

SARS-Cov 2: deaths and saved lives. Why lockdown is worth. The Italian numbers

by Luca Paolazzi



But is it worth? Staying at home? Becoming unemployed? Losing income, often to the point of falling into the already packed ranks of the poor? Counting sleepless nights in anguish that your company, the creature of a lifetime, will fail?

The compulsory lockdown has not only high and unimaginable economic costs, but also human and psychological ones. Brought-together people who cannot stand each other, and whose cohabitation was an exercise in balancing between parallel existences. Or, conversely, people who are forced to remain separate (distant parents and children, for example). People suffering from hypochondria for whom the epidemic is a constant torture. People who fall into depression. Life projects that remain suspended in limbo: we will get married, but when? Not to mention the people who have not had the chance to mourn their beloved, even when they have passed away not because of the coronavirus.

So is it worth it? The answer is a simple and clear: «Yes». A very strong and resounding «Yes». We are saving hundreds of thousands of lives, and probably millions. Only in Italy. Not “just” a few dozen, if there was someone daring to cynically use the abacus of this macabre count to establish an acceptable threshold of losses (someone, in fact, did it: didn’t you, Mr. Boris Johnson?). Hundreds of thousands, most likely millions.

The exact bill, the most bitter one, will never be known, but this is the order of magnitude. That is based on two variables: the number of people who will die from this epidemic, and the number of people who would have died if we had let the virus spreading without any barrier. We estimate, with inevitable great approximation, the two variables.

How many deaths we will actually have? Statisticians and econometricians are busy making this prediction, also to understand when the peak of the epidemic will be reached, since the number of deaths from SARS-Cov2 is the least distorted variable by the various factors that instead make it difficult to understand the true level of the infected. Which, for example, depends on the amount of swabs made, and on which people you decide to do them and when (timing is crucial to detect the virus), because the capacity to perform tests is also limited, and it is not easy to raise it on demand.

We refer to two estimates of the deaths that we will eventually count. The first follows the path indicated by Mauro Maltagliati, of the University of Florence, and published on Neodemos (www.neodemos.it); it leads, according to the calculations updated by Michele Tettamanzi of REF Ricerche, to 15 thousand total deaths. Unfortunately, this path is not very reliable, because it varies a lot with the data itself: an increasing number of registered deaths also raises the final estimate, which, therefore, more than a prediction looks

like a finding. To have an insight: until the horrendous data of Friday, March 27 the model indicated 12,500 deaths.

The second estimate is based on a different model, applied by Carlo Favero, of Bocconi University, to Lombardy. For which Favero estimates 25 thousand deaths (on March 27 they sum up to 3732: a long and very sad way, then). If we extrapolate, with considerable arbitrariness, the estimate for Lombardy to Italy, we would reach 42 thousand deaths. What a catastrophe!

However, the actual number of coronavirus deaths is also uncertain. For one simple reason: tampons are for the living. And many die without having been helped. Both because the health system is already at the extreme of effort and strength, and because the disease degenerates very quickly.

This fact has been observed in Nembro, one of the most affected county near Bergamo, Northern Italy. Comparing the deaths in the first eleven weeks of 2020 to the average over the same period of the past five years, Claudio Cancelli and Luca Foresti calculated that the deaths from SARS-Cov2 are 4 times higher than the official data. 6 times in Pesaro and Cernusco sul Naviglio. And 10 times in Bergamo!

If the multiple of Nembro were valid for all of Italy, the real coronavirus deaths would already be at least 36 thousand, instead of the more than 9 thousand at March 27. And the final number would be at least 60 thousand with the Maltagliati-Tettamanzi estimate and 130 thousand with the Favero one.

A heinous sum. But still nothing compared to what would have happened if there had been no lockdown. According to Cancelli and Foresti, we would have reached 600 thousand, considering Nembro, where 1% of the population has disappeared, as representative of Italy. And 2.4 million, following the reasoning of Tomàs Pueyo (*The hammer and the Dance*).

In other words, with the lockdown we are saving at least 470 thousand lives in Italy, but more probably 2.2 million.

None of us are Wonderwoman or Superman, but today we have great power, of life and death. Ours and others. And from great power comes great responsibility.