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Deaths of the Elderly

Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, your blogger has been surprised often enough that he thought he would not be surprised much more. He was surprised by the lockdowns, and surprised by the sudden halt in 2020 economic activity. He was surprised by the speed at which the vaccines were developed, and even more surprised by the resistance to the vaccines among some of those whose lives could have been saved. He was surprised at the “totality” of the pandemic. Were there more surprises?

This week he was surprised yet again, by some numbers that should not have surprised him. From a variety of government sources, he discovered that (at the time), of the 993,000 deaths from COVID, 740,000 (74.4%) of them were age 65 and over. Almost 2.4 per hundred people age 75 and over, and almost 4.3 per hundred people age 85 and over died of COVID-19.

What is the economic loss from these deaths? Most of those ages 65 and over have retired, and certainly almost all of those ages 85 and over are no longer working. Yet, family and friends have lost large numbers of loved ones and companions, members of the churches and synagogues, and people’s golfing and movie buddies. These are economic losses just as surely as foregone production.

This is a health economics blog, and one must acknowledge that total deaths are “gross measures” – undoubtedly many of these people would have died from something else. For example, the number of deaths in 2020, 3.4 million, represented an 18.75% increase from 2019. The numbers did not bounce back either in 2021. The 2021 deaths in represented a 0.82% increase from 2020, or 19.72% higher than 2019 (<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/united-states-deaths-spiked-as-covid-19-continued.html>).

Deaths are easy to measure, but measuring the longer-term impacts will be trickier. Older people who have been weakened, but recovered from COVID-19, may die sooner from something else. Scholars and journalists have been writing about “Long COVID”, the long-term impacts of the coronavirus. It will be years before analysts will have much definitive information on these impacts.

YB and his partner are health care professionals, and Partner has been dogmatic about their getting boosters when available, masking when out and about, wiping off surfaces, and generally “acting safely”. YB’s complaints aside, the data show that Partner has been right. YB is grateful.

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