

Debunking a flawed forecast

What is our future? The Leader's August 12 article on COVID-19 paints a grim "path we're on", saying "the number of deaths from the coronavirus in the United States has surpassed 160,000, and a new forecast predicts 300,000 deaths in the country by the end of the year" and "we need to get [mask compliance] into the 95%+ rate".

This refers to the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation forecast released on August 6, which NPR said "projects that between now and [the first of] December, 137,000 people will die on top of the roughly 160,000 who have died so far."

There are multiple problems with this IHME forecast, starting with plotting each death based on the date it was reported instead of when it actually occurred, resulting in misleading trend curves and predictions.

The difference between dates reported and occurred may seem like a fine point, but the reality is huge. The CDC notes "it can take several weeks for death records to be submitted..., processed, coded, and tabulated." Originally about 10% of actual weekly deaths were reported the same week, 45% by the second week, 67% by the third, and 80% by the fourth.

A strange complicating factor began after July 4, when great numbers of deaths from previous months started being reclassified as COVID-19 deaths (94% of which have multiple causes). Of the 6,617 deaths reported the week ending July 11, only

302 occurred after July 4, while 3,547 actually occurred before May 9, over 2 months earlier.

Reclassification of old deaths continues to this day. Regardless of their legitimacy, these "new" old deaths from previous months are irrelevant for evaluating how we are doing now or projecting future trends, but tragically are treated as "new" COVID-19 deaths in scary media reports and IHME forecasts.

On this basis, IHME starts at 1,003 deaths per day on July 30 and bounces around from 970 to 1,200 deaths per day until November 1, projecting 99,167 "new" death reports (including reclassified old deaths) during that 3-month period.

Given the fog from varying COVID-19 death definitions, the current trend is hard to determine, but first-week CDC death reports have dropped the past 5 weeks, from 257 to 161 to 154 to 140 to 128 the week ending August 22.

IHME then moves from flawed extrapolation of current trends to the realm of pure speculation, guessing that (1) cold weather would increase death rates to 1,867 per day by December 1; (2) boosting mask compliance to 95% would save 66,740 lives; and (3) not re-imposing lockdowns in November would kill 96,712 people.

Their mask prediction assumes that even the leakiest cloth mask is 33% effective at reducing infections and deaths, despite WHO's latest guidance that "there is no direct evidence ... on the effectiveness of universal

masking of healthy people in the community to prevent infection with respiratory viruses, including COVID-19".

Since the sick and at-risk are likely already wearing masks, any low-hanging-fruit benefit has already been reached, so it is absurd for IHME to assume such dramatic impact from ramping up masking to 95% when the New England Journal of Medicine says "the chance of catching COVID-19 from a passing interaction in a public space is therefore minimal."

IHME's fear-mongering prediction of a hundred thousand extra deaths in a cold November if we don't lock down again is based on questionable assumptions and wild guesswork, akin to but much less plausible than Imperial College's overblown forecast of 2.2 million COVID-19 deaths back on March 16, which diverged from reality within a few weeks but nevertheless led to continued lockdowns.

And it's worth noting that IHME has been embarrassingly wrong in the past, when they led a lot of us astray by maintaining their failed projection of just 60,000-70,000 deaths by August 4 all the way through the end of April, past the point when current deaths already exceeded their 3-months-later projection.

What awaits us 4 months in the future? I don't know, and IHME sure doesn't know either. Their latest junk science forecast should not be used as a guide for county, state, nor national public policy.

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