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# Painful lockdowns a global policy failure that must never be repeated

Had people been presented with the right information they would have adjusted their behaviour accordingly, but we never trusted them to

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Lockdowns taught us many painful lessons. That economies cannot be shuttered for many months without consequence. That needless money printing will fuel inflation. That school closures will have a catastrophic effect on pupils' education. But perhaps the most painful lesson is that lockdowns were far less effective than many people had been led to believe.

Today we, along with Prof Steve H. Hanke of Johns Hopkins University, are releasing new research which concludes lockdowns were a colossal global policy failure that should never be imposed again. Our systematic meta-analysis of Covid restrictions has found lockdowns saved what translates to an estimated 1,700 to 6,000 lives in England and Wales. By way of context, [influenza inflections account for an annual burden of around 20,000 deaths](#) in the two nations.

We used two different approaches to evaluate [the effectiveness of lockdowns](#) in Europe and the United States in the spring of 2020. Our results indicate that lockdowns prevented approximately 3.2 to 10.7 per cent (6,000 to 23,000 Covid-19 deaths in Europe and 4,000 to 16,000 deaths in the US). These results are based on all relevant research studies and are robust when accounting for potential biases. They are further supported by results from natural experiments and several existing reviews on the subject, strengthening their validity.

## Unrealistic assumptions

Our findings sit in sharp contrast to two widely cited claims from Imperial College London.

The first projection, made in March 2020, suggested intervention could save over 400,000 lives in the UK. This heavily relied on the assumptions made in the authors' modelling exercise. The second claim, based on a before/after comparison in June 2020, suggested that lockdowns averted 3.1 million deaths across 11 countries. This conclusion, however, rested on the unrealistic assumption that lockdowns were the sole determinant of the observed reduction in transmission. The authors failed to account for the voluntary behavioural changes adopted by individuals, such as working remotely or cancelling private gatherings, which undoubtedly contributed to reducing transmission rates.

This last point is important. The choice was never between lockdown and "business as usual". Had people been presented with the information and the risks, they would have adjusted their behaviour accordingly – yet in many countries they were never trusted to do so. Nonetheless, our meta-study unveils a series of substantial burdens that lockdowns imposed on society, from the economic to the political.

A unique feature of many of these burdens is their delayed manifestation. A salient example can be found in the government support measures which were designed to bolster aggregate demand. These measures gave rise to a surge in the quantity of money held by the public, which later caused record levels of inflation in many nations. School closures have widened attainment gaps, and will likely impact the most vulnerable children for many years to come. The unexpected rise in non-Covid deaths in certain countries serves as a potent reminder that the lockdowns may cause long-term detrimental effects on our collective health. Over 650,000 deaths were registered in the UK in 2022 – 9 per cent more than in 2019.

The Telegraph's Lockdown Files offered a unique insight into how the Government handled the earlier stages of the pandemic. In many cases, it appears policy was formulated on the hoof, with little regard given to costs and benefits. This was not unique to the UK. Our research finds the costs were huge, the benefits minimal. Lockdown was a blunt policy tool that failed to serve its purpose. Yet as the serious mistakes of 2020 and 2021 begin to fade in the memory, there is a very real risk that this instrument will be used again in future.

Our findings, including the relevance of voluntary behaviour, should serve as a critical focus point of the UK's Covid-19 Inquiry. Otherwise, we risk being trapped in a cycle of repeating the costly errors we made during the pandemic.

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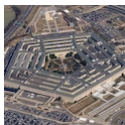
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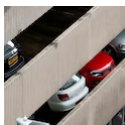
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