

CDC has not reduced the death count related to COVID-19

1 September 2020, by Beatrice Dupuy



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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention did not "backpedal" on the number of deaths caused by COVID-19, reducing the figure from nearly 154,000 to just over 9,000, as social media posts claimed.

The term "Only 6%" trended widely on Twitter over the weekend as supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory promoted tweets that falsely suggested the CDC had updated its records to show that only 6% of U.S. deaths tied to COVID-19 were legitimate. President Donald Trump was among those who tweeted the information, which was later taken down by Twitter for violating platform rules.

The posts, which received hundreds of thousands of shares online, were based on a regularly updated CDC data table showing underlying conditions for those who died of COVID-19. The conditions included [high blood pressure](#), diabetes and obesity, as well as problems that are caused by COVID-19 itself, such as respiratory failure and pneumonia.

The [CDC data table](#) is based on an analysis of death certificates that mention COVID-19 as a

cause. For 6% of the deaths, COVID-19 was the only cause mentioned, the CDC notes.

The other 94% list COVID-19 and other conditions together. Among those deaths, there were, on average, 2.6 additional conditions or causes per death, the public health agency said.

As of Aug. 26, the CDC said, there were 161,332 deaths where COVID-19 was listed on the death certificate. Social media users over the weekend posted an older screenshot of the data that showed 153,504 deaths. The posts used the 6% figure to claim the U.S. death toll was much lower—9,210.

"CDC just backpedaled (quietly) and adjusted the U.S. COVID deaths from 153,504 to 9,210. Admitting that their numbers are so (expletive) that they are off by a whopping 94%," said a post being shared on Facebook Monday.

But such claims misrepresent the data. A death isn't excluded from the COVID-19 tally just because the person was obese or had diabetes or dementia. Someone with heart problems can still be killed by COVID-19, and the [death certificate](#) could mention both as contributing.

Experts say it's not surprising that so few people who died from COVID-19 had no underlying conditions listed on their death certificates. It is rare for people not to have multiple medical issues at death.

"The underlying cause of death is the condition that began the chain of events that ultimately led to the person's death," Dr. Robert Anderson, who oversees the CDC's death statistics work, said in a statement. "In 92% of all deaths that mention COVID-19, COVID-19 is listed as the underlying cause of death."

Also, while death certificates are supposed to list any causes or conditions that contributed, past

research has shown that the documents aren't perfect. Doctors might not know – or specify – all the reasons behind a particular [death](#).

More important, the CDC figures show what medical professionals have been saying since the outset of the pandemic—that the virus tends to have a more severe impact on people with underlying conditions.

For example, people died with diabetes not because of it, said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious-diseases expert at Vanderbilt University.

"If it hadn't been for the COVID virus infection, these people would be living today," he said. "So yes, although they have contributing underlying chronic health factors, it's still the COVID virus that killed them."

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APA citation: CDC has not reduced the death count related to COVID-19 (2020, September 1) retrieved 25 May 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-cdc-death-covid-.html>

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