Research [in] Brief

What's the Most Helpful Way to Measure COVID-19 Deaths?

Primary issue

The number of deaths caused by COVID-19, the result of the novel coronavirus, is a key metric to judge the virus's trajectory. But measuring deaths is more complicated than counting only the deaths of those people who had tested positive for the virus. To combat the pandemic and its effects productively, authorities and policymakers need accurate knowledge about how many people have died from COVID-19 and whether the death rate is growing, shrinking, or holding steady.

Key findings

Two competing approaches are being used and debated:

- One is to count only those deaths that are known to have been caused or probably caused by COVID-19. To be counted this way, a death must be certified by a medical professional as being a direct result of the disease. This approach may miss capturing some disease-related deaths, but it provides a timely and reliable measurement.

- The other approach is to estimate disease-related deaths by comparing the number of deaths within a specified period to the average number of deaths during that same period in years past. The excess is then attributed to COVID-19. This approach relies on data that will be updated for one or more years to come, so while they may capture a larger picture, they are not as reliable in the short term.

The bottom line

Determining the policies that will achieve the best outcomes for health and economic activity depends on understanding whether COVID-19 death rates are rising or falling, and for which demographics and geographies. Directly measuring deaths from COVID-19 offers a timelier and more complete statistic in the short term than measuring deaths through excess mortality and is therefore vital in improving policy decisions.