

Excess

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Deaths outnumbered births in Oregon in 2020 for the first time ever, according to a post by Oregon economist Josh Lehner.

One bright spot: Fears about spikes in suicides, particularly with students separated from their friends and attending classes virtually, appear to have been unfounded.

Low in COVID-19 deaths, high in other

Oregon had fewer COVID-19-related fatalities per capita than most states – it ranks fifth lowest in the country. But the state saw one of the highest percentages of excess deaths in the nation attributed to causes other than COVID-19.

A high number of excess deaths during the time of a widespread disease is not unprecedented.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS/HIV epidemic led to a spike in excess deaths in Africa as health resources were diverted from other health concerns to stop the spread of the disease.

“It’s a zero-sum game because they’re sacrificing all other health sectors,” Chi said. “In three years’ time, the prevalence of AIDS in Haiti dropped in half. That’s a remarkable outcome, but the price Haiti paid was everything else in health deteriorated.”

“That’s exactly what I have been suspecting happened here.”

Gov. Kate Brown ordered health clinics in Oregon to close in March 2020 to preserve the supply of personal protective equipment such as face masks. They were allowed to reopen two months later.

Such clinics are often the primary healthcare option for lower-economic residents.

The state also had some of the strictest stay-home orders in the nation, possibly contributing to people not seeking medical treatment even after clinics reopened.

Dr. Bud Pierce, a Salem oncologist, said his practice saw a 15% decline in patient visits during the early months of the pandemic despite not closing. He said visits went up again in the summer as the number of COVID-19 cases dropped and restrictions loosened.

Pierce said it was especially difficult for people in nursing homes in Oregon to seek medical attention as they were largely locked down for much of 2020.

“My sense from an oncology point of view, early on, people just couldn’t get out of the nursing facilities,” Pierce said. “There wasn’t the energy or ability to get there.”

Due to a lack of testing for COVID-19 early in the pandemic, some of those excess deaths also could have been due to the virus and never recognized as such, Chi said.

“How do you account for those deaths?” Chi said.

Spike in drug use, overdoses

According to the Oregon Health Authority, at least 339 people in Oregon died of drug overdoses in the state between January and June 2020, an increase of 40% from the same period in 2019.

The OHA said most of those overdose deaths involved opioids, fentanyl, synthetic opioids and methamphetamines. Fentanyl deaths increased by 92% during that six months, and methamphetamine deaths increased by 37%.

Similar spikes were seen nationwide. In the United States, there were about 90,000 overdose deaths in 2020, up from 70,000 in 2019.

According to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, the state had record sales of marijuana and distilled spirits in the early months of the lockdown, despite bars and restaurants being closed.

“The COVID lockdown I think has led many people to use mind- and mood-altering substances, the illegal fentanyl, the illegal opioids, methamphetamine, cocaine,” said Dr. Paul Christo, pain specialist at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and host of Aches and Gains on SiriusXM. “It’s due to the situation, loss of jobs, economic hardship. It’s led many people to use drugs to cope. It’s been a very stressful year due to COVID-19.”

During lockdown, there also was a spike in relapses, Christo said.

“I think it’s due to the stresses related to COVID 19 and the means of coping with those extreme stresses,” Christo said.

In the early days of the pandemic, public safety organizations in Oregon and nationwide also reported rises in domestic abuse calls.

Homicides in Oregon increased 18% in 2020, to 155 from 126 in 2019 according to the Oregon Health Authority. Deaths by unintended injuries rose 2% to 2,288, from 2,224 a year before.

Suicides decreased in 2020

Throughout the pandemic, health professionals, community leaders and parents have voiced concerns that an extended lockdown — especially one that included keeping school buildings closed — would lead to an increase in suicides in 2020.

But according to preliminary data released by the Oregon Health Authority, suicides dropped 11% in 2020 to 809, from 908 in 2019. The youth suicide rate also decreased.

According to OHA data, suicide-related visits to emergency rooms and urgent care clinics dropped during months most Oregon school buildings were closed and students were learning completely online, including March, April, May, October, November and December.

There were fewer than 400 visits in May 2020 compared with more than 600 in May 2019.

In January, Brown cited suicides in youth, including those in children ages 11 and 12, as part of her decision for prioritizing teachers for COVID-19 vaccines before seniors and those with preexisting conditions who were more likely to die from the virus. Oregon was one

of the few states to move teachers toward the front of the line.

The Oregon Health Authority hasn’t released a breakdown of ages for those who died in 2020 due to suicide.

When the Statesman Journal asked Brown in March about her earlier comments related to suicide numbers, she said she was referring to suicide attempts.

“In terms of conversations that I’ve had with superintendents, with educators and parents, there is absolutely no question that our children are suffering from the pandemic and not being in in-person learning, whether it’s an increase in suicide attempts, whether it’s depression, whether it’s anxiety,” Brown said.

Heart attacks, Alzheimer’s, cancer

The Oregon Health Authority has not released a full breakdown of causes of death from 2020, but spokesperson Jonathan Modie said the top three causes are cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer’s disease and cancer.

“As to why these are up during the pandemic, we can only speculate, but it certainly could be related to disruption of preventive services and access to care, as well as numerous stressors (social, financial, etc.),” Modie said in an email.

According to a data dashboard by the National Center for Health Statistics, of the 3,525 excess deaths in Oregon between Feb. 1, 2020, and April 1, 2021, 651 were categorized as “other diseases of the respiratory system.”

According to the figures, the second-highest cause of excess deaths in Oregon was Alzheimer’s, with 484 deaths.

Chi said when his father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s at age 80, he lived another 10 years due to attentive care.

“If you give the patient more physical activity and more social interaction, you can extend their life and their health,” Chi said. “By those factors, I am not surprised there are excessive deaths from Alzheimer’s. Had this pandemic not limited our interactions and activity, more people could have lived longer. One could say those Alzheimer’s patients died of loneliness.”

Other diseases with significant numbers of excess deaths in Oregon were cancer (423), diseases of the circulatory system such as heart attacks (361), hypertensive diseases (332), cerebrovascular diseases such as strokes (331) and diabetes (186).

During the lockdowns, efforts to help the elderly, disabled and the homeless suffered, Pierce said. That could have led to preventable deaths.

“When you get under COVID stress, we’re not nearly as sacrificial as taking care of the old, the disabled and I’ll throw prisoners in there,” Pierce said. “It’s hard for people to put their necks out when they’re afraid of dying.”

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Vaccine

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Some people are concerned the vaccine was developed and approved too quickly, and long-term side effects are unknown.

“I don’t feel there has been adequate time to thoroughly test the vaccines,” Stacy Adams, 49, of Salem wrote. “I will not get it.”

Others say the vaccine is pointless if we still have to wear masks and socially distance, and if immunity wears off quickly.

“It is a temporary (six month) vaccine that has a high incidence of adverse reactions to a virus with a very high survival rate,” Sisters resident Matt Cyrus wrote. “I have more faith in the immune system than the vaccine.”

“The big question is how long is the shot or my immunity effective?” asked Hal Wineland of Keizer, who said he will not get the shot because he has had COVID-19. “Will we get a new version of the vaccine in the fall to cover all the strains?”

And still others have a general distrust of government.

Jennifer Benson, 66, of Damascus, said she was “unsure if we should be controlled to get the vaccine.”

The Associated Press poll also found a strong political split in vaccine support. The poll indicated that 42% of Republicans said they probably or definitely would not get the shot, compared with 17% of Democrats.

State and federal officials said they understand people’s concerns.

But the benefits outweigh any risks, they said.

“We know the vaccines are very safe,” Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen said. “I know many people are worried about side effects, but the COVID-19 case mortality rate among people 80 and older is 20% or one in five. The serious risk the virus poses to older adults far outweighs the temporary discomfort and disruption you might experience from getting a vaccine.”

In comparison, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said that as of April 5, there were 2,794 reported deaths among vaccinated people, a rate

of 0.002%, and no evidence suggests a link between the deaths and the vaccine.

Prior to the COVID-19 vaccine, no vaccine had been created in fewer than four years. But this vaccine didn’t come out of the blue — there is more than a decade of research behind it and efforts begun on other coronaviruses. And the work on this particular virus began in the first days of its discovery, in January 2020.

While they don’t yet have final FDA approval, the FDA has issued emergency authorizations for the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. Such emergency approval is permitted during a health emergency. The drug makers still had to have completed multiple rounds of clinical trials, including a trial with more than 3,000 people that lasts for at least two months.

After getting authorization, the companies have had to continue to track any side effects and file monthly safety reports. They are expected to continue trials and apply for regular approval. Pfizer is expected to submit its application for full licensure later this month.

It remains unclear to experts how long the vaccines will provide immunity. Pfizer has reported that six months after getting a second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine as part of a 46,000-person clinical trial, volunteers remained more than 90% protected against symptomatic COVID-19.

U.S. Health officials are continuing to urge those vaccinated to keep wearing masks in public because scientists are unsure whether they could still carry and spread the virus or how well it works against some of the new variants.

“Because vaccinations do dramatically reduce transmission, eventually the CDC will issue new (masking) recommendations for vaccinated individuals,” said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, in an April USA Today article. “But it won’t happen until the summer at the earliest, and all this depends on getting the B.1.1.7 variant (first identified in the U.K.) under control and expanding vaccination coverage.”

More than 700,000 Oregonians have been fully vaccinated so far. Oregon officials identified 168 cases as of April 2 in which vaccinated individuals tested positive for the virus more than two weeks after their final dose. Three of those people died.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control is trying to debunk myths about the vaccines. According to the CDC:

- You should be vaccinated even if you already had COVID-19, because experts don’t know how long immunity from the illness lasts. If you were treated with monoclonal antibodies or convalescent plasma, you

should wait 90 days before getting the vaccine.

- There is currently no evidence that COVID-19 vaccination causes any fertility problems or problems with pregnancy.

- COVID-19 vaccines do not change or interact with your DNA in any way.

- Getting a COVID-19 vaccine won’t make you test positive for COVID-19 on a viral test. You may test positive on some antibody tests, which indicate you had a previous infection.

How is Oregon fighting vaccine hesitancy?

The Oregon Health Authority is running targeted public education and advertisements to increase vaccine confidence, including in rural areas, OHA’s Hernández said.

One campaign, “Oregon COVID-19 Vaccine Information” is running ads on Facebook, Pinterest, Reddit, Quora, WebMD and other websites.

“The campaign is aimed at increasing vaccine confidence, testifying to the safety and effectiveness of the vaccines, framing vaccination as a path back to the people, places, and things we love, and affirming that it’s OK to have questions — demystifying the vaccination process by sharing stories of normal folks (including non-urban areas) who have chosen to get vaccinated and why,” Hernández said.

Oregon also is holding special clinics to reach people who might face barriers to getting the vaccine, including those with a mistrust of government.

For example, during April, OHA will partner with FEMA and Morrow and Malheur counties to hold a series of vaccine clinics for migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Boardman, Irrigon and Heppner.

Lincoln County held vaccine clinics focused on reaching seafood, agricultural, fish processing and seasonal and migrant workers.

“While OHA remains a trusted source of accurate information for providers and the community, we also acknowledge the historical mistrust within some communities toward governmental public health authorities. That’s why we are working with and supporting trusted community partners with outreach,” Hernández said.

“We’re connecting our experts directly with communities through activities like Facebook live events, weekly community webinars, and ongoing presentations in partnership with trusted community organizations. That will continue as we move forward with the rollout,” she said.

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A sign directs people to get the COVID-19 vaccine at the Salem Health and Marion County vaccination clinic on the Oregon State Fairgrounds.
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