chaudhary said, how could she go on living? Three weeks later, on Aug. 18, the virus took her life, too—yet another number in an unrelenting march toward a woeful milestone. (Courtesy of Bharat Sangwan via AP)

Few people can testify to those numbers like the Rev. Mario Carminati, a priest in the northern Italian province of Bergamo, which was hit by one of Europe's first major outbreaks last spring. When the virus overwhelmed local cemeteries, Carminati opened his church to the dead, lining up 80 coffins in the center aisle. After an army convoy carted them to a crematory, another 80 arrived. Then 80 more.

"It was something completely unpredictable that arrived like a bolt of lightning in a clear sky ... and struck our reality," he said.

Eventually the crisis receded and the world's attention moved on. But the pandemic's grasp endures. In August, Carminati buried his nephew, 34-year-old Christian Persico.

"This thing should make us all reflect. The problem is that we think we're all immortal," Carminati said.



In this Feb. 3, 2014, photo, Joginder Chaudhary, left, and Kapil pose for a picture with their mother Premlata on Kapil's wedding day, in Jhantala, Madhya Pradesh, India. After the virus killed the 27-year-old Chaudhary in late July

2020, his mother wept inconsolably. With her son gone, Premlata Chaudhary said, how could she go on living? Three weeks later, on Aug. 18, the virus took her life, too—yet another number in an unrelenting march toward a woeful milestone. (Courtesy of Kapil Chaudhary via AP)

The virus first appeared late last year in patients hospitalized in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The first death was reported there on Jan. 11. By the time authorities locked down the city nearly two weeks later, millions of travelers had come and gone. China's government has come in for criticism that it did not do enough to alert other countries to the threat.

Government leaders in countries such as Germany, South Korea and New Zealand worked effectively to contain it. Others, like U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, dismissed the severity of the threat and the guidance of scientists, even as hospitals filled with gravely ill patients.

Brazil has recorded the second most deaths after the U.S., with about 142,000. India is third and Mexico fourth, with more than 76,000.

Oscar Ortiz, an oil platform worker for Mexico's state-owned Petroleos Mexicanos, said he felt helpless while ill and quarantined this spring, as 14 of his coworkers died from the virus, three in a single week.



In this April 14, 2020, file photo, head mortician Jordi Fernandez prepares a coffin before placing the body of a COVID-19 victim in an underground parking garage turned into a morgue at the Collserola funeral home in Barcelona. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana, File)

"It's very painful to see this and not be able to do anything," said Ortiz, whose company has reported more than 300 deaths in its ranks.

The virus has forced trade-offs between safety and economic well-being. The choices made have left millions of people vulnerable, especially the poor, minorities and the elderly.

India, whose government relaxed tight restrictions in recent months to jump-start an economy where many subsist on earnings from day labor, is the latest example.

"When the pandemic actually started to get under control to some extent, the lockdown was eased and then completely lifted," said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India. "The virus had a free passage and could spread much more easily."

With so many of the deaths beyond view in hospital wards and clustered on society's margins, the milestone recalls the grim pronouncement often attributed to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin: One death is a tragedy, millions of deaths are a statistic.



In this Monday, July 6, 2020, file photo, a health worker screens people for

COVID-19 symptoms at Dharavi, one of Asia's biggest slums, in Mumbai, India. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool, File)

The pandemic's toll of 1 million dead in such a limited time rivals some of the gravest threats to public health, past and present.

It exceeds annual deaths from AIDS, which last year killed about 690,000 people worldwide. The virus's toll is approaching the 1.5 million global deaths each year from tuberculosis, which regularly kills more people than any other infectious disease.

But "COVID's grip on humanity is incomparably greater than the grip of other causes of [death](#)," said Lawrence Gostin, a professor of global health law at Georgetown University. He noted the unemployment, poverty and despair caused by the pandemic, and deaths from myriad other illnesses that have gone untreated.

To put the [death toll](#), alone, in perspective, look to Brazil.

Nearly a decade ago, more than 900 Brazilians were killed in flooding that was widely described as the country's worst-ever single day of natural disaster. From late May to late August, the coronavirus killed more Brazilians than that, on average, day after day.



Priest Mario Carminati touches a picture of his nephew Christian Persico, who died from symptoms of coronavirus, at a cemetery in Casnigo, near Bergamo, Italy, Sunday, Sept. 27, 2020. "This thing should make us all reflect. The problem is that we think we're all immortal," the priest said. (AP Photo/Antonio Calanni)

The victims included Caravaldina Oliveira da Costa, who worked for years as a maid in the beach resort of Armacao dos Buzios. She also stood up for her neighbors in Rasa, a poor community filled with the descendants of escaped slaves, becoming their voice in a fight for land rights.

"She brought something to Rasa that no politician would bring: self-

confidence," said Rejane Oliveira, her niece and disciple.

When the elder Oliveira died in June at 79, Buzios' mayor decreed three days of mourning. But city hall ruled out holding a ceremony. Because of the virus, officials said, it wasn't safe to gather.

For all its lethality, the virus has claimed far fewer lives than the so-called Spanish flu, which killed an estimated 40 million to 50 million worldwide in two years, just over a century ago.

That pandemic came before scientists had microscopes powerful enough to identify the enemy or antibiotics that could treat the bacterial pneumonia that killed most of the victims. In the U.S., the Spanish flu killed about 675,000. But most of those deaths did not come until a second wave hit over the winter of 1918-19.



In this July 12, 2020, file photo, Reginalda Oliveira Costa, shows a photo of her mother, Nally Oliveira da Costa, or "Aunt Uia," in Rasa quilombo in Buzios, Brazil. Oliveira, who died from symptoms of coronavirus, worked for years as a maid in the beach resort of Armacao dos Buzios. She also stood up for her neighbors in Rasa, a poor community filled with the descendants of escaped slaves, becoming their voice in a fight for land rights. (AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo, File)



In this Aug. 5, 2020, file photo, recently filled graves are seen in the Olifantsveil Cemetery outside Johannesburg, South Africa. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP

Photo/Jerome Delay, File)



In this Sept. 22, 2020, file photo, relatives of Tranquilino Ruiz Cabrera, who worked as a taxi driver and died from COVID-19 related complications, mourn during his burial at Asuncions's Recoleta Cemetery, in Paraguay. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Jorge Saenz, File)



In this Sept. 24, 2020, file photo, people receive COVID-19 tests at a mobile testing center in Marseille, France. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Daniel Cole, File)



In this Aug. 31, 2020, family members mourn the passing of Manuela Chavez, who died from symptoms related to the coronavirus at the age of 88, as a government team prepares to remove her body from inside her home, in the Shipibo Indigenous community of Pucallpa, in Peru's Ucayali region. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd, File)



In this Sept. 23, 2020, file photo, workers from "Hevra Kadisha," Israel's official Jewish burial society, prepare a body before a funeral procession at a special morgue for COVID-19 victims in the central Israeli city of Holon, near Tel Aviv. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty, File)



In this April 20, 2020, file photo, nurses and doctors clear the area before defibrillating a patient with COVID-19 who went into cardiac arrest at St. Joseph's Hospital in Yonkers, N.Y. The emergency room team successfully revived the patient. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File)



In this Sept. 24, 2020, file photo, workers lower a coffin containing the body of a suspected COVID-19 victim into a grave during a burial at the special section of Pondok Ronggon cemetery which was opened to accommodate the surge in deaths during coronavirus outbreak, in Jakarta, Indonesia. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus eclipsed 1 million, nine months into a crisis that has devastated the global economy, tested world leaders' resolve, pitted science against politics and forced multitudes to change the way they live, learn and work. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara, File)

Up to now, the disease has left only a faint footprint on Africa, well shy of early modeling that predicted thousands more deaths.

But cases have recently surged in countries like Britain, Spain, Russia and Israel. In the United States, the return of students to college

campuses has sparked new outbreaks. With approval and distribution of a vaccine still probably months away and winter approaching in the Northern Hemisphere, the toll will continue to climb.

"We're only at the beginning of this. We're going to see many more weeks ahead of this pandemic than we've had behind us," Gostin said.

Already, though, far too many grieve.

"This pandemic has ruined my family," said Rajendra Chaudhary, who lost his son, the young Indian doctor, and then his wife. "All our aspirations, our dreams, everything is finished."

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