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Lockdown benefits 'a drop in the bucket compared to the costs', landmark study finds

Researchers say draconian measures taken in spring 2020 had 'negligible impact' on Covid mortality compared with lighter-touch countries

By Laura Donnelly, HEALTH EDITOR

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Scientists from Johns Hopkins University and Lund University examined almost 20,000 studies on measures taken to protect populations against Covid across the world.

Their findings suggest that lockdowns in response to the first wave of the pandemic, when compared with less strict policies adopted by the likes of Sweden, prevented as few as 1,700 deaths in England and Wales. In an average week there are around 11,000 deaths in England and Wales.

The report authors said their findings showed that the draconian measures had a “negligible impact” on Covid mortality and were a “policy failure of gigantic proportions”.

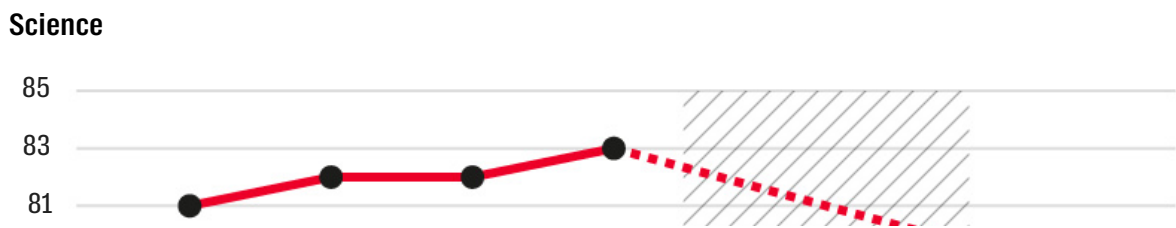
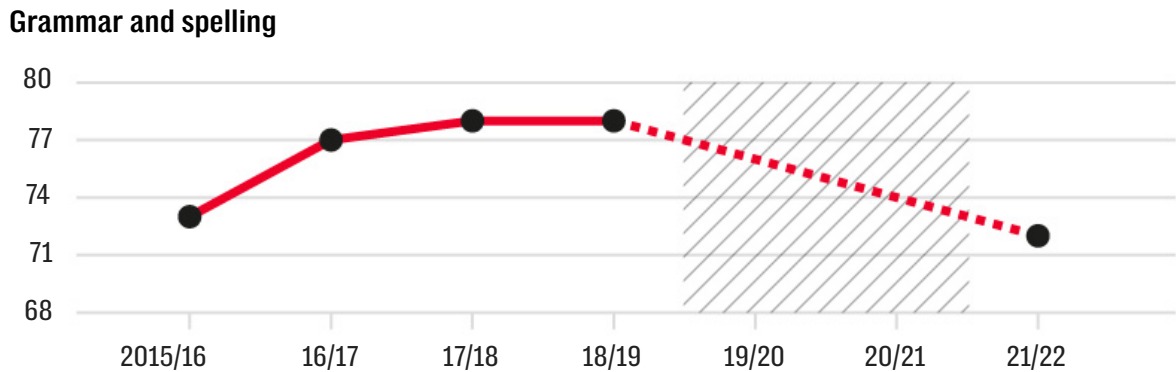
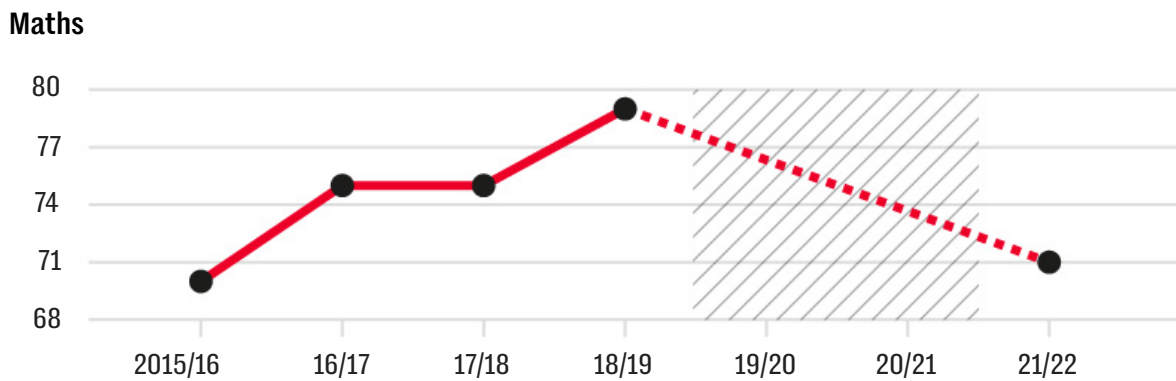
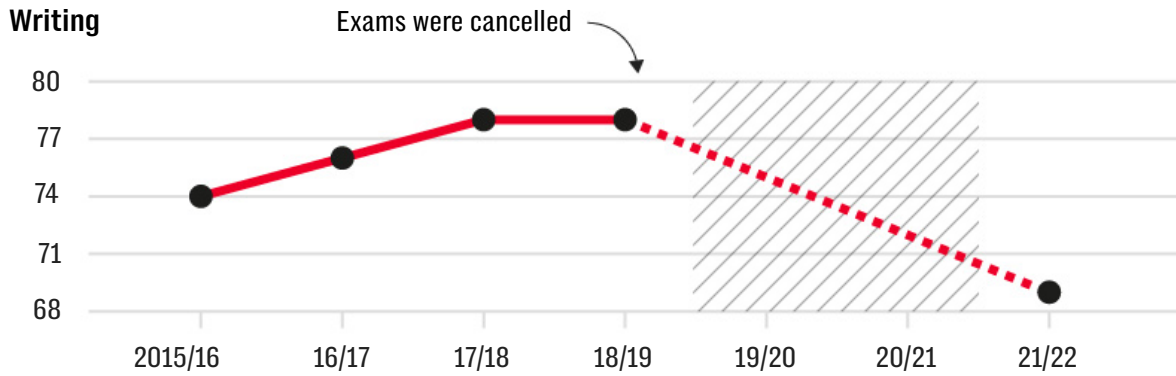
Johns Hopkins is one of the most respected medical schools in the world and became known during the pandemic for its Covid dashboard measuring cases and deaths all over the world.

The study’s authors conclude: “The science of lockdowns is clear; the data are in: the deaths saved were a drop in the bucket compared to the staggering collateral costs imposed.”

The detrimental impact of lockdown on children’s health and education, on economic growth and its contribution to large increases in public debt has become increasingly clear since the policy was introduced.

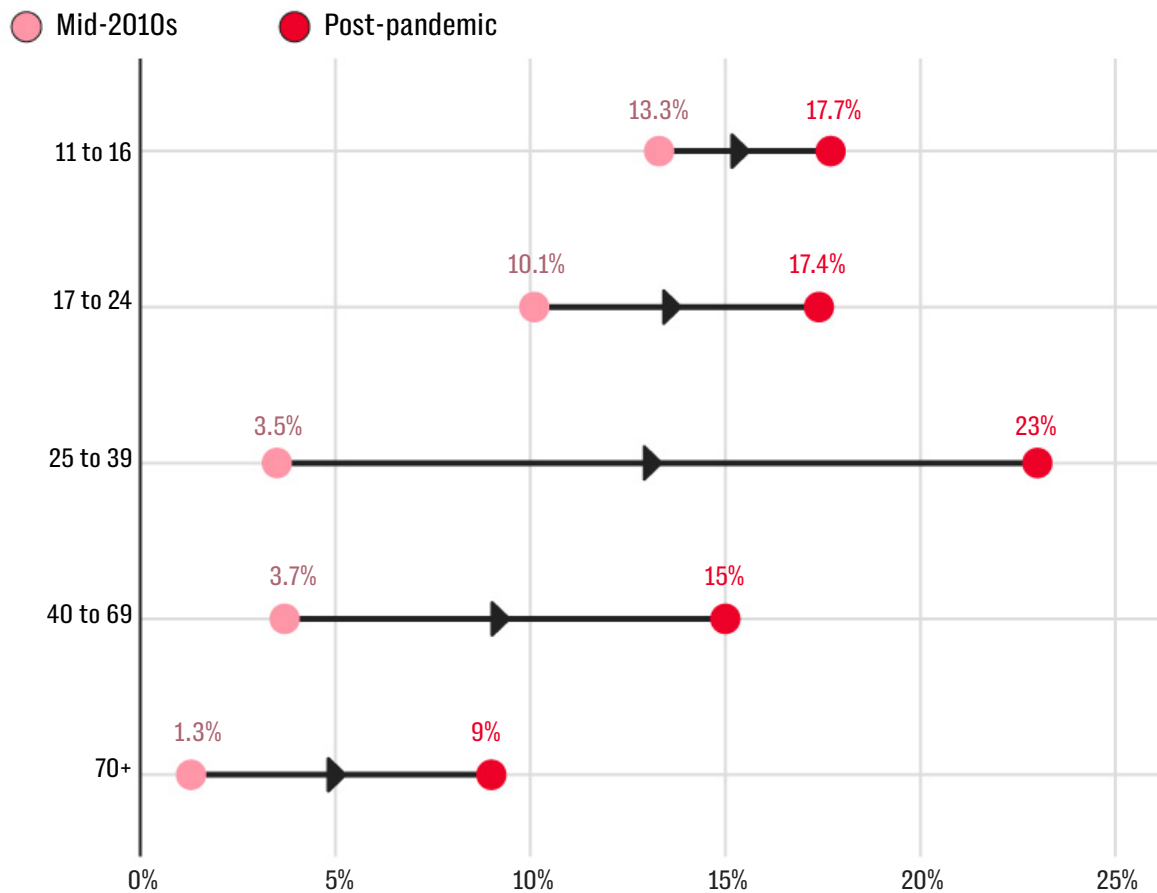
The decline in 11-year-olds' writing, maths and science ability

Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard



Mental health problems have worsened in all age groups

% of people with mental health issues by age group



However, [The Telegraph recently revealed](#) that a secretive government unit worked with social media companies during the pandemic in an attempt to curtail criticism of controversial lockdown policies.

The Covid Disinformation Unit monitored social media and [asked tech companies to remove posts it considered to be “potentially harmful content”](#).

Britain’s first lockdown, in March 2020, was introduced on the basis of modelling exercises from Prof Neil Ferguson which had predicted there could be more than 500,000 deaths in the UK, without action to stop the spread of the virus.

His research had suggested that even with mitigations such as social distancing, and household quarantines for Covid cases, there could be at least 250,000 deaths, unless further measures were taken.

TIMELINE

When Britain locked down

March 16, 2020

Matt Hancock tells Britons they are fighting a war against an “invisible killer” as social distancing measures are introduced in the UK for the first time. The then health secretary tells MPs the Government’s actions have “slowed” the spread of the virus in the UK

March 16, 2020

Neil Ferguson, from Imperial models forecasting 500,000 deaths that even with mitigations such could be at least 250,000 deaths

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The new study on the impact of lockdowns is published in a report by the Institute of Economic Affairs out on Monday.

Across Europe, countries which embarked on lockdowns saw 6,000 fewer deaths than if they had embarked on a less draconian approach, while the US could have seen 4,000 fewer deaths, they conclude.

By contrast, modelling by [Prof Ferguson and his colleagues from Imperial College London](#) in March 2020 had predicted that, without action, the UK could see 510,000 deaths from Covid, with 2.2 million in the United States.

After lockdown was imposed, the scientist suggested that “intense social distancing and other interventions now in place” could reduce that figure to 20,000 in the UK.

The Covid Inquiry is set to examine the Government’s decision making during the pandemic but it has already been the subject of significant criticism relating to its speed, scope and transparency.

Researchers for the Johns Hopkins study said the findings showed that lockdowns had been “a global policy failure of gigantic proportions”.

Lockdowns ‘a failed promise’

Co-author Dr Lars Jonung, professor emeritus at the Knut Wicksell Centre for Financial Studies at Sweden’s Lund University, said the study was the first to fully evaluate the

impact of mandatory restrictions.

He said: "It demonstrates that lockdowns were a failed promise. They had negligible health effects but disastrous economic, social and political costs to society. Most likely lockdowns represent the biggest policy mistake in modern times."

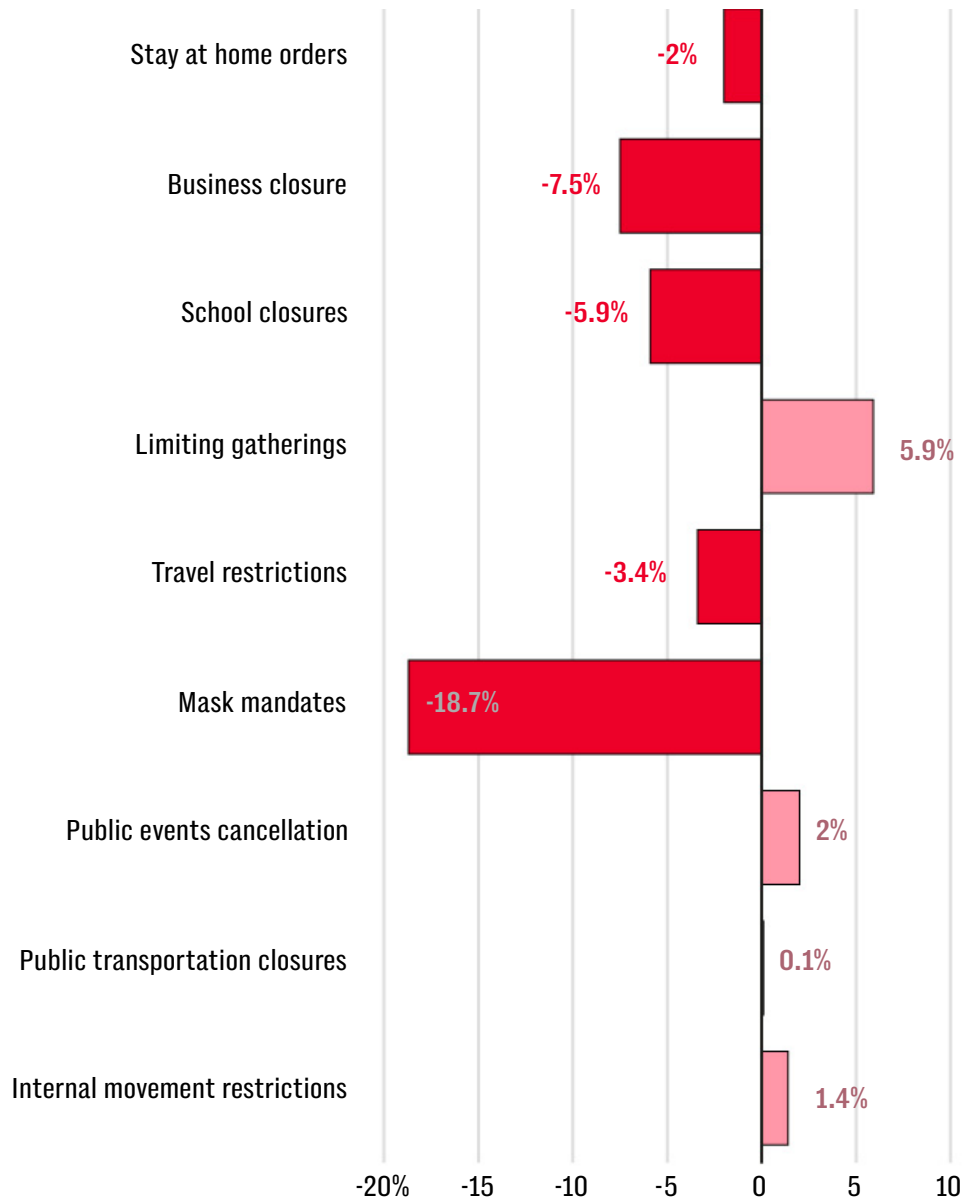
Prof Steve H. Hanke, co-author and professor of applied economics and co-director of the Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise at Johns Hopkins University: said: "When it comes to Covid, epidemiological models have many things in common: dubious assumptions, hair-raising predictions of disaster that miss the mark, and few lessons learned."

The researchers examined 19,646 potentially relevant studies, selecting 22 with standardised measures for meta analysis.

They used two approaches to examine the impact of lockdown.

What impact did individual restrictions have?

Percentage change in mortality



Figures are averages from a range of studies considered.

SOURCE: DID LOCKDOWNS WORK? THE VERDICT ON COVID RESTRICTIONS BY PROF STEVE H HANKE, PROFESSOR OF

The first, described as “stringency index studies”, examined the difference between harsher lockdowns and more voluntary measures.

This found the difference in mortality amounted to just 3.2 per cent – or 1,700 deaths in England and Wales – compared with countries such as Sweden which relied more on voluntary social changes.

Even when a broader definition of lockdown was used – combining the impact of specific interventions, to allow for the fact countries embarked on different measures – the estimates suggest that it only reduced Covid deaths by 10.7 per cent.

This amounts to 6,000 deaths in England and Wales, 23,000 deaths in Europe and 16,000 deaths in the United States during the first wave. Over this period there were 74,000 Covid deaths in England and Wales.

Some measures linked to increase in deaths

While business closures were associated with a 7.5 per cent fall in Covid mortality, gathering limits – such as “the rule of six” – were linked to an increase in Covid death rates of 5.9 per cent.

Other interventions, such as the use of face coverings, which were not pushed in Britain until the end of the first wave, were found to be “relatively effective” where they were used, cutting deaths by 18.7 per cent.

Researchers said more research was needed – including to examine the impact of masks on welfare – to answer the question of whether mask mandates were a desirable policy.

The report’s authors said their estimate of 1,700 deaths prevented by the first lockdown was far less than those of a typical flu season, which has between 18,500 and 24,800 deaths.

Jonas Herby, co-author of the study and special adviser at the Centre for Political Studies (CEPOS), an independent classical liberal think tank based in Copenhagen, Denmark, said: “Numerous misleading studies, driven by subjective models and overlooking significant factors like voluntary behaviour changes, heavily influenced the initial perception of lockdowns as highly effective measures.

“Our meta-analysis suggests that when researchers account for additional variables, such as voluntary behaviour, the impact of lockdowns becomes negligible.”

Swedish model suggests voluntary change

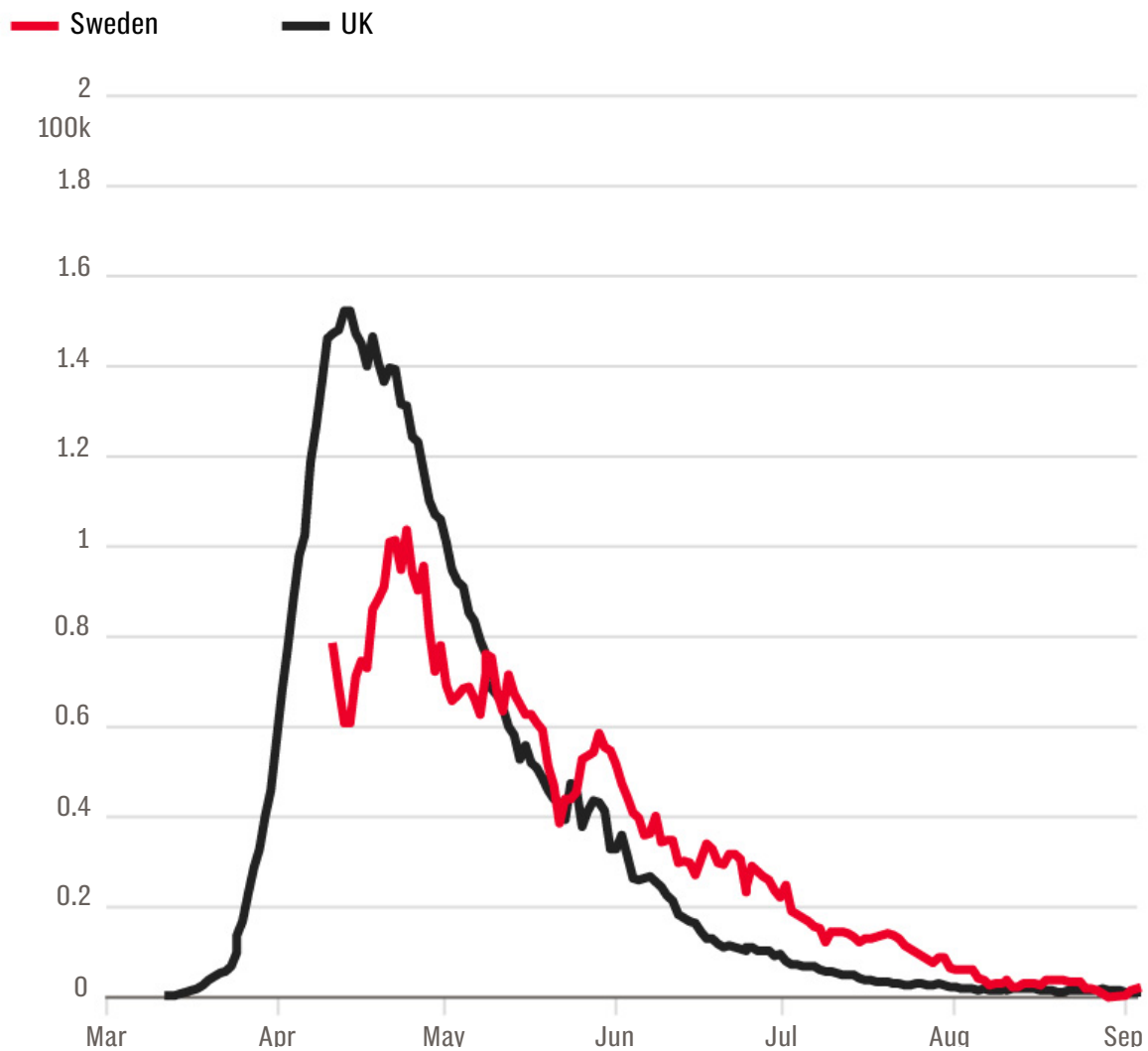
Researchers said studies showed that voluntary behavioural change was more important than mandatory restrictions in combating Covid.

While Sweden had few compulsory restrictions, changes in consumer activity showed that older people stayed away from shops and restaurants at times as infections spread.

Prof Ferguson did not respond to the points made in the study.

Deaths attributed to Covid-19 in England and Sweden

Seven day rolling average of new deaths per 100k



In response to an earlier version of the paper, which did not include UK data, he said: “Disentangling the precise impact of individual NPIs [non pharmaceutical interventions] remains extremely challenging, not least because the most socially and economically disruptive measures (closing all non-essential businesses, stay at home orders) were generally used in combination and as last resorts on top of longer-term measures such as mask wearing.

“Analysis has been further complicated by the accumulation of immunity (from infection and vaccination) in populations together with the emergence of new Covid-19 variants. Distinguishing the relative effectiveness of mandates versus government recommendations – while clearly of political interest – is even more challenging, given the large between- (and even within-) country differences in population responses to both types of measures.”

A government spokesman said: “We are committed to learning from the Covid Inquiry’s findings, which will play a key role in informing the Government’s planning and

preparations for the future.”

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