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The Locked-down: we need more than headline statistics to understand the impact of Covid-19

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The Locked-Down: We need more than headline statistics to understand the impact of Covid-19

For governments and individuals much of our understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic has been mediated through metrics of cases and deaths and shaped by heartbreaking personal stories. In this post, **Leeza Osipenko** *argues that such metrics only scratch the surface of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and makes the case for more expansive data collection to understand how Covid-19 is reshaping society.*

As part of a project to gather a wider range of information about the lived experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, readers are invited to share their experiences here.

TAKE THE SURVEY ↗

We stopped flying around the world, going to the office, kissing and having car accidents, but we have not stopped suffering and dying from causes unrelated to Covid-19, even if it may increasingly seem so. The world remains a dangerous place. While we are doing all we can to prevent as many premature deaths from the virus, we have no idea about the wider impacts of the lockdown. If we took the same care and precision to collect this data – might we be at risk of finding an answer we are not prepared for?

Since the stock markets have plummeted to levels where the thought of checking on them leads to acute anxiety, our attention has been diverted to another more immediate and constantly updating metric, the global number of Covid-19 cases and deaths. The power of these metrics is absolute. The absence of parameters for comparators or counterfactuals evokes panic, sensationalism, and calls for immediate action. All attention and efforts are focussed on Covid-19 cases. The governments and the media promise that the lockdown will protect us from the virus. This logic is unquestionable and unchallengeable. Tracking negative and positive externalities of the current Covid-19 measures is not a political priority, but, the only way we will be able to understand the impact of our actions relating to this pandemic, is if we have high quality data on what happens next to it and around it.

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As well as information about Covid-19, the Worldometer also presents the annual seasonal flu deaths, which range from 795 to 1,781 per day globally, leading to a highly imprecise annual estimate of between 290,000 and 650,000. We have never accurately collected such data. In more 'normal' times, it was interesting but not alarming enough to give it much attention. Covid-19 is more dangerous, it is rapidly exceeding these inaccurate seasonal flu figures. Are the Covid-19 deaths in addition to the flu deaths, or are they replacing some of them? We can assume, but we will never know. Putting such things into perspective does not serve a political agenda.

Beyond the Covid-19 metrics, people continue to die according to the status quo. In the several months up to April 2, when 50,000 lives were lost to Covid-19 (the accuracy of this number is questionable), about 250,000 people died of malaria and 430,000 people died of HIV, but the latter figures are static and not pandemic. They are business as usual, they seed no fear, as a society, we have decided this level of loss is manageable. In comparison, Covid-19 can kill millions of us according to the models and assumptions. This thought dwarfs the importance of other problems on Earth, even the social convulsions being caused by Covid-19 in parallel to the outbreak of the virus.

Social scientists are [ringing alarm bells](), [making predictions]() and writing papers on the scenarios of life during and after the pandemic. The [air is becoming cleaner](), the [ozone]() layer is recovering, animals are enjoying more space. I used to be awoken by construction noise every morning. Now, birds wake me up, their songs unaccompanied by the roar of traffic. Whist the quality of my life has improved in one domain, the construction workers may already have lost their income.

What lies ahead is unknown. Will China experience a [second wave]() of Covid-19? How long will the lockdowns and their consequences last? [How many lives will be lost]() on either side of the equation? Practically, besides recording data in death certificates, few attempts are being made to actively account for the experiences of those not making into the Covid-19 metric tables. Billions of people are in lockdown, each one of them with their own destinies, problems, and curtailed aspirations. These are not discounted lives, they are as real and valuable as the lives of people entering intensive care units for the Covid-19 complications.

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People might be dying in their locked-down homes of heart failure unable to make it to a hospital, they might be escalating domestic violence, or committing suicide in seclusion. The elderly might be suffering in retirement communities and mental health problems might be taking their toll on all demographics. The outcomes from cancelled surgeries, suspended clinical trials, [disrupted maternity services](), unfilled prescriptions and [delayed chemotherapies](), to name a few, are difficult to imagine. Crime and traumas may fall, or may relocate from the streets to the bedrooms. At the same time, the elderly not admitted to hospitals, may avoid infections and polypharmacy and actually enjoy a better quality of life in their homes, kids won't pick up lice and measles at playgrounds, other as yet unknown benefits of this new lifestyle may improve some aspects of our health and wellbeing. Such statistics are not in vogue, but they are an essential lens for understanding the wider impact of Covid-19 on society.

We still have a chance to collect such data from many countries around the globe with the help of charities, social care services, special government initiatives, professional organisations, volunteers, as well as through IT solutions that enable self-reporting. If as a society we made a trade-off to mobilise and to save lives in the Covid-19 pandemic, we should account for those who enable this monumental societal effort and learn the details of the price we are paying, so that future generations may benefit.

We need to support the brave doctors, nurses and all the other workers making our new quiet and deserted world run for us today. These people are putting themselves at risk trying to save those they can and protect the rest of us. With the help of these amazing people, we will get through this and when it is all over, we will be celebrating our success comparing the saved lives in the war with Covid-19 against the pre-pandemic predictive models which are as erroneous as they are sensational. Thousands of papers will be published using yet more sophisticated models, death certificates data, assumptions and extrapolations. Will this all really be good enough to understand the positive and negative outcomes of the current measures?

Sacrifices are inevitable, capacities are limited. If we have woefully insufficient resources to care for people in lockdown, at least we can record these experiences and learn all we can from them. Much of life continues alongside Covid-19, we should seek to understand it better.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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