

BST 260 Report

Irisa Jin, Xu Han, Cenjia Zeng

Abstract

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply impacted global health and mortality, displaying some vulnerabilities in healthcare systems worldwide. Official statistics report millions of deaths, but evidence suggests the actual toll is 1.6 times higher than reported due to underreporting and the indirect effects of the pandemic (Karlinsky & Kobak, 2021; Shang et al., 2022). Excess mortality, the difference between observed and expected deaths, has become a critical measure for understanding the pandemic's full impact. This metric includes both direct effects, such as deaths caused by the virus, and indirect consequences, like delayed medical care and strained healthcare systems (Kung et al., 2020). By offering a comprehensive view, excess mortality can guide public health policies and improve preparedness for future crises (Araya, 2022; Bech et al., 2021).

Globally, the impact of COVID-19 on mortality has varied. Some regions, like South America and parts of Asia, experienced high excess mortality due to severe outbreaks and healthcare challenges (Shang et al., 2022). In contrast, other areas saw reductions in non-COVID deaths, as measures like lockdowns limited the spread of other infectious diseases (Karlinsky & Kobak, 2021). In the United States, the pandemic showed significant health disparities. African American and Hispanic communities suffered disproportionately high death rates, largely due to structural inequalities like limited healthcare access and economic barriers (Siegel et al., 2021; Goldstein & Atherwood, 2020). These inequities underscore the importance of state-level analyses to identify patterns and develop equitable health interventions (Kung et al., 2020).

Evidence suggests that COVID-19 became less severe over time in some populations. For instance, by early 2022, case-hospitalization rates had decreased by 90% in locations like Spain

and Boston compared to the start of the pandemic (Amer et al., 2022). Similarly, Massachusetts healthcare workers experienced fewer severe complications after April 2020 (Lan et al., 2020). Nationwide U.S. data from April 2020 to April 2021 showed that severe cases were a minority of hospital admissions, with their proportion decreasing over time (Whitfield et al., 2021). However, these improvements were not evenly distributed. Vulnerable groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, older adults, and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, continued to experience higher rates of severe illness and death (Bergmann et al., 2022). This emphasizes the need to study changes in COVID-19 severity across different waves and populations to introduce adaptive public health strategies.

This study aims to analyze mortality trends in the United States from January 2020 to December 2024. Using daily and weekly mortality data, it will divide the pandemic into distinct waves based on trends observed through data visualizations. For each wave, the study will show the calculation of state-level death rates to identify which states were most and least affected. It will also assess whether COVID-19 became less severe over time by examining hospitalization and death rates. Additionally, this study will estimate weekly excess mortality for each state and evaluate how much of it can be attributed to COVID-19 deaths. By exploring both COVID-19-related and unrelated mortality, this study seeks to provide a clearer picture of the pandemic's full impact. Through careful analysis and visualization, the study's findings aim to inform public health strategies and improve readiness for future health emergencies (Ramírez-Soto & Ortega-Cáceres, 2022; Stokes et al., 2021).

Methods

The data used in this project are from multiple sources, including COVID-19 cases, deaths, hospitalizations, and vaccination records from CDC APIs, state-level population estimates from the US Census Bureau, and state-to-region mappings from publicly available JSON files. Data preprocessing involved cleaning, aggregating, and joining datasets by state and week using the CDC's MMWR format. Rates per 100,000 people were calculated for comparability across states and time periods. All programming was conducted in the R language.

The pandemic was divided into three periods based on time-series trends: (1) starting from the initial global outbreak (Jan 25, 2020 – Feb 28, 2021), characterized by the first significant wave of COVID-19; (2) the beginning of the Delta Variant Surge (Mar 1, 2021 – Nov 30, 2021), marked by a rise in cases and deaths associated with the Delta variant; and (3) seeing the Omicron wave (Dec 1, 2021 – Apr 29, 2023), notable for a sharp increase in cases but a lower mortality rate due to widespread vaccinations.

State-level death rates were calculated for each period, and trends in hospitalization and death rates were analyzed to assess changes in virulence over time. Visualizations, including time-series plots and bar charts, were created using ggplot2 to support these analyses.

Results

The COVID-19 pandemic was divided into three periods based on the observed trends in case and death rates across the US states, as well as outside information. From Figure 1, three major peaks were defined to be both present in case and death rate. They corresponded to and included the initial global outbreak, Delta Variant surge, and the Omicron wave; this was matched to information given by the official CDC website. The initial global outbreak (Jan 25, 2020 – Feb 28, 2021) is marked by the first large peak in cases and deaths, with a steep rise in both metrics during late 2020 and early 2021. The Delta Variant surge (Mar 1, 2021 – Nov 30, 2021) shows a distinct increase in both case and death rates, albeit with a broader and steady peak. Lastly, the Omicron wave (Dec 1, 2021 – Apr 29, 2023) features a sharp, high spike in case rates but a comparatively smaller rise in death rates, suggesting a shift in the pandemic dynamics and the advancements in scientific discoveries (widespread of vaccines).

State-level death rates varied significantly across the defined periods. From Figure 2, it can be clearly seen that in period (1), states like Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Mississippi reported the highest death rates, reflecting the early and severe impact of the pandemic in these regions, with Vermont and Hawaii at the lowest death rates. During the (2) phase, West Virginia, Florida, and Tennessee experienced the highest death rates, while Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island showed the lowest death rates. In (3) time period, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio had the highest death rates, while Alaska, Hawaii, and Vermont had the lowest death rates. Interestingly, Vermont, Hawaii, and Alaska remains having the lowest death rates throughout the pandemic, possibly due to a small population and less ability to spread the disease.

The virulence of COVID-19 appeared to decrease over time, as evidenced by Figure 3. In (1), the vaccination (regular and booster, which has not been available yet) remains to be almost 0; the hospitalization rate increases rapidly in this time period. In (2), the regular series is increasing and people also begin to take booster vaccines; the hospitalization rate is not as high as (1). There is a large peak of hospitalization in (3) but declines quickly, possibly due to high vaccination (including booster) rates. This conclusion can also be explained by a decreasing death rate.

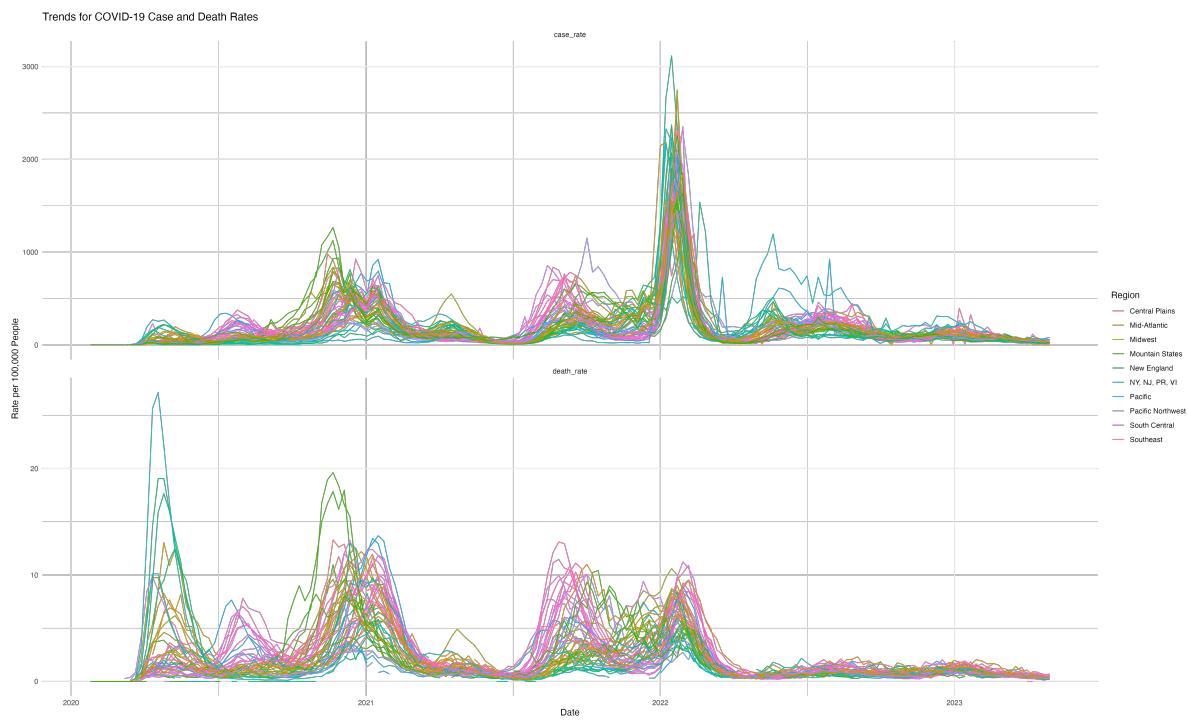


Figure 1

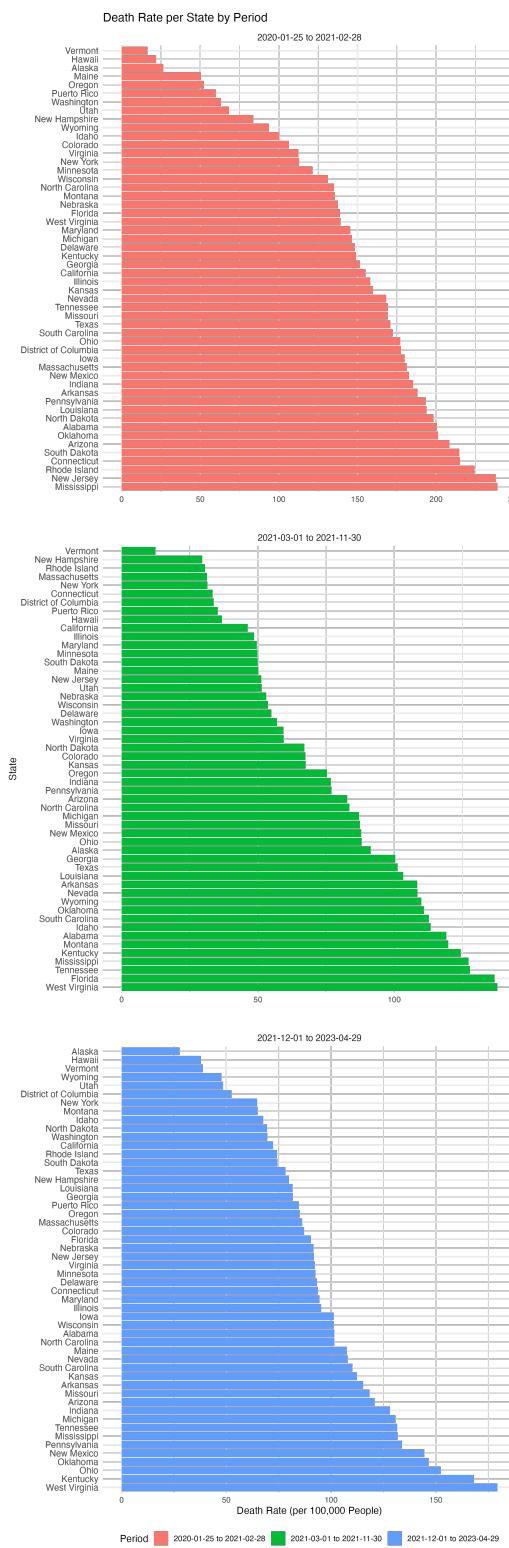


Figure 2

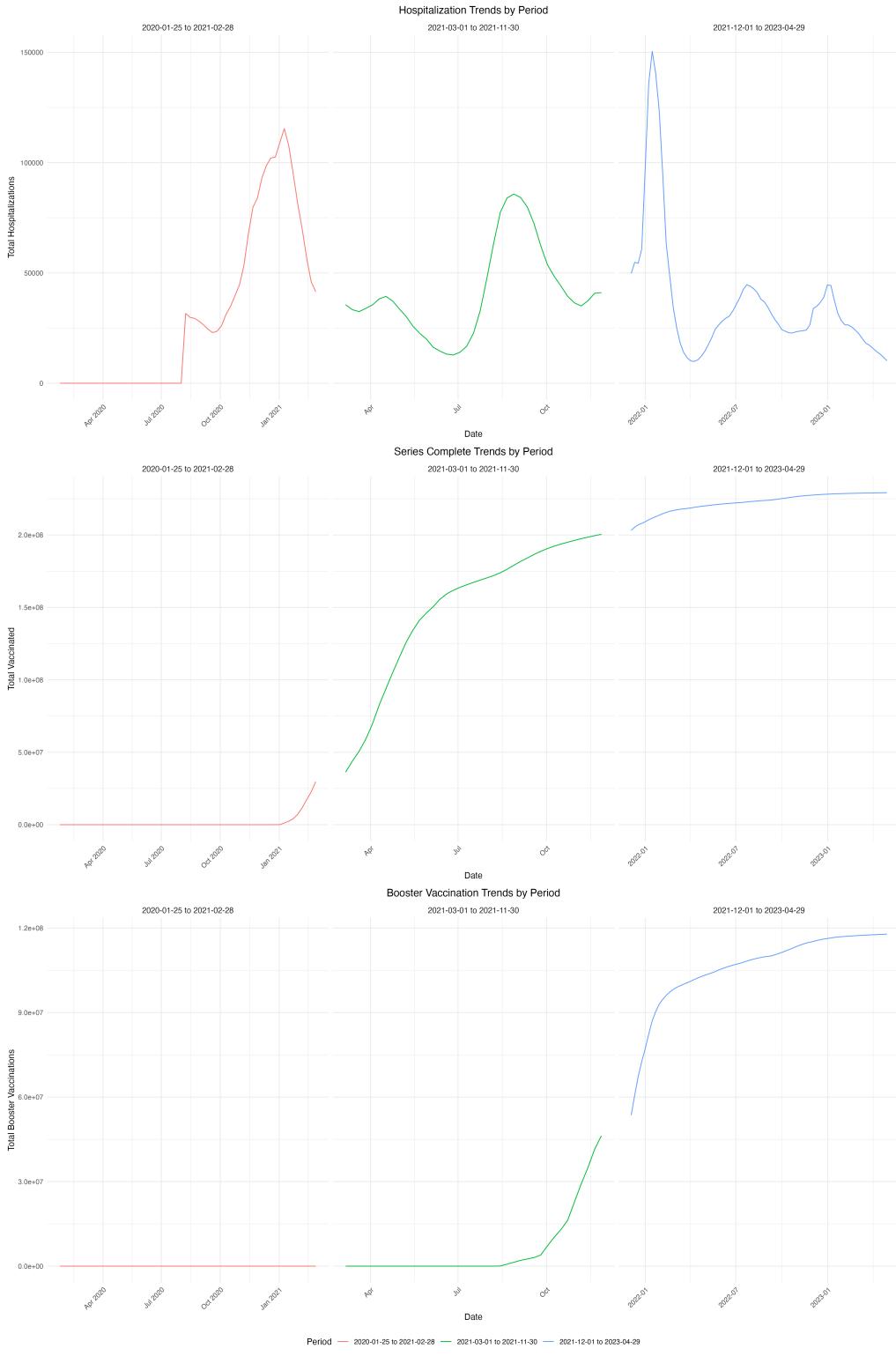


Figure 3

Discussion

Reference