

The many disasters of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Principles of Complex Systems, Vols. 1, 2, & 3D
CSYS/MATH 6701, 6713, & a pretend number, 2024–2025

Prof. Peter Sheridan Dodds

Computational Story Lab | Vermont Complex Systems Center
Santa Fe Institute | University of Vermont



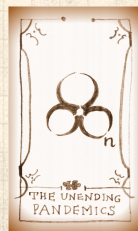
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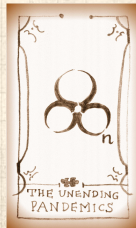
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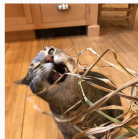
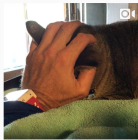
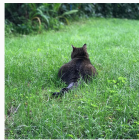
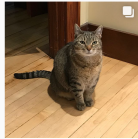
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Sealie & Lambie
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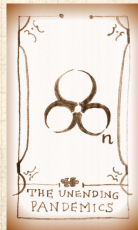
 On Instagram at [pratchett_the_cat](https://www.instagram.com/pratchett_the_cat) 

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Outline

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Narrative Epidemiology

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First: The Truth

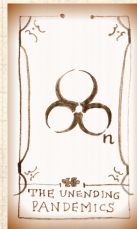
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COVID-19 is a conspiracy



First: The Truth

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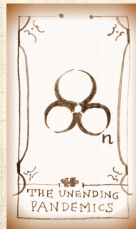
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COVID-19 is a conspiracy



It's not a real contagion.



First: The Truth


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COVID-19 is a conspiracy

 It's not a real contagion.

 Contagion : *con*='with' + *tangere*='to touch.'



First: The Truth


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WHO declares COVID-19 transmission may be via airborne particles in ...



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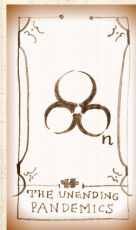
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WHO declares COVID-19 transmission may be via airborne particles in ... May, 2021  after long resisting doing so 

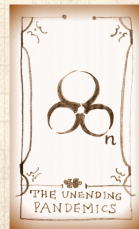


 2020-01-14: WHO tweeted: 
“Preliminary investigations conducted by the Chinese
authorities have found no clear evidence of human-to-human
transmission of the novel #coronavirus.”

 2020-03-30: WHO Official Defends Guidance: ‘We’re Not
Seeing’ Airborne Transmission 



The whole concept of 'disaster' is a disaster:



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Dis + Aster = Bad Star = Astrological Ill Fate.



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If the heavens are a clockwork, then all was foretold.



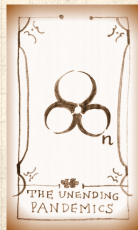
The whole concept of 'disaster' is a disaster:

- Dis + Aster = Bad Star = Astrological Ill Fate.
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- The stars and planets are the shadowy cabal.



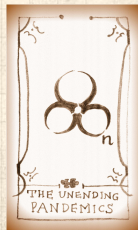
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- But we know there are different timelines available.



The whole concept of 'disaster' is a disaster:

- Dis + Aster = Bad Star = Astrological Ill Fate.
- If the heavens are a clockwork, then all was foretold.
- The stars and planets are the shadowy cabal.
- But we know there are different timelines available.
- Fate is a sometimes food, and there is only the story of fate.
(more later in PoCS, Vol. 1).




Journal entry, 2020-02-11:




Coronavirus






Journal entry, 2020-02-11:

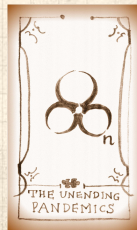
 Coronavirus

 The idiocy about R_0 continues.



Journal entry, 2020-02-11:

-  Coronavirus
-  The idiocy about R_0 continues.
-  Unbelievably believably bad science.

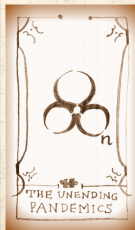


Journal entry, 2020-02-21:

Twitter DMs to a colleague:





Okay: The scientists studying pandemics need to be able to present some kind set of numbers that show how bad things are. The whole R_0 disaster has been waiting to happen because people have been ... lazily having fun with math models? Unconcerned about how to communicate vital scientific information? Stupid? I don't know. Maybe a radar plot visualization. I don't know.

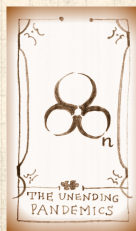


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 "When these three boundaries are crossed, we are in trouble"




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 “When these three boundaries are crossed, we are in trouble”

 Measles has an R_0 of 20. We should all have it. Of course, there's no f**king time scale for R_0 so we don't know when that happens.



Journal entry, 2020-02-21, cont.:

Twitter DMs to a colleague:

 One of the core pieces we had in our old paper: “What is N ?”



Journal entry, 2020-02-21, cont.:

Twitter DMs to a colleague:

- One of the core pieces we had in our old paper: “What is N ?”
- And rare events matter so, so much. I keep seeing new countries report their first case.



Journal entry, 2020-02-21, cont.:

Twitter DMs to a colleague:

- One of the core pieces we had in our old paper: “What is N ?”
- And rare events matter so, so much. I keep seeing new countries report their first case.
- South Korea with the church. WaPo says cases are “soaring” there. I haven’t seen the numbers.




vtdigger :





2023-03-10: Tuesday basketball game, UVM beats UMBC
81-74.

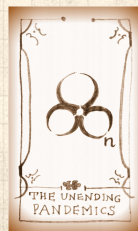


vtdigger :


 2023-03-10: Tuesday basketball game, UVM beats UMBC
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 2020-06-07: 2020/06/07: Six who attended UVM basketball
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“We weren’t thinking about Covid at all.”




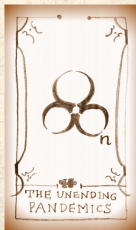
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“We weren’t thinking about Covid at all.”

 At least 50 people would experience symptoms.





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“We weren’t thinking about Covid at all.”

 At least 50 people would experience symptoms.

 Three people in attendance would die.

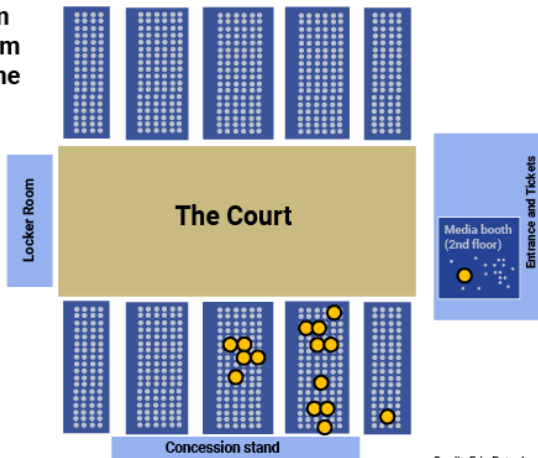




2020-06-10: Spread of Covid-19 from UVM game more extensive than thought

The cases from one Patrick Gym basketball game

 = Positive case



Seating locations are approximate.

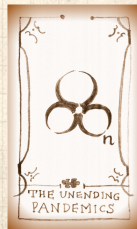
Credit: Erin Petenko

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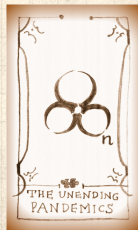


[vtdigger](#) :



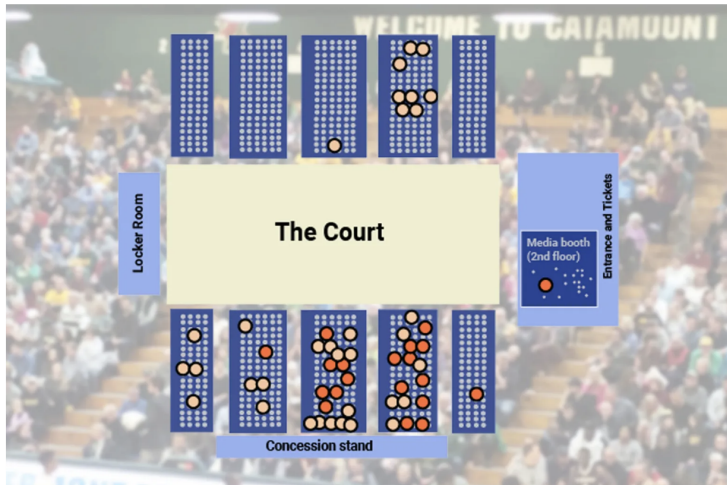
2020-06-18: UVM basketball game was a major spreading event, VTDigger survey finds 

“...the 3,200 cheering fans filling Patrick Gym represented all the ways not to act in a pandemic: squeezed shoulder-to-shoulder on the bleachers, offering high fives, yelling, sharing pizza with neighbors.”





2020-06-21: The Deeper Dig: How Covid-19 spread at a UVM basketball game

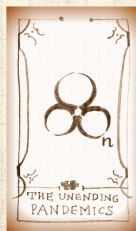


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What is haPpeNing?

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On March 11, within about 15 minutes after 9 pm US EST:



What is haPpeNing?

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On March 11, within about 15 minutes after 9 pm US EST:

1. Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson announced that they had tested positive for COVID-19.



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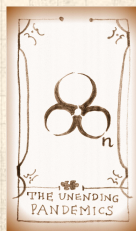
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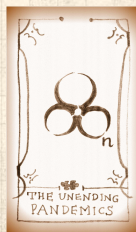
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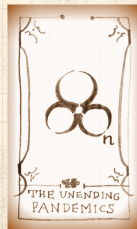
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3. Trump gave an Oval Office Address during which the Dow Jones Industrial Average futures dropped.
4. Also: former US vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was appearing on the popular Fox TV show "The Masked Singer" performing Sir Mix-A-Lot's "Baby Got Back" in a bear costume.



2020-03-15, journal entry:

They look like us now  


 What must be done, and must have been done from the start:




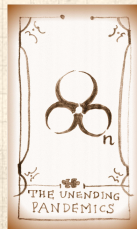
¹Solid life general-purpose life advice.

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 Test everyone.

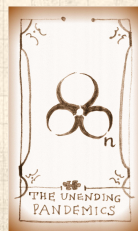


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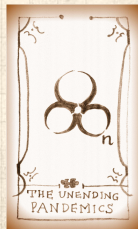
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 And we needed to be prepared.





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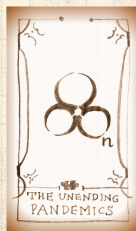
 And we needed to be prepared.

In general for pandemics:

 Limit contact, groups, travel.

 Wear masks, PPE.

 Don't breathe other people's air, don't lick surfaces.¹



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“Narrative Epidemiology” through TV Tropes:

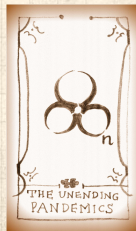
 The virus is the Big Bad   and a Complete Monster  





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²Always: Make Sure He's Dead  . Rule #2: DoubleTap   Double Tap.

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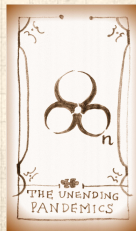
 Ignore the Scientists  





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 Asymptomatic spreaders: The Virus   looks like us
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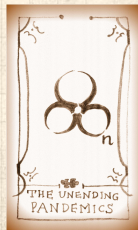
-  The virus is the Big Bad  and a Complete Monster 
-  Ignore the Scientists 
-  Asymptomatic spreaders: The Virus  looks like us now 
-  Failure to act as one against a remorseless unified foe: Let's Split Up, Gang 



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-  Vaccine as a silver bullet  





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Split Up, Gang 
-  Vaccine as a silver bullet 
-  Bill Gates created the virus and wants to put chips in your
head: Poison-and-Cure Gambit 



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“Narrative Epidemiology” through TV Tropes:

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-  Fear that disaster leads to worse: Tyrant Takes the Helm 



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
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-  Resurgence: Back from the Dead  ²



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-  Fear that disaster leads to worse: Tyrant Takes the Helm 
-  Resurgence: Back from the Dead ²
-  Fundamental problem: We much prefer stories of individuals, not systems.



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Story versus the Virus

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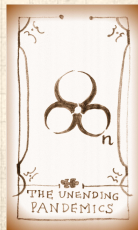
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Journal entry, 2020-03-21:

The complete incompetence of Trump, our doom

Washington Post article, March 20 

Azar couldn't get through to Trump to speak with him about the virus until Jan. 18, according to two senior administration officials. When he reached Trump by phone, the president interjected to ask about vaping and when flavored vaping products would be back on the market, the senior administration officials said.



Story versus the Virus

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Journal entry, 2020-03-21, cont.:

On Feb. 25, Nancy Messonnier, a senior CDC official, sounded perhaps the most significant public alarm to that point, when she told reporters that the coronavirus was likely to spread within communities in the United States and that disruptions to daily life could be “severe.” Trump called Azar on his way back from a trip to India and complained that Messonnier was scaring the stock markets, according to two senior administration officials.



Like life, death finds a way.



Mismeasurement of Death


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System failure—things fall apart

 We couldn't and still can't count cases and deaths properly.



Mismeasurement of Death

The PoCSverse
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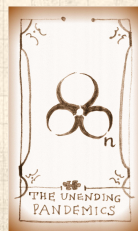
Narrative
Epidemiology

The dashboards are all
wrong

The peril

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- 🧱 We couldn't and still can't count cases and deaths properly.
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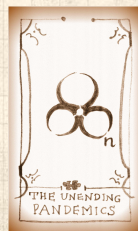
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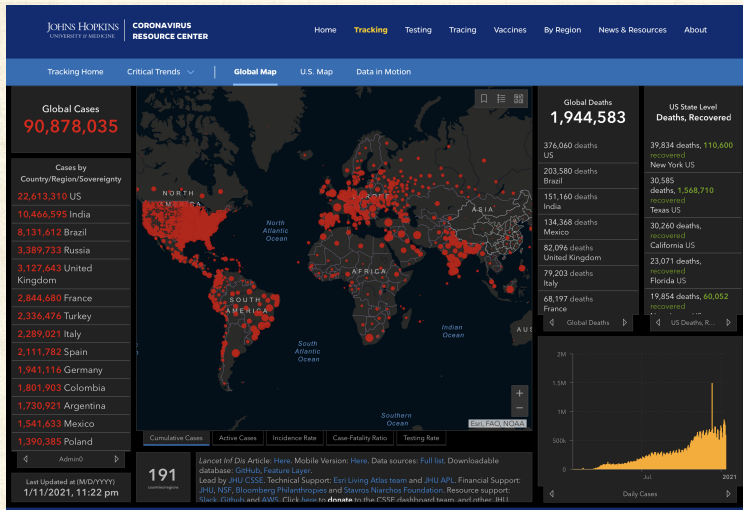
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- ❏ We need a Grim Scorekeeper.
- ❏ Excess deaths in the US have run at about 35% more than reported COVID deaths.
- ❏ Estimate: Over 500,000 excess deaths in the US from March 15 to December 31, 2020.



Eight significant digits, no errors:

January 11, 2020, Johns Hopkins:



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<https://www.ft.com>

January 7, 2020, Financial Times, beautiful, misleading:

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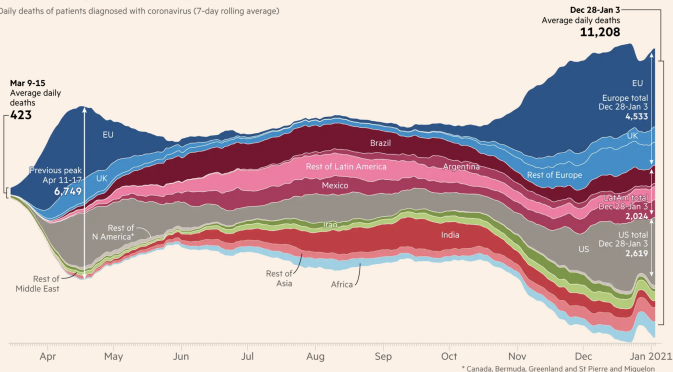
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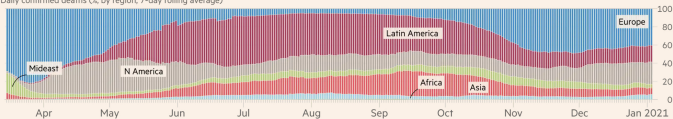
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Covid-19's soaring death toll dwarfs figures from first wave

Daily deaths of patients diagnosed with coronavirus (7-day rolling average)



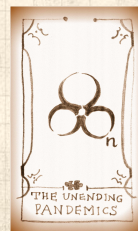
Daily confirmed deaths (% by region, 7-day rolling average)



FT graphic: Steven Bernard / @sdbernard

Source: FT analysis of data from WHO, Covid Tracking Project, Johns Hopkins University, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://www.ft.com>



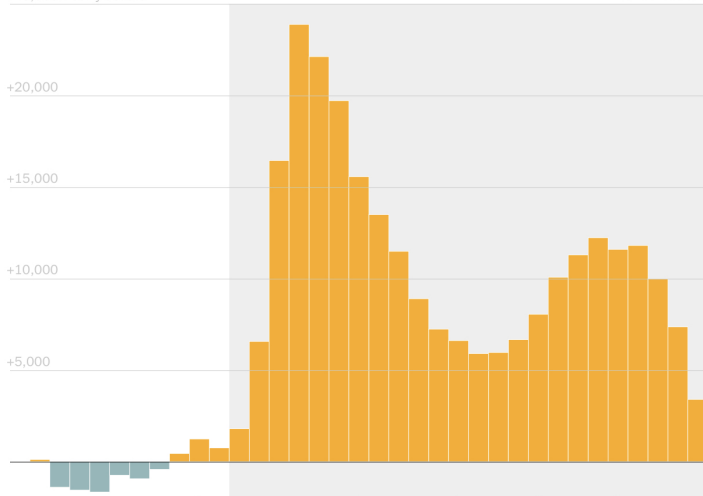
Eventually: time series with excess deaths:

September 20, New York Times:

U.S. Deaths Above or Below Normal

257,900 excess deaths from March 15 to Aug. 29

+25,000 weekly deaths



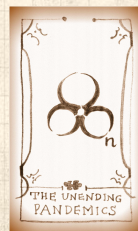
Recent weeks are likely undercounts.

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
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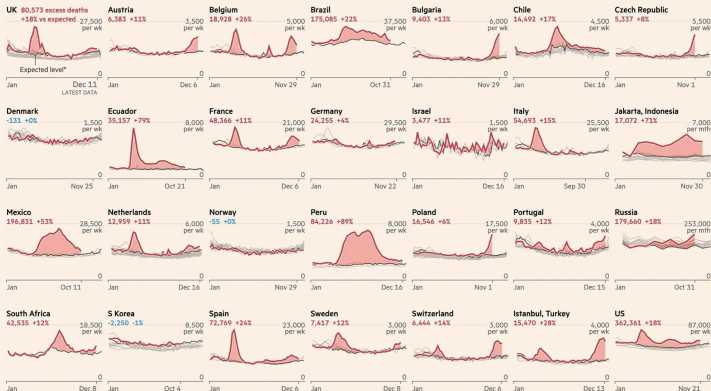


Financial Times, excess deaths:

January 7, 2020, Financial Times:

Death rates have climbed far above historical averages in many countries that have faced Covid-19 outbreaks

Number of deaths per week from all causes, 2020 vs recent years:  Shading indicates total excess deaths since 100 confirmed cases in the country



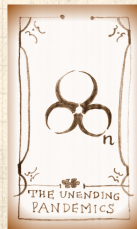
*Adjusted for trend over recent years
Sources: FT analysis of mortality data from individual countries and the Human Mortality Database. Data updated December 22
FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @burnmurdoch
© FT

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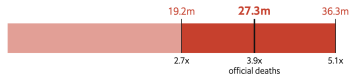
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The Economist: The Pandemic's True Death Toll

Estimated global excess deaths

With 95% confidence interval



Official global covid-19 deaths



HOW MANY people have died because of the covid-19 pandemic? The answer depends both on the data available, and on how you define “because”. Many people who die while infected with SARS-CoV-2 are never tested for it, and do not enter the official totals. Conversely, some people whose deaths have been attributed to covid-19 had other ailments that might have ended their lives on a similar timeframe anyway. And what about people who died of preventable causes during the pandemic, because hospitals full of covid-19 patients could not treat them? If such cases count, they must be offset by deaths that did not occur but would have in normal times, such as those caused by [flu](#) or [air pollution](#).

Compare excess deaths across countries

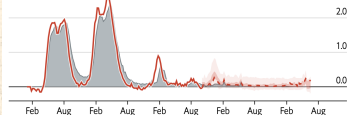
Select country/region

United States



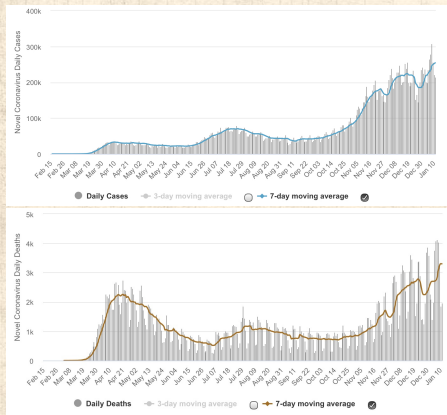
Compare to

Peru



The humans:

Timely delivery of Stimulus Packages for the Virus and SIR models:



Vacations + fatigue + stories.

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The failure of epidemiological models


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Farr's model : Normal distribution for case load.



The failure of epidemiological models


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Farr's model : Normal distribution for case load.



Farr's Law!





The failure of epidemiological models


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 Farr's model : Normal distribution for case load.

 Farr's Law!

 Non-mechanistic, farcical.



The failure of epidemiological models


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Farr's model : Normal distribution for case load.



Farr's Law!



Non-mechanistic, farcical.



Sigmoid functions appear everywhere and are easily produced by gimmick models.



Mass negligent geronticide:



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Emergence of differential age mortality:

-  Older people are not economically important.
-  Shutting down society will ... ?



Why not let it rip?

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Especially early on, but throughout:



“It’s no worse than the flu.”

“Flatten the curve”



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