

COVID-19's global death toll tops 5 million in under 2 years

November 1 2021, by Carla K. Johnson



Relatives of Luis Enrique Rodriguez, who died of COVID-19, visit where he was buried on a hill at the El Pajonal de Cogua Natural Reserve, in Cogua, north of Bogota, Colombia, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021. Rodriguez died May 14, 2021. Relatives bury the ashes of their loved ones who died of coronavirus and plant a tree in their memory. Credit: AP Photo/Ivan Valencia

The global death toll from COVID-19 topped 5 million on Monday, less than two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems.

Together, the United States, the European Union, Britain and Brazil—all upper-middle- or high-income countries—account for one-eighth of the world's population but nearly half of all reported deaths. The U.S. alone has recorded over 745,000 lives lost, more than any other nation.

"This is a defining moment in our lifetime," said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious disease specialist at the Yale School of Public Health. "What do we have to do to protect ourselves so we don't get to another 5 million?"

The death toll, as tallied by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the populations of Los Angeles and San Francisco combined. It rivals the number of people killed in battles among nations since 1950, according to estimates from the Peace Research Institute Oslo. Globally, COVID-19 is now the third leading cause of death, after heart disease and stroke.

The staggering figure is almost certainly an undercount because of limited testing and people dying at home without medical attention, especially in poor parts of the world, such as India.



Patients lie on beds in a COVID-19 isolation room at the University Emergency Hospital in Bucharest, Romania, Oct. 22, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru, File

Hot spots have shifted over the 22 months since the outbreak began, turning different places on the world map red. Now, [the virus is pummeling Russia, Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe](#), especially where rumors, misinformation and distrust in government have hobbled vaccination efforts. In Ukraine, only 17% of the adult population is fully vaccinated; in Armenia, only 7%.

"What's uniquely different about this pandemic is it hit hardest the high-

resource countries," said Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr, director of ICAP, a global health center at Columbia University. "That's the irony of COVID-19."

Wealthier nations with longer life expectancies have larger proportions of older people, cancer survivors and nursing home residents, all of whom are especially vulnerable to COVID-19, El-Sadr noted. Poorer countries tend to have larger shares of children, teens and young adults, who are less likely to fall seriously ill from the coronavirus.



A medical worker prepares a shot of Russia's Sputnik Lite coronavirus vaccine at a vaccination center in the GUM, State Department store, in Red Square with the St. Basil Cathedral in the background, in Moscow, Russia, Oct. 26, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin, File

India, despite its terrifying delta surge that peaked in early May, now has a much lower reported daily death rate than wealthier Russia, the U.S. or Britain, though there is uncertainty around its figures.

The seeming disconnect between wealth and health is a paradox that disease experts will be pondering for years. But the pattern that is seen on the grand scale, when nations are compared, is different when examined at closer range. Within each wealthy country, when deaths and infections are mapped, poorer neighborhoods are hit hardest.

In the U.S., for example, COVID-19 has taken an outsize toll on Black and Hispanic people, who are more likely than white people to live in poverty and have less access to health care.

"When we get out our microscopes, we see that within countries, the most vulnerable have suffered most," Ko said.



Reena Kesarwani holds a photograph of her husband, Anand Babu Kesarwani, who died of COVID-19, in their hardware shop, Monday, Oct. 25, 2021, in the Chhitpalgarh village, in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state. Credit: AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh

Wealth has also played a role in the global vaccination drive, with rich countries accused of locking up supplies. The U.S. and others are already dispensing booster shots at a time when millions [across Africa haven't received a single dose](#), though the rich countries are also shipping hundreds of millions of shots to the rest of the world.

Africa remains the world's least vaccinated region, with just 5% of the population of 1.3 billion people fully covered.

"This devastating milestone reminds us that we are failing much of the world," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said in a written statement. "This is a global shame."

In Kampala, Uganda, Cissy Kagaba lost her 62-year-old mother on Christmas Day and her 76-year-old father days later.

"Christmas will never be the same for me," said Kagaba, an anti-corruption activist in the East African country that has been through multiple lockdowns against the virus and where a curfew remains in place.



A man gets his dose of the Sinovac vaccine at a COVID-19 vaccination place for seniors, March 24, 2021, in Duque de Caxias, Brazil. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only

devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Silvia Izquierdo, File

The pandemic has united the globe in grief and pushed survivors to the breaking point.

"Who else is there now? The responsibility is on me. COVID has changed my life," said 32-year-old Reena Kesarwani, a mother of two boys, who was left to manage her late husband's modest hardware store in a village in India.

Her husband, Anand Babu Kesarwani, died at 38 during India's crushing coronavirus surge earlier this year. It overwhelmed one of the most chronically underfunded public health systems in the world and killed tens of thousands as hospitals ran out of oxygen and medicine.

In Bergamo, Italy, once the site of the West's first deadly wave, 51-year-old Fabrizio Fidanza was deprived of a final farewell as his 86-year-old father lay dying in the hospital. He is still trying to come to terms with the loss more than a year later.



Medical staff members transport a body of a patient who died of the coronavirus at the morgue of the city hospital 1 in Rivne, Ukraine, Oct. 22, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka, File

"For the last month, I never saw him," Fidanza said during a visit to his father's grave. "It was the worst moment. But coming here every week, helps me."

Today, 92% of Bergamo's eligible population have had at least one shot, the highest vaccination rate in Italy. The chief of medicine at Pope John XXIII Hospital, Dr. Stefano Faggioli, said he believes that's a clear result of the city's collective trauma, when the wail of ambulances was

constant.

In Lake City, Florida, LaTasha Graham, 38, still gets mail almost daily for her 17-year-old daughter, Jo'Keria, who died of COVID-19 in August, days before starting her senior year of high school. The teen, who was buried in her cap and gown, wanted to be a trauma surgeon.

"I know that she would have made it. I know that she would have been where she wanted to go," her mother said.



Seen through the foliage of a tree, a member of the medical staff looks from a window at one of the COVID-19 dedicated sections of the Matei Bals hospital as people wait outside to get the third dose booster Pfizer vaccine shot, Sept. 28, 2021, in Bucharest, Romania. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor

countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda, File



Volunteer Danny McCall Sr., waits for patients at the door of a COVID-19 vaccination clinic set up at Bethel AME Church as part of an effort to make testing and vaccines more available to an underserved community, Sept. 24, 2021, in Providence, R.I. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/David Goldman, File



A woman walks through a line of masked service sector women waiting to receive a swab for a COVID-19 test during a mass testing in Beijing, Oct. 29, 2021, following a spike of the coronavirus in the capital and other provincials. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong, File



A health worker administers a dose of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine at the Bundung Maternal and Child Health Hospital, Sept. 23, 2021, in Serrekunda, outskirts of Banjul, Gambia. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Africa remains the world's least vaccinated region, with just 5% of the population of 1.3 billion people fully covered. Credit: AP Photo/Leo Correa, File



Hundreds of people line up to receive their second dose of vaccine against the coronavirus at the municipal ground, July 29, 2021, in Hyderabad, India. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Mahesh Kumar A., File



Palmiro Tami, 82, holds the hand of his wife, Franca Persico, in the garden of the Fondazione Martino Zanchi nursing home, after receiving the second shot of a Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, in Alzano Lombardo, northern Italy, March 22, 2021. In Bergamo, Italy, once the site of the West's first deadly wave, 92% of Bergamo's eligible population has had at least one shot, the highest vaccination rate in Italy. Credit: AP Photo/Luca Bruno, File



This undated file photo provided by LaTasha Graham shows Jo'Keria Graham, 17, who died of COVID-19 in August 2021, days before starting her senior year of high school. The teen, who was buried in her cap and gown, wanted to be a trauma surgeon. Credit: LaTasha Graham via AP, File



The body of a patient who died of coronavirus lies in a coffin at the morgue of the city hospital in Rivne, Ukraine, Oct. 22, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka, File



Erika Machado visits a memorial for COVID-19 victims at Penitencia cemetery, Oct. 27, 2021, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Her father's name Wagner Machado is engraved on the memorial. Credit: AP Photo/Bruna Prado, File



New graves can be seen at the Yastrebkovskoe cemetery, which serves as one of the burial grounds for those who died of the coronavirus, outside Moscow, Russia, Oct. 21, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Dmitry Serebryakov, File



Health workers carry a coffin containing the body of a COVID-19 victim into an ambulance for burial in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, July 10, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Trisnadi, File



An employee disinfects an area near a station chapel inside Savyolovsky railway station in Moscow, Russia, Oct. 26, 2021. The global death toll from COVID-19 has topped 5 million, nearly two years into a crisis that has not only devastated poor countries but also humbled wealthy ones with first-rate health care systems. Credit: AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, File

In Rio de Janeiro, Erika Machado scanned the list of names engraved on a long, undulating sculpture of oxidized steel that stands in Penitencia cemetery as an homage to some of Brazil's COVID-19 victims. Then she found him: Wagner Machado, her father.

"My dad was the love of my life, my best friend," said Machado, 40, a saleswoman who traveled from Sao Paulo to see her father's name. "He was everything to me."

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