

Supplementary appendix to: Historically high excess mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland, Sweden and Spain

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1 Material and methods

The data and the statistical code are available at https://github.com/RPanczak/ISPM_excess-mortality/.

1.1 Statistical model

We built a model where the linear predictor of deaths count in year i , month j and age group k $D_{i,j,k}$ depended on (1) an intercept by age group α_k , (2) a yearly linear trend β_1 , (3) a periodic component $\beta_{2,\dots,5}$ based on four cosine and sine functions to account for temporal trends and seasonal variability in mortality, and (4) the total population in the age group $P_{i,k}$ included as an offset:

$$D_{i,j,k} = \alpha_k + \beta_1 i + \beta_2 \sin\left(\frac{2\pi j}{12}\right) + \beta_3 \sin\left(\frac{4\pi j}{12}\right) + \beta_4 \cos\left(\frac{2\pi j}{12}\right) + \beta_5 \cos\left(\frac{4\pi j}{12}\right) + \log(P_{i,k}) \quad (1)$$

The quantities $D_{i,j,k}$ were treated as latent variables, since deaths counts were not available with this level of precision. Rather, available data consisted of overall death counts by month $\mathbb{M}_{i,j}$ and age group-specific death counts by year $\mathbb{A}_{i,k}$. The model was jointly fitted to both types of data. The sum of $D_{i,j,k}$ by month was fitted to overall death counts by month with a negative binomial likelihood:

$$M_{i,j} = \sum_k D_{i,j,k} \quad (2)$$

$$\mathbb{M}_{i,j} \sim \text{neg-bin}(M_{i,j}, \phi) \quad (3)$$

where ϕ is the overdispersion parameter. Simultaneously, the sum of $D_{i,j,k}$ by age group was fitted to age group-specific death counts by year with a multinomial likelihood:

$$A_{i,k} = \sum_j D_{i,j,k} \quad (4)$$

$$N_i = \sum_k A_{i,k} \quad (5)$$

$$\mathbb{A}_{i,k} \sim \text{multinom}\left(N_i, \frac{A_{i,k}}{N_i}\right) \quad (6)$$

The joint likelihood can thus be expressed as:

$$\Pr(\mathbb{M}, \mathbb{A} | \alpha, \beta_1, \dots, \beta_5, \phi) = \prod_{i,j} \text{neg-bin}(\mathbb{M}_{i,j} | M_{i,j}, \phi) \times \prod_{i,k} \text{multinom}\left(\mathbb{A}_{i,k} \middle| N_i, \frac{A_{i,k}}{N_i}\right) \quad (7)$$

This approach of “stratification and joint likelihood” was inspired by a recent work focusing on the COVID-19 infection-fatality ratio [1].

The model was implemented in Stan (the full code is available in the `stan` folder in study’s GitHub repository) [2]. We selected weakly informative prior distributions for all model parameters [3, 4], that is normal distributions with mean 0 and standard deviation 10 for intercept and yearly and seasonal slope parameters and a Cauchy distribution with location 0 and scale 5 for the inverse of the overdispersion parameter. We estimated the posterior distributions with Stan’s default Hamiltonian Monte Carlo algorithm [5] by sampling 1000 iterations after 1000 iterations for warm-up in four independent chains. We assessed convergence using the Gelman-Rubin convergence diagnostic and sampling efficiency using effective sample size. These diagnostics did not reveal any issues with mixing and convergence in all settings.

1.2 Estimating excess deaths

The procedure to obtain excess deaths for year i (by month or by age group) was as follows:

1. We fitted the model to the five previous years $\{i - 5, \dots, i - 1\}$ and obtained posterior samples for all parameters.
2. From these posterior samples, we computed expected values of $D_{i,j,k}$ for year i using equation 1.
3. We then summed these quantities by month or age group (equations 2 or 4), and drew values from the corresponding probability distributions (equations 3 or 6), obtaining a set of expected values of death counts for year i by month or by age group.

4. We then subtracted the observed number of deaths on year i , and summarized the samples by their mean and 2.5% and 97.5% quantiles, obtaining point estimates and 95% credible intervals of excess deaths for year i by month or by age group.

This Bayesian approach ensured a full propagation of uncertainty from the data into the expected values and thus the estimates of excess deaths. Since five years of data is needed to calculate expected counts the estimates of excess deaths are available five years after the start of data collection in each country. We first calculated expected deaths excluding data from pandemic years of 1890, 1918, 1957 and 2020, and then also calculated expected deaths using all available data (shown by the examples of 1918 and 2020 in Supplementary Figures S3 and S4).

1.3 Monthly vs. weekly data

A comparison with the same seasonality adjustments between weekly* and monthly aggregated calculation of excess mortality (unadjusted for age) for Switzerland, Spain, and Sweden showed small differences in the expected number of deaths (between -0.4% and +0.9%) for the full calendar years where the data was available between 2005 and 2020.

*Short-term Mortality Fluctuations (STMF) data series, (available at <https://www.mortality.org/>).

2 Supplementary table

	Baseline		Sensitivity 1*		Sensitivity 2†		Sensitivity 3‡		Sensitivity 4§	
Country, Year	Excess	95% CrI	Excess	Excess	95% CrI	Excess	95% CrI	Excess	95% CrI	
Switzerland										
1889	1,380	(-1,550; 4,255)	1,100	1,300	(-1,650; 4,130)	1,680	(-865; 4,190)	-410	(-3,405; 2,510)	
1890	3,455	(705; 6,120)	3,380	3,360	(605; 6,015)	2,395	(-310; 5,020)	1,790	(-1,110; 4,565)	
1891	1,920	(-1,265; 5,010)	1,975	1,585	(-1,605; 4,520)	1,950	(-825; 4,670)	990	(-2,140; 4,045)	
1917	3,810	(1,155; 6,395)	3,630	3,855	(1,175; 6,505)	4,035	(1,240; 6,670)	1,905	(-925; 4,630)	
1918	24,730	(21,925; 27,455)	24,460	24,625	(21,690; 27,465)	25,725	(22,845; 28,480)	23,705	(20,540; 26,705)	
1919	3,730	(510; 6,835)	3,820	3,700	(515; 6,790)	4,600	(1,895; 7,275)	3,455	(200; 6,540)	
1956	1,535	(-775; 3,750)	1,555	1,470	(-865; 3,725)	1,695	(-505; 3,905)	1,555	(-630; 3,710)	
1957	-920	(-3,680; 1,805)	-1,200	-1,035	(-3,835; 1,675)	-180	(-2,650; 2,250)	-25	(-2,440; 2,295)	
1958	-3,705	(-6,950; -605)	-3,360	-3,190	(-6,315; -185)	-2,980	(-5,535; -475)	-2,760	(-5,095; -380)	
2019	165	(-3,210; 3,400)	280	320	(-2,950; 3,460)	395	(-2,200; 2,895)	600	(-1,865; 2,975)	
2020	8,430	(5,255; 11,450)	8,810	8,685	(5,575; 11,675)	8,105	(5,505; 10,630)	7,360	(4,395; 10,240)	
2021	-1,000	(-3,085; 955)	-845	-715	(-2,735; 1,220)	-795	(-2,715; 1,010)	-925	(-3,280; 1,375)	
Sweden										
1889	2,495	(-1,400; 6,155)	2,785	2,540	(-1,280; 6,290)	290	(-3,385; 3,790)	-1,125	(-5,425; 2,960)	
1890	8,810	(4,870; 12,575)	8,720	8,525	(4,475; 12,495)	7,380	(3,750; 10,945)	7,060	(2,930; 11,055)	
1891	5,295	(800; 9,480)	6,365	5,570	(1,045; 9,800)	6,515	(2,655; 10,245)	5,875	(1,405; 10,255)	
1917	-2,640	(-7,970; 2,330)	-2,980	-2,865	(-8,140; 2,105)	-2,945	(-7,240; 1,245)	-645	(-4,165; 2,725)	
1918	25,935	(20,595; 31,085)	25,505	25,695	(20,310; 30,885)	25,735	(21,420; 29,845)	27,700	(23,945; 31,250)	
1919	7,245	(1,180; 12,965)	8,260	7,140	(1,020; 12,835)	5,875	(1,265; 10,350)	7,395	(3,625; 11,080)	
1956	1,080	(-2,395; 4,445)	1,585	1,450	(-2,085; 4,910)	1,050	(-1,825; 3,820)	880	(-2,410; 4,065)	
1957	2,760	(100; 5,340)	3,040	2,990	(395; 5,515)	3,325	(410; 6,220)	3,135	(-470; 6,575)	
1958	-360	(-3,505; 2,720)	1,040	620	(-2,465; 3,605)	-315	(-3,565; 2,800)	-800	(-4,875; 3,060)	
2019	-4,365	(-8,015; -795)	-4,390	-4,255	(-7,810; -730)	-3,350	(-6,330; -345)	-4,380	(-7,125; -1,695)	
2020	7,655	(4,200; 10,985)	8,465	8,405	(4,960; 11,690)	6,760	(3,635; 9,910)	2,600	(-690; 5,750)	
2021	--	--	1,700	750	(-1,845; 3,160)	--	--	--	--	
Spain										
1917	11,645	(-13,875; 36,180)	12,155	12,020	(-13,400; 36,025)	22,060	(-900; 44,430)	20,950	(1,005; 40,565)	
1918	241,660	(215,790; 266,105)	239,680	239,495	(214,035; 264,175)	243,240	(218,610; 266,700)	241,660	(215,790; 266,105)	
1919	28,835	(1,100; 55,560)	23,340	22,835	(-4,940; 49,265)	24,670	(-165; 48,125)	45,235	(21,520; 67,910)	
1956	32,305	(9,145; 53,685)	39,455	33,085	(10,205; 54,805)	33,355	(14,275; 51,825)	30,730	(15,545; 45,480)	
1957	13,225	(-2,660; 28,785)	10,715	11,675	(-4,495; 27,310)	28,360	(7,820; 48,025)	21,360	(4,365; 37,570)	
1958	-28,160	(-47,480; -9,435)	-32,630	-28,615	(-48,745; -9,615)	-11,425	(-33,630; 9,845)	-27,265	(-44,020; -10,910)	
2019	-13,370	(-34,800; 7,185)	-20,505	-19,885	(-41,320; 1,025)	-8,505	(-26,810; 9,205)	-10,460	(-31,415; 9,695)	
2020	72,330	(51,940; 92,410)	65,960	65,495	(44,510; 85,625)	65,045	(47,040; 81,970)	69,225	(47,980; 89,670)	
2021	10,865	(-3,425; 24,715)	10,110	10,980	(-3,525; 24,785)	9,350	(-3,005; 21,775)	14,245	(-265; 28,120)	
* Serfling, Poisson, unadjusted for age										
† Serfling, NB, unadjusted for age										
‡ Serfling, NB, age adjusted, alternative time window, no trim										
§ Serfling, NB, age adjusted, alternative time window, trim										

Table S1: Results of four sensitivity analyses for selected years.

3 Supplementary figures

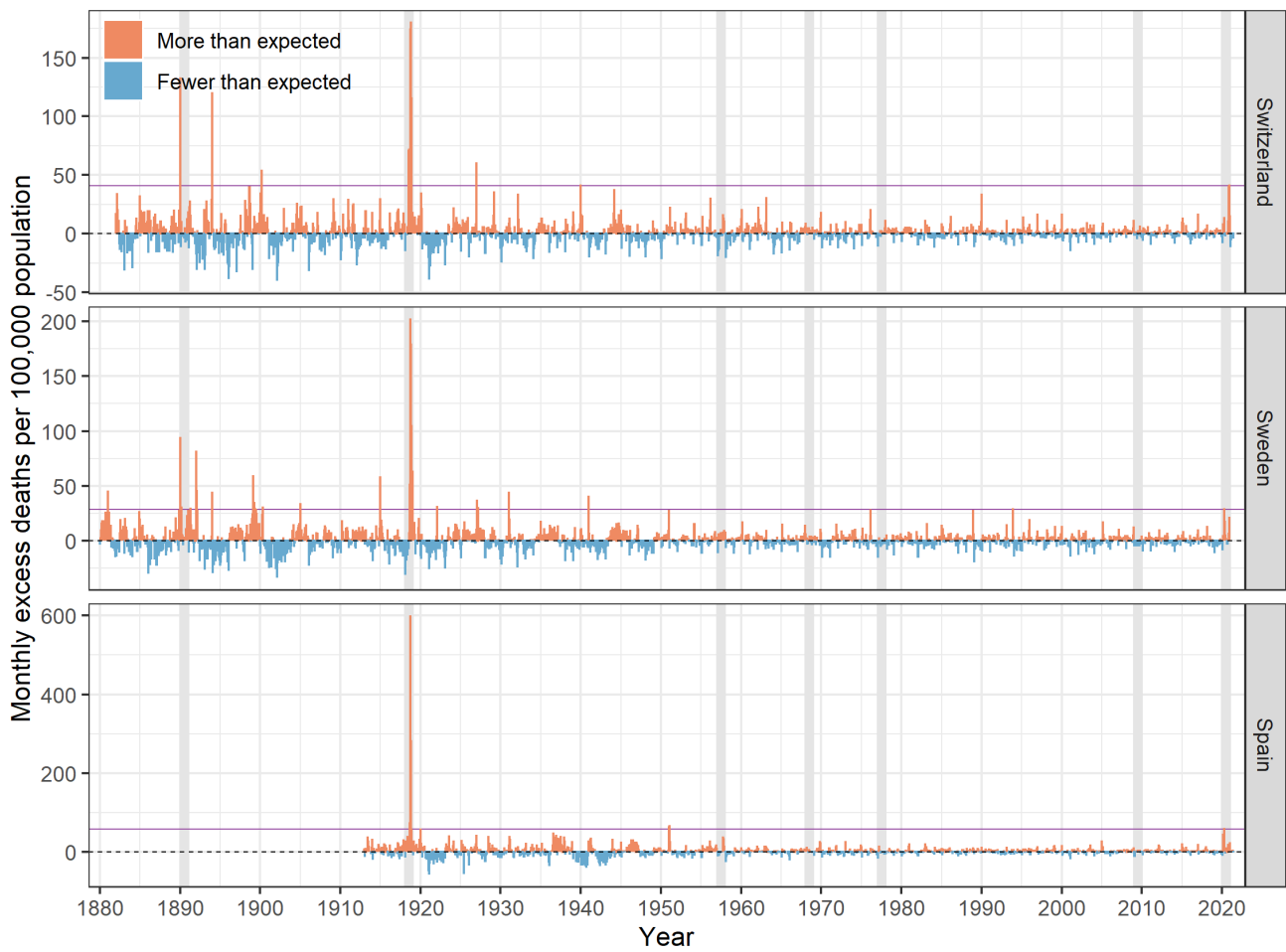


Figure S1: Monthly numbers of deaths in Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, displayed as differences between observed and expected number of deaths per 100,000 population (red=more, blue=less). The purple horizontal line marks the level of highest value from 2020-2021 period.

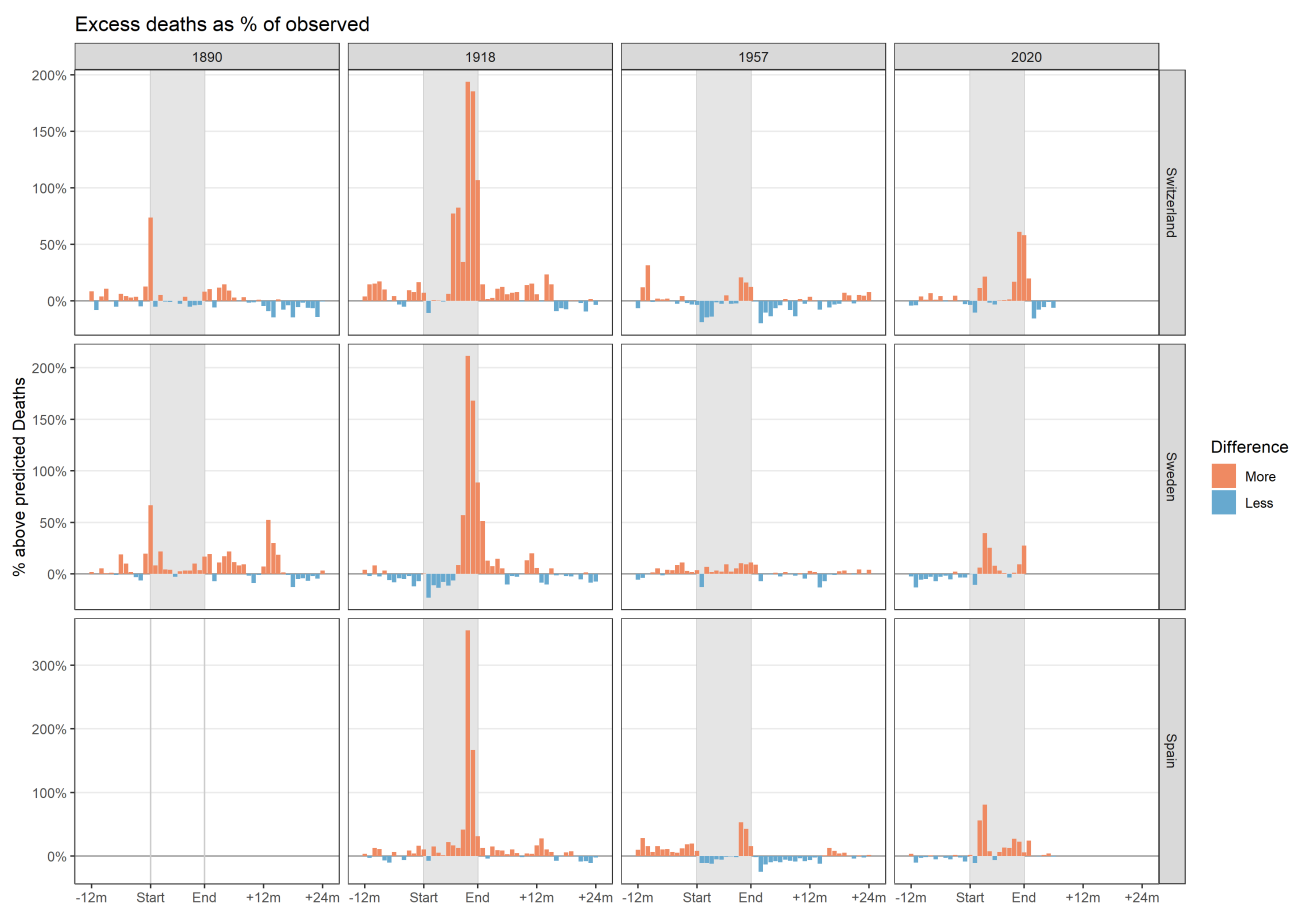


Figure S2: Detailed inspection of the strongest pandemic years 1890, 1918, 1957, and 2020 in all three countries. The differences between observed and expected values (red=more, blue=less) are displayed as percentages.

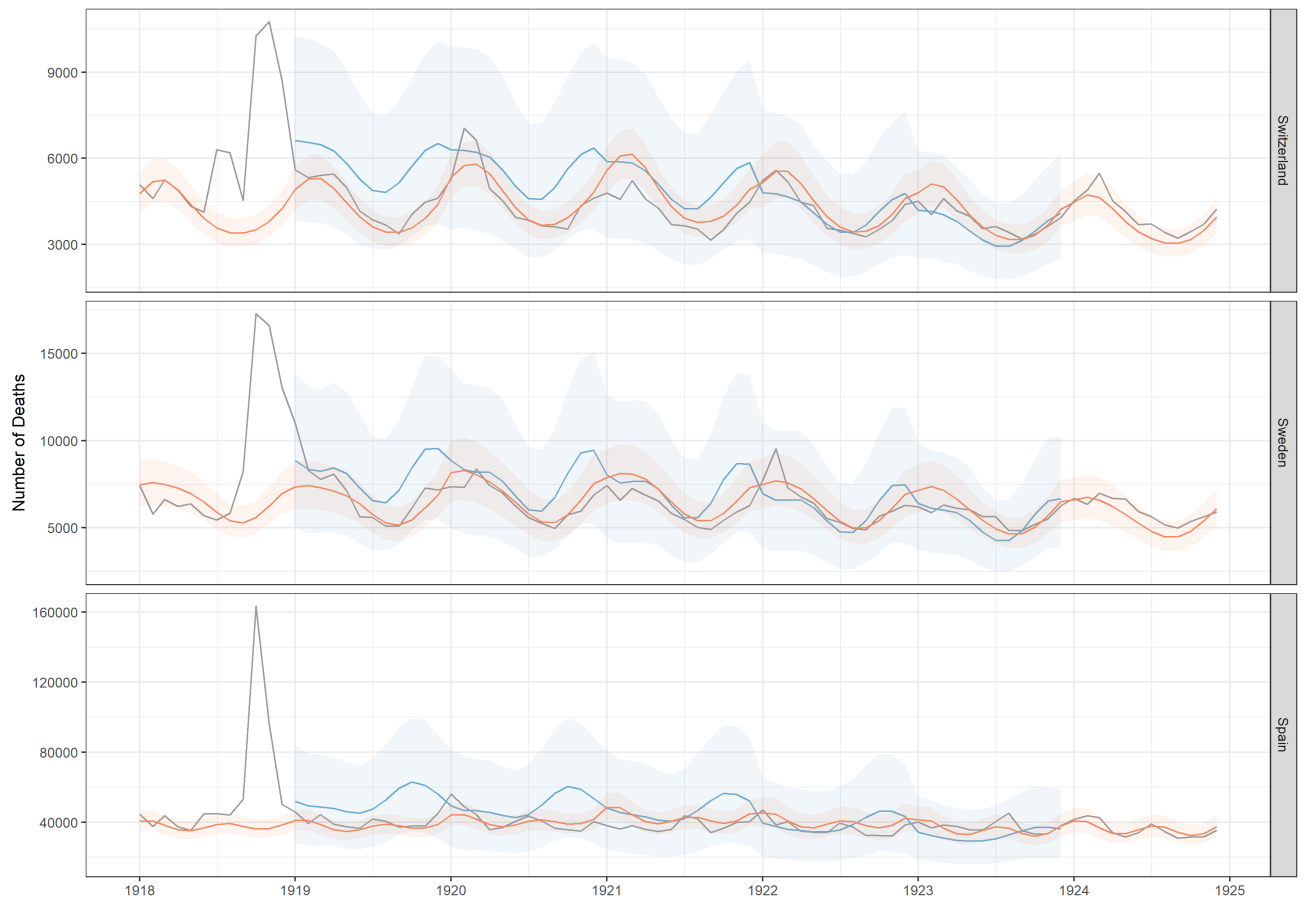


Figure S3: Exemplary visualization based on 1918, how big the difference in the calculated expected number of deaths is for the years 1919 and following, if the year 1918 is included in the calculations (blue line and confidence interval) or not (red line and confidence interval) (Black line: observed deaths). From 1924 onward the results of two methods are the same.

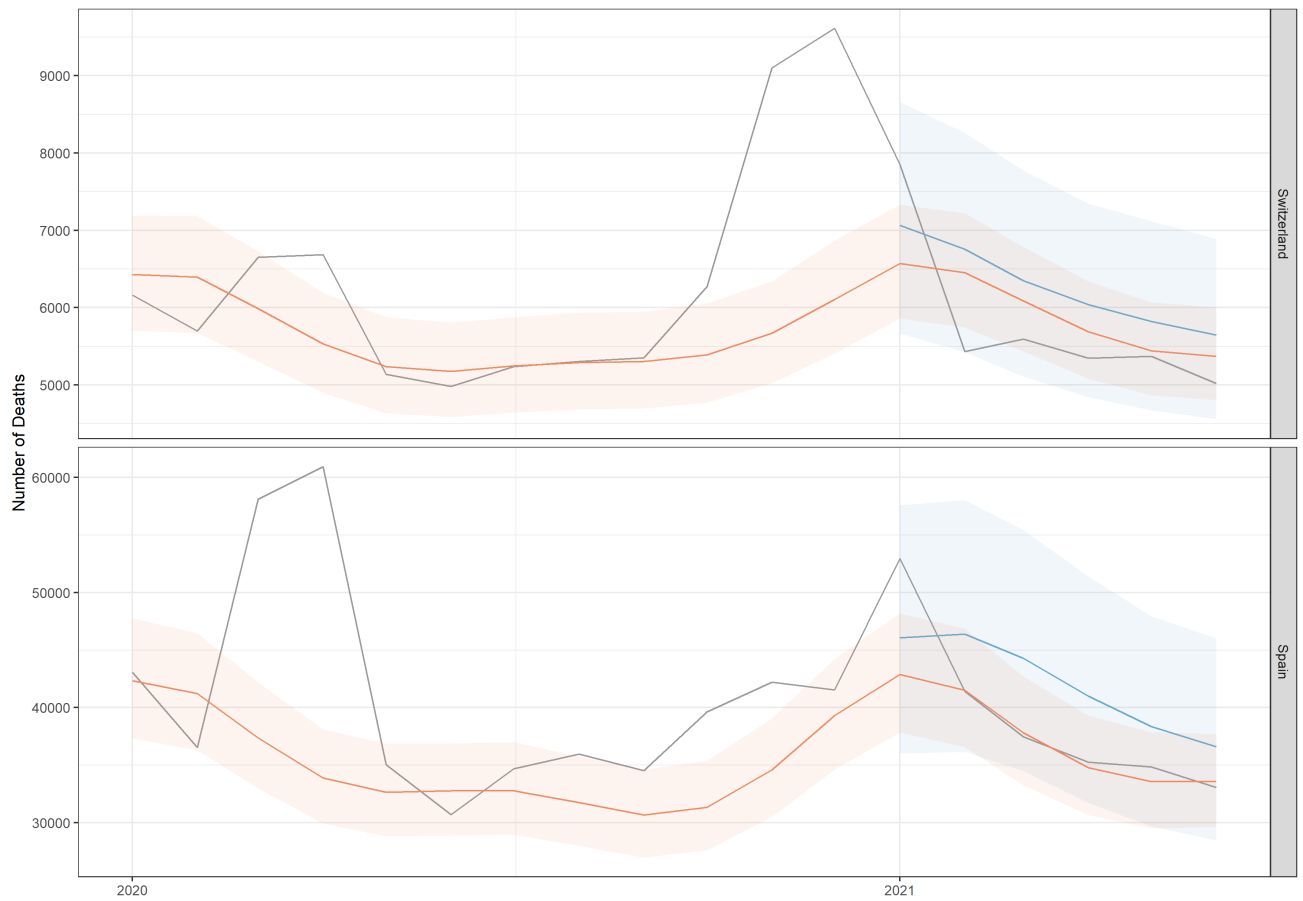


Figure S4: Exemplary visualization based on 2020, how big the difference in the calculated expected number of deaths is for the first six months of the year 2021, if the year 2020 is included in the calculations (blue line and confidence interval) or not (red line and confidence interval) (Black line: observed deaths).

References

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