

Living, and dying, by numbers

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As a way of light relief, I wonder if anyone spots the song title that has been adapted in the title of this blog? It will be at the end of the blog and was a minor hit from an English synth-pop outfit who appeared at the tail-end end of decade in which fashion and music was eclectic and rarely dull.

There can be no doubt that Covid-19 is exacting a dreadful toll in terms of the lives lost. Some [media outlets](#) suggest that the pandemic we're experiencing may have resulted in 55% more deaths than has been announced in the daily Government statistics; As the article explains, deaths occurring outside of hospitals in England and Wales for the week ending on April 17th was 22,351, over 50% higher than the 14,451 actually announced by the Department of Health.

On Sunday, the [Financial Times](#) reported that it calculated that "Global coronavirus death toll could be 60% higher than reported."

The actual number of dead is, certainly in this country, a contested statistic because of the fact that, for reasons that are not entirely clear, but cynics suggest was to keep the actual total down, deaths due to Covid-19 outside hospitals, especially in care homes, are not included in daily announcements. As such, making comparisons with other countries is much less straightforward than might be possible. [Worldometer](#) which provides constantly updated figures for Covid-19 mortality shows hospital deaths for the UK only.

The result is what seems like an unseemly search for a figure representing the actual number of deaths. As such, *The Daily Mail* contends that by using the ONS (Office for National Statistics) data, it may reasonably be assumed that the death toll from Covid-19 is likely to be at least 32,600.

On Radio Four on Sunday morning, one medical commentator acknowledged that it's very likely that in only a couple of months since

the pandemic hit UK, we'll have lost almost half the total number of those civilians who died in the second world war very largely as a result of Luftwaffe bombing of major cities (London suffering the greatest number of deaths between September 1940 and May 1941)

Comparison to the second world war appear to be popular as on Tuesday at 14.31 on the [BBC's live news feed](#) for Covid-19, Chris Morris and Oliver Barnes in 'Reality Check', described that the number who've in London due to the pandemic in the four weeks to 17th April "has now narrowly surpassed the number of civilians killed during the worst four-week period of aerial bombing of the city during the Blitz"

It's tempting to make comparison. However, as the UK's data shows, unless there is confidence that such comparison is on a like-for-like basis, any inferences drawn may be misleading or spurious. Nevertheless, imperfect though the figures may seem to be, they are being used, it seems, to make political statements and, we're informed, choices about the future as far as strategy of dealing with Covid-19 is concerned.

On Monday, on his first day back to normal duties as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson made a public statement outside 10 Downing Street about where he believes we are. In a curiously inconclusive speech, Johnson gave the impression that's been achieved has been a success but that more work needs to be done. [ITV's political pundit](#), Robert Peston, blogging immediately after Johnson's statement, summarised it as 'We are winning but we haven't won'.

Some might argue that a death toll of at least 32,600 hardly represents success compared to other countries in which mortality due to Covid-19 is significantly lower.

Assuming that every country shown by worldometer does indeed include every death due to Covid-19 regardless of location, the UK is second only to the United States. Of course, other factors are to be considered in making comparisons of Covid-19 mortality, not least of which is the size of the population; America (330.669 million), UK (67.886 million).

On the basis of population only as a measure the trend is disturbing. The UK's population is just under a fifth of the US's. However, it's notable that the figure of 32,600 dead due to Covid-19 in the UK represents over 56% of the 57,000 deaths experienced there. Naturally, many would argue, quite correctly, that the USA is geographically at least, a much larger country.

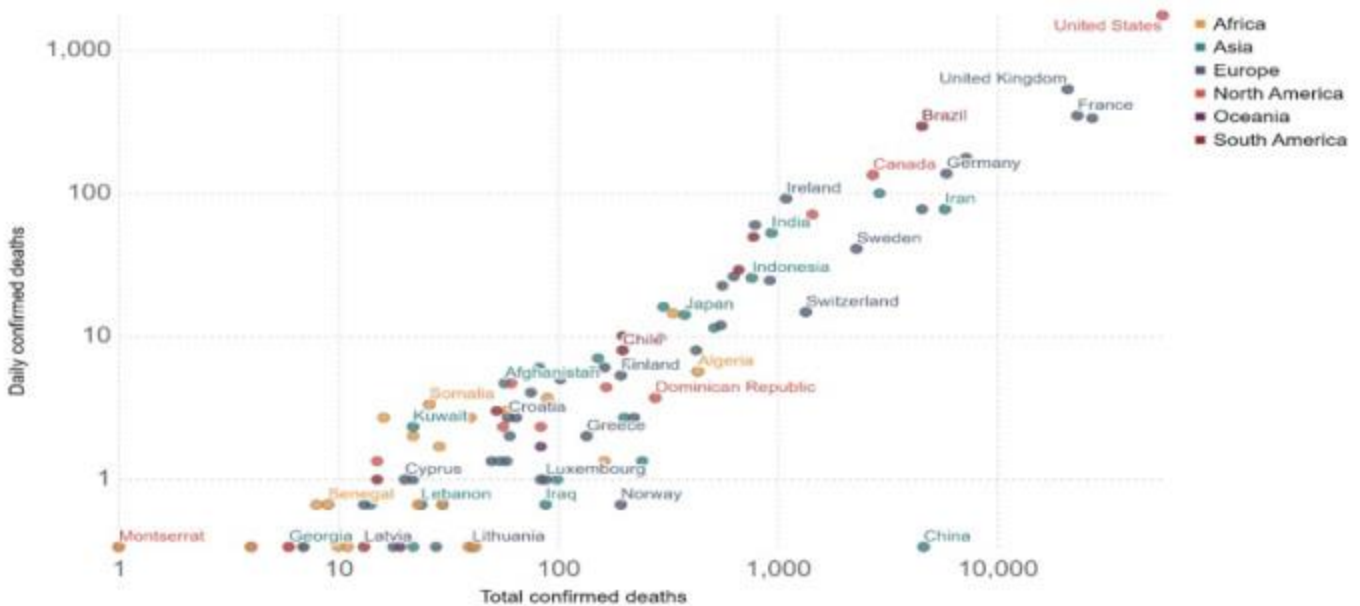
Using the two major cities of London and New York for comparison presents starker difference. Respectively, the two populations are not very different; 8.982 million (2019) and 8.399 million (2018). However, death due to Covid-19 is far from similar.

According to the BBC, using data produced by the ONS, there have been 4,697 deaths due to Covid-19 in London. This, of course, represents a truly horrific statistic. However, when compared to the number dead in New York the capital city might claim to have got off lightly. [*The New York Times*](#) has looked at death there and found that approximately 27,600 people in New York have died since the beginning of the pandemic; "about 20,900 more than is typical."

The diagram below (source <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data>) neatly shows the spread of mortality as a 'rolling average' for the past three days. Note that Italy is to the right, and slightly lower than France.

Daily vs. total confirmed deaths due to COVID-19, Apr 28, 2020

Shown is the 3-day rolling average of confirmed COVID-19 deaths. Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death means that the number of confirmed deaths may not be an accurate count of the true number of deaths from COVID-19.



Source: European CDC – Situation Update Worldwide – Last updated 28th April, 11:30 (London time) OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

There will be reckoning as to how different countries handled the impending crisis that was Covid-19, most particularly in the imposition of so called 'lockdown' to reduce infections to decrease what is referred to as the R value which is a measure of transmission (contagiousness) of a disease or virus. However, the two countries with greatest mortality, the US and the UK, were somewhat later in imposition of measures to reduce infection and, as many believe, less fulsome in the restriction in personal freedom than many other countries, particularly those that have experienced far fewer deaths.

Numbers presented in the data available on Covid-19 death clearly demonstrates, imperfect though it may be, that different strategies have produced different results. However, beyond the issue of mortality, dreadful as it may be is whether the economic impact may have been different.

Reducing infection and death was naturally, assumed to be the overriding maxim of dealing with Covid-19. Equally, though, introducing measures that effectively ceases the majority of economic activity was not going to be achieved without considerable expense.

The costs for the UK are going to be astronomical and measured in hundreds of billions.

Accounting firm [PWC](#) have produced a useful overview of scenarios *they* believe may occur. Right-wing Centre for Policy Studies have calculated that the total cost of dealing with Covid-19 will be over £246 billion (bn) based on direct expense (126.671 bn) and indirect (119 bn) [The Centre for Policy Studies](#) estimates that coronavirus will cost the UK a total of £246 billion.

Given the utterly alarming rate at which businesses ranging from large corporations to micro enterprises in pretty much every sector are claiming they are likely to bust without assistance, this figure, is only likely to increase. The enormous cost will eventually have to be paid; most commentators claim by increased taxes.

Interestingly, as an overview of the analysis of the costs of Covid-19 carried out by the Centre for Policy Studies, [The Article](#), stridently argues that what is required is the opposite of tax increases, the imposition of which would be short-termist and destructive:

“The solution to the economic consequences of coronavirus is growth. Our economy will take a hit of unprecedented magnitude and the only solution is to think long term. Rather than hiking taxes, we should in fact be bringing them down in order to make Britain the hub of post-virus economic activity.”

Such a policy will not sit easily with many; especially those who believe that what we’ve experienced is a form of Keynesian intervention. However, there is a view that many current cabinet ministers are slavish adherents of what is referred to as ‘supply-side economics’, particularly those involved in *Britannia Unchained*.

There is a very good argument that increased entrepreneurialism will be welcomed if it is achieved in such a way that creates improved prosperity for all and not just, as has been the case in recent times, of capital being concentrated in an extremely small elite whose wealth is often in inverse proportion to the payment of taxes in this country.

There was always going to be a trade-off between mortality due to Covid-19 and saving the UK’s economy from catastrophe. As

everyone including the government, opposition, businesses and trade unions recognise, whilst this is still work in progress, attention will eventually turn to the sort of post-pandemic future is needed. This should surely be one in which the numbers are obsessively focused on improving the lives of the current subsequent generations.

This will take adroit leadership and a sense of values that instils optimism. There is also an urgent need for integrity for honesty in the numbers dying due to Covid-19 we're being presented each day by the government.

Not that much to ask it might be argued.

Oh, the song referred to in the title of the blog is ['Living by Numbers'](#) which was a quirky minor hit in late 1979 early 1980 for New Musik. Give it a play, it will brighten your day in these difficult times.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and contributor to *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644)