# American study estimates 1.87 million excess deaths occurred in China two months after its zero COVID policy ended

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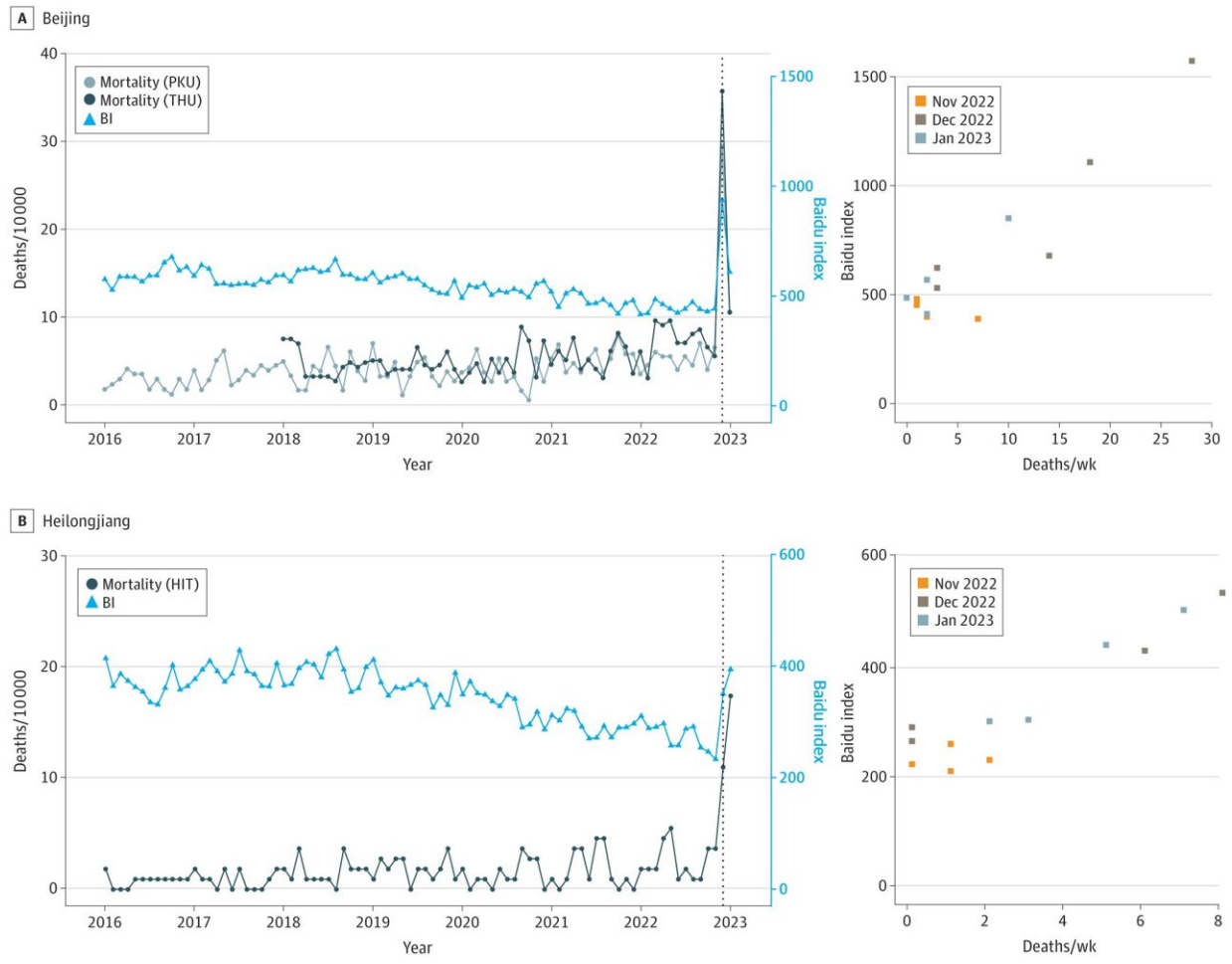


Observed Mortality and Baidu Index (BI) in Beijing and Heilongjiang Province. A and B, left panels: Observed monthly mortality rate in 3 universities of China, and BI (monthly mean) in Beijing and Heilongjiang province, January 2016 to

January 2023. The dotted vertical line represents the removal of the zero COVID policy in December 2022. The figure displays the BI trends, represented by light blue lines. Dark blue lines represent morality rates in Tsinghua University (THU) (A, left panel) and Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) (B, left panel), and the light gray line represents mortality rates in Peking University (PKU) (A, left panel). A and B, right panels: Association between weekly death counts and BI (weekly mean), November 2022 to January 2023. Weekly deaths from PKU and HIT were used. Weekly death counts from THU were not obtainable. The orange, brown, and gray squares represent weeks in November 2022, December 2022, and January 2023, respectively. Credit: *JAMA Network Open* (2023). DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.30877

A pair of public health researchers at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center's Public Health Sciences Division, in Seattle, Washington, working with two independent colleagues, has found that in the two months after China halted its zero COVID policy at the end of 2022, 1.87 million excess deaths occurred in that country.

In their study, reported in *JAMA Network Open*, the group used obituary data from three Chinese universities along with other data obtained using the Baidu search engine regarding deaths in China likely due to COVID-19.

During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, deaths from the disease were remarkably lower in China than in other countries. This was due, it is believed, to officials in China enacting a program called the zero COVID policy that placed tight restrictions: People were ordered to quarantine, and authorities enacted a program of regular testing, closed many workplaces and schools and instituted mandatory mask policies.

Such restrictions took a tremendous toll on the Chinese economy, and the government eased restrictions, finally doing away with the zero

COVID policy in December 2022. Two months later, the Chinese government reported that approximately 60,000 people had died from the disease up to that point. In this new effort, the research team took another route to assess the Chinese death tally following the lifting of the zero COVID policy.

As has been done in the U.S. and other countries by other teams, the researchers ignored figures cited by official government agencies regarding the number of people that died of COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic. Instead, they analyzed excess deaths derived from sources listing the number of people who died over a given period of time and comparing those numbers against the same period of time in other years. The difference, they suggest, is likely due to COVID-19 deaths categorized as something else.

In this new effort, the research team obtained data published by three universities in China and also used data found using the Baidu search engine for deaths of people over 30 by any cause in the areas where the three universities were located. They used math techniques to estimate deaths across the whole country for the two months following cessation of the zero COVID policy—it came to approximately 1.87 million excess deaths.

**More information:** Hong Xiao et al, Excess All-Cause Mortality in China After Ending the Zero COVID Policy, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.30877