

Oxfordi Ülikooli kaasprofessor
EAPS Gunther Beyeri autasu laureaat 2018.a.
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LAUREATE GUNTHER BEYER AWARD EAPS 2018
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29.04.2021 16.00 – 18.00 ZOOM

Quantifying impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic through life expectancy losses: a population-level study of 29 countries

Abstract:

Background: Variations in the age patterns and magnitudes of excess deaths, as well as differences in population sizes and age structures make cross-national comparisons of the cumulative mortality impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic challenging. Life expectancy is a widely-used indicator that provides a clear and cross-nationally comparable picture of the population-level impacts of the pandemic on mortality.

Methods: Life tables by sex were calculated for 29 countries, including most European countries, Chile and the USA for 2015-2020. Life expectancy at birth and at age 60 for 2020 were contextualised against recent trends between 2015-19. Using decomposition techniques we examined which specific age groups contributed to reductions in life expectancy in 2020 and to what extent reductions were attributable to official COVID-19 deaths.

Results: Life expectancy at birth declined from 2019 to 2020 in 27 out of 29 countries. Males in the USA and Bulgaria experienced the largest losses in life expectancy at birth during 2020 (2.1 and 1.6 years respectively), but reductions of more than an entire year were documented in eleven countries for males, and eight among females. Reductions were mostly attributable to increased mortality above age 60 and to official COVID-19 deaths.

Conclusions: The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant mortality increases in 2020 of a magnitude not witnessed since WW-II in Western Europe or the breakup of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Females from 15 countries and males from 10 ended up with lower life expectancy at birth in 2020 than in 2015, a year when life expectancy was adversely impacted already due to an especially bad flu season.