



CA Study Finds COVID-19 Lockdowns Ineffective: Experts Weigh In

A new study, shared by Johns Hopkins University and written by economists, said that COVID lockdowns do little to save lives. Not all agree.

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In March 2020, the state imposed sweeping coronavirus restrictions across the state, shuttering businesses and urging people to stay home. A paper from three economists recently challenged the idea of public interventions to stop the spread. (Jeff Chiu/AP Photo)

CALIFORNIA — A recent working paper argued that lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic did little to save lives and instead imposed "enormous economic and social costs." The analysis reignited controversy over the lockdown debate after it was shared by Johns Hopkins University last month.

The study is not yet peer reviewed and was authored by three economists — one of whom is a professor of applied economics at Johns Hopkins University — and has drawn backlash from the medical community.

A handful of conservative-leaning media outlets reported on the study, while most mainstream media did not.

Patch asked two experts — Dr. Timothy Brewer, a professor of infectious disease at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Dr. John Swartzberg, a professor of vaccinology and infectious disease at the University of California, Berkeley — to weigh in on the paper. Patch also reached out to the California Department of Public Health but received no response.

The paper, "A Literature Review and Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Lockdowns on COVID-19 Mortality," was authored by Steve Hanke, a professor at Johns Hopkins and director of the Troubled Currencies Project at the Cato Institute; Jonas Herby, a special adviser at the Center for Political Studies in Copenhagen; and Lars Jonung, a Lund University economist.

The three economists aimed to determine whether lockdowns reduced deaths caused by COVID-19. Lockdowns in the study were defined as a combination of stay-at-home orders, social distancing and mask-wearing.

"While this meta-analysis concludes that lockdowns have had little to no public health effects, they have imposed enormous economic and social costs where they have been adopted," the working paper said. "In consequence, lockdown policies are ill-founded and should be rejected as a pandemic policy instrument."

The researchers determined that lockdowns in Europe and the United States only reduced COVID-19 mortality by 0.2 percent on average. Shelter-in-place orders were also ineffective, only reducing COVID-19 mortality by 2.9 percent on average. Experts consulted by Patch questioned the validity of the paper's findings and its methodology.

"Shame on these authors to try and pass something on as scientific research when it is a polemic about their personal political views," Swartzberg told Patch. "It's hard enough to advance our knowledge about this pandemic and how to manage it. Screed like this serves only to confuse our understanding and stall progress."

Swartzberg said it was misleading to refer to the paper as a "Johns Hopkins study," as some media outlets have called it.

"It is a paper written by three economists, one of whom is at Johns Hopkins," he told Patch in an email. "It's not a peer-reviewed paper. Rather, it's described [as a] 'working paper' and has not been published in a journal. It is really a position paper by three economists: it is much more opinion than fact."

Alternatively, Brewer told Patch: "There is no reason to discount it because it was done by economists, just as there is no reason to rank studies — as the authors do — based on whether they were done by social scientists (mainly economists) or not."

Both Brewer and Swartzberg pointed out that the researchers excluded other studies and data that showed lockdowns did slow the rapid spread of COVID-19 and prevent deaths.

"Overall it is not a bad study, but much data gets excluded by their inclusion criteria," Brewer said.

The authors used a systematic search and screening procedure to identify 18,590 studies, but only 24 studies were eligible for inclusion in the meta-analysis, the researchers said.

"That is not so unusual, but does raise the question of what the non-included information" said, Brewer said. "The study only looks at effects on COVID-19 deaths, not COVID-19 case numbers, hospitalizations or other potentially important outcomes."

Swartzberg said: "They called this a systematic review and metanalysis. It is neither. They cherrypicked articles that supported their position and ignored those that did not."

Brewer pointed to another study conducted in 2020 in which researchers found that cities that implemented public health interventions during the first 50 days of pandemic in China resulted in fewer reported cases.

But since that study did not look at deaths directly, it was not included in the Herby meta-analysis, Brewer said.

"It is one more piece of data, but I would not give it more weight than other data," Brewer said. "Its value is in trying to look at the impact of certain public policies on a definable outcome, COVID-19 mortality, but it is not and should not be regarded as necessarily the complete answer. The best way to get to truth is usually to look at the totality of evidence, and there are a number of studies, several of which were not included in the meta-analysis, that suggest that these interventions work in reducing COVID cases and mortality."