

Inadequate COVID-19 response likely resulted in 130,000 - 210,000 avoidable deaths

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Washington D.C. Credit: [dmbosstone](#)/Flickr CC

Between 130,000 and 210,000 COVID-19 deaths in the United States could have been avoided if the Trump administration had quickly and effectively implemented a cohesive public health response to the novel

coronavirus, according to a new report. The report by Columbia University Earth Institute's National Center for Disaster Preparedness, titled "130,000—210,000 Avoidable COVID-19 Deaths—and Counting—in the U.S.," compares the U.S. death toll and policy response to six similarly high-income countries: South Korea, Japan, Germany, Australia, France, and Canada.

The new report suggests that if the U.S. followed similar policies and protocols as the six nations, such as building sufficient testing capabilities, enacting earlier lockdowns, issuing a national mask-wearing mandate, and providing federal guidance on social distancing, it could have avoided at least 130,000 and potentially as many as 210,000 COVID-19 deaths.

The report concludes there is a disproportionately high COVID-19 [death](#) rate in the U.S. compared to the other nations, even when examining median population age and obesity—two well-documented factors that affect COVID-19 mortality rates. This is likely explained by the slow and disorganized response by the Trump administration in both the early days of the pandemic and persistently through today. South Korea, for example, which reported its first COVID-19 case on the same day as the U.S., quickly enacted stringent measures to combat the spread of the virus that have resulted in a low mortality rate among its population.

"The U.S. death toll stands apart from nearly all high-income nations. The data establishes that a significant number of lives could have been saved if the Trump administration acted on the advice from the scientific and public health community," said Irwin Redlener, principal author of the report and founding director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and Director Pandemic Resource and Response Initiative at Columbia University's Earth Institute. "As the country faces a second wave of this virus, we need to hold leadership accountable. The magnitude of loss, caused by a disorganized response, will have

devastating and long-lasting consequences for millions of American families."

The report incorporates data through October 16, when the U.S. death toll was 217,717 and more than 8 million COVID-19 cases were confirmed in the U.S.

The researchers calculated the total death count in each country as a percentage of its population, which was multiplied by the total U.S. population to determine the proportional number of deaths that each nation would have encountered if its population were the same size as the United States. Assuming equal underlying risk of mortality on an individual basis, the researchers then determined the number of avoidable deaths by calculating the difference between the number of proportional deaths and the total number of U.S. deaths.

The research found that if the U.S. had followed the policies and protocols of:

- Australia, there may have been as few as 11,699 deaths, sparing 206,018 American lives.
- Canada, there might have been as few as 85,192 U.S. deaths, saving as many as 132,525 lives.
- France, there may have been 162,240 deaths, saving as many as 55,477 lives.
- Germany, there might have been as few as 38,457 U.S. deaths, saving as many as 179,260 lives.
- Japan, there may have been as few as 4,315 deaths, with 213,402 deaths avoidable.
- South Korea, there might have been just 2,799 deaths—only 1.2 percent of the current U.S. death toll, saving as many as 214,918 lives.

"From the moment the pandemic was first identified, President Trump and his team have downplayed the crisis and ignored basic and widely known public health guidelines to curb the spread of COVID-19," said Jeffrey Sachs, professor of sustainable development and professor of health policy and management at Columbia University. "To stop the ongoing epidemic in the U.S., it is urgent to examine the available data, identify the failures, call out the administration's relentless misinformation, and hold the Trump administration accountable for its failure to slow the virus's spread and the more than 200,000 lives that have been unnecessarily lost."

"It is sobering to remember that last year, before COVID-19 hit, the U.S. was ranked first in the world in an independent assessment of pandemic preparedness," said Nathaniel Hupert, associate professor of population health sciences and of medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine. "Our national experience with this disease will for years to come to be 'Exhibit A' in demonstrating the critical impact of leadership and respect for science, or lack of it, in public health crisis response."

In addition to the international comparison to calculate the avoidable death toll, the report also begins to dissect the "collateral damage" that these COVID-19 tragedies have had on American families. It notes emerging data on long-term health impacts of COVID-19 infections, increasing statistics on children left without parents, and bereavement rates among families of the deceased. The researchers note the available data is only a snapshot of the picture nationwide and that not all states have public information on the pandemic's impact on families and long-term health.

More information: The report is available online:
ncdp.columbia.edu/custom-content/9-Deaths-US-NCDP.pdf

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