

# COVID-19 Lockdowns Were a Costly Failure, New Research Shows



A new peer-reviewed [systematic review and meta-analysis](#) published on June 2 by the Institute of Economic Affairs found COVID-19 lockdowns failed to significantly reduce deaths.

The 220-page book, by the London-based think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs, reviewed 19,646 potentially relevant studies. For their meta-analysis, the authors' included 22 studies based on actual, measured mortality data.

The authors, including Professor Steve H. Hanke of the Johns Hopkins University, also considered a range of studies that assessed the impact of individual lockdown restrictions, including stay-at-home rules, school closures, and travel restrictions.

- The Herby-Jonung-Hanke meta-analysis found that lockdowns, as reported in studies based on stringency

indices in the spring of 2020, reduced mortality by 3.2 percent when compared to less strict lockdown policies adopted by the likes of Sweden. This means lockdowns only prevented 1,700 deaths in England and Wales, 6,000 deaths across Europe, and 4,000 U.S. deaths.

- Lockdowns prevented relatively few deaths compared to a typical flu season. In England and Wales, 18,500–24,800 flu deaths occur, in Europe, 72,000 flu deaths occur, and in the U.S., 38,000 flu deaths occur in a typical flu season.
- These results pale in comparison to the Imperial College of London's March 2020 modeling exercises, which predicted that lockdowns would save more than 400,000 UK lives and over 2 million U.S. lives.
- The authors found that voluntary changes in behavior, such as social distancing, played a significant role in mitigating the pandemic—but harsher restrictions, like stay-at-home rules and school closures, generated very high costs but produced only negligible health benefits.
- COVID-19 lockdowns were “a global policy failure of gigantic proportions,” according to the study. The draconian policy failed to significantly reduce deaths while imposing substantial social, cultural, and economic costs.
- “This study is the first all-encompassing evaluation of the research on the effectiveness of mandatory restrictions on mortality,” according to one of the study's co-authors, Dr. Lars Jonung, professor emeritus

at the Knut Wicksell Centre for Financial Studies at Sweden's Lund University, "It demonstrates that lockdowns were a failed promise. They had negligible health effects but disastrous economic, social, and political costs to society. Most likely, lockdowns represent the biggest policy mistake in modern times."

A meta-analysis is considered the 'gold-standard' for evidence, as it combines comparable, independent studies to determine overall trends.

In each case, the restrictions did little to reduce COVID-19 mortality:

- Shelter-in-place (stay-at-home) orders in Europe and the U.S. reduced COVID mortality by between 1.4 and 4.1 percent;
- Business closures reduced mortality by 7.5 percent;
- Gathering limits likely increased COVID mortality by almost six percent;
- Mask mandates, which most countries avoided in Spring 2020, reduced mortality by 18.7 percent, particularly mandates in workplaces; and
- School closures resulted in a between 2.5 percent and 6.2 percent mortality reduction.

A second approach employed by the authors to estimate the effects of lockdowns on mortality combined studies that looked at specific lockdown measures (such as school closures, mask-

wearing, etc.) on how single non-pharmaceutical interventions were actually used in Europe and the United States.

Using this approach, the authors estimate that lockdowns reduced mortality by 10.7 percent in the spring of 2020—significantly less than estimates produced by epidemiological modeling.

The study compares the effect of lockdown measures against the effect of ‘doing the least,’ rather than doing nothing at all. Sweden’s response to COVID was among the least stringent in Europe, but still imposed some legal restrictions and included an extensive public information campaign.

Voluntary measures, like social distancing and the reduction of person-to-person contact, effectively reduced COVID mortality in Sweden, a country that did not impose draconian legal restrictions. This is consistent with evidence early in the pandemic that voluntary action began reducing transmission before lockdowns.

The authors also conclude that legal mandates only limited a relatively small set of potential contagious contacts and could, in some cases, have backfired by encouraging people to stay indoors in less safe environments.

If voluntary action, minor legal changes, and proactive information campaigns effectively reduced the transmission of COVID, lockdowns were unwarranted from a public health point of view. This negative conclusion is amplified by the significant economic and social costs associated with lockdowns, which include:

- stunted economic growth;
- large increases in public debt;
- rising inequality;
- damage to children’s education and health;
- Reduced health-related quality of life;

- damage to mental health;
- increased crime; and
- threats to democracy and loss of freedom.

The research concluded that, unless substantial alternative evidence emerges, lockdowns should be 'rejected out of hand' to control future pandemics.

Herby, co-author of the study and special adviser at the Center for Political Studies (CEPOS), an independent classical liberal think tank based in Copenhagen, Denmark, said:

*“Numerous misleading studies, driven by subjective models and overlooking significant factors like voluntary behaviour changes, heavily influenced the initial perception of lockdowns as highly effective measures. Our meta-analysis suggests that when researchers account for additional variables, such as voluntary behaviour, the impact of lockdowns becomes negligible.”*

Hanke, co-author and professor of applied economics and co-director of the Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise at Johns Hopkins University, said: “When it comes to COVID, epidemiological models have many things in common: dubious assumptions, hair-raising predictions of disaster that miss the mark, and few lessons learned.”

“The science of lockdowns is clear; the data are in: the lives saved were a drop in the bucket compared to the staggering collateral costs imposed,” he added.

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