

British government suppressed daily pandemic death toll by thousands

By Simon Whelan
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Research by *Guardian* journalists into data collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and released by Downing Street reveal how the Johnson government suppressed the number of daily COVID-19 deaths throughout April.

For 22 consecutive days between April 2 and 23, a total of 26,566 people died in the UK from COVID-19. Government ministers, however, issued figures at the Downing Street briefings day after day that never once reached four figures. As the Tory government presided over its reckless and homicidal policy of herd immunity, it covered over the severity of its crimes by fiddling the figures and announcing partial death tolls.

On Easter Monday, April 6, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson ill with the virus, the Downing Street briefing was taken by Dominic Raab. The foreign secretary stated the death toll in the 24 hours to 5 p.m. on Sunday, April 5 had risen by 439. However, the ONS figures reveal that almost three times as many people died on April 5, a total of 1,210.

Analysis of the official figures shows that on April 8, the UK suffered a record 1,445 deaths from COVID-19 in 24 hours. However, the following day, on April 9, Raab, deputising again for Johnson, claimed the death toll had increased by 881 the previous day. The actual death toll was 64 percent higher than that announced.

In the UK, in just 18 days, COVID-19 deaths accelerated from 139 in a single day to a peak of 1,445, on April 8. It would be 58 days later before the death toll returned to running in the low hundreds or less. Moreover, it was not until April 29 that the government altered its daily presentation to include deaths in all locations, including those where no test had been carried out, but the virus was mentioned on the death certificate.

In increasingly surreal attempts to pull the wool over

everyone's eyes, the Department of Health and Social Care effectively announced it was unable to carry out simple addition, claiming that the task of providing accurate death toll numbers was technically challenging and time consuming.

The reported death tolls announced by ministers during the initial period of the crisis at the daily press briefings were systematically partial and inaccurate. Their presentation undercounted the real death toll by collecting only deaths recorded in hospitals following a positive COVID-19 test. Downing Street's figures initially only included confirmed deaths in hospitals, conveniently ignoring the many thousands of deaths in care homes. In the first 24 weeks of data, nearly 30 percent of all deaths attributable to the virus occurred in care homes, according to ONS figures. Many who died in these locations had previously been discharged from hospitals without being tested. The policy of removing from hospitals the elderly and infirm and dumping them into residential care homes—supposedly justified by the need to “protect the National Health Service”—killed thousands needlessly, including many care workers.

By June 23, according to the ONS, there had been 14,404 deaths in care homes, 2,205 in private homes, 660 in hospices, 219 in other communal establishments and 182 elsewhere.

In early June, ONS figures first came to light showing gaping disparities between the horrific reality and the picture presented by the government. On June 2, Health Secretary Matt Hancock claimed the government was being “transparent,” despite statistical data showing how it had vastly underreported the likely number of COVID-19 deaths.

Hancock rubbished the ONS figures on “excess deaths,” which showed death rates three times higher

than those announced by the government at the time.

The excess deaths method of compiling figures for COVID-19 is internationally recognised as the best. The Health Foundation explains, “Excess deaths is a better measure than the COVID-19 deaths of the pandemic’s total mortality. It measures the additional deaths in a given period compared to the number usually expected and does not depend on how COVID-19 deaths are recorded.”

Speaking to the Guardian, Sir David King, the former government chief scientific adviser and chairman of the independent SAGE group, suggested the lacuna between the government’s figures and the objective toll was “an attempt to play down the adversity that the country was faced with.”

“They didn’t say we have to add on all these other numbers which would have been a more honest thing to say,” said King, suggesting the government was, by implication, dishonest. King continued, “They were saying things were more rosy than they actually were. The most important thing when you are running any crisis of this kind is truth and honesty. The only way to maintain the moral authority of the government. This is the most disastrous handling of any serious challenge to a government for 100 years.”

In response to Guardian requests for a comment, the government offered up another of their now usual pro-forma statements: “Every death is a tragedy, and our deepest sympathies go out to all the families who have lost loved ones. We have always been transparent about the way we report COVID-19 deaths and it is wrong to suggest we would in any way attempt to play down the scale of this global pandemic. The government’s daily figures and the ONS data count different things, which we have always fully explained and clearly reported.”

The government suppressed the extent of COVID-19 fatalities because its policies directly created the conditions for an explosive outbreak of the virus and consequently tens of thousands of needless deaths.

There is no innocent explanation for the blatant suppression of the pandemic death numbers. The government’s briefings were an act of propaganda designed to deceive the public and to suppress anger within working class communities, which have disproportionately borne the overwhelming majority of deaths from the virus. Millions are employed in key

parts of the economy without sufficient workplace protection and consequently many thousands have and continue to die from infection at work.

By masking the severity of the virus, the government’s many obfuscations also serve to undermine public attitudes towards the need for extreme caution and maintaining adequate social distancing and shielding as advocated by many independent scientists. By under reporting the number of deaths, the government sought to mask the virulence of the virus and the full extent of the its criminal negligence.

Now, with the Tories rushing headlong to end lockdown and remove any meaningful social distancing measures, even the daily coronavirus press briefings have been ditched.

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