

ARE JEWS DISPROPORTIONATELY DYING FROM COVID-19?

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Media reports claiming that Jews make up a disproportionate percentage of all COVID-19 deaths in the UK have been published recently, raising concern across the community. Jews make up about 0.45% of the country's population, so any indications that Jews comprise a significantly higher proportion of coronavirus victims ought to be taken seriously. But are they correct?

The short answer is it's too early to tell. On the one hand, I wouldn't be surprised to see elevated counts among Jews. British Jews are old: 21% are aged 65 and above, compared to 16.4% of the population as a whole, and given that the virus is more virulent among the old than the young, Jews may be disproportionately affected.

Additionally, London is some way ahead of the rest of the country in the spread of the contagion, and about two-thirds of British Jews live there. Such a large city and international hub attracts people from all over the world in vast numbers who continually interact with each other in all manner of ways. Jews are no exception; many work in the centre of town, travelling in daily by tube, and are very much in the thick of things. So whilst we are far from alone in this respect, a London effect may partially explain higher counts. The city is an ideal place for a virus to spread, and like New York City in the United States, it is at the vanguard of the epidemic in this country.

Our socio-economic position may also have a bearing on how the virus impacts us. Collectively, we are wealthier and better educated than average, which also means that we are more likely to travel abroad – another way in which we might have been more likely than others to have picked up the infection early on. That said, Jews are also healthier than average: 5% of us have bad or very bad health compared to a national average of 5.6%. That's not an insignificant difference, particularly bearing in mind our age profile, and it's due both to cultural factors and our socio-economic status, both of which have commonly protected us against ill-health.

There may also be something about the way in which Jews organise their lives that might inadvertently cause the virus to spread between us. Jewish life involves gathering and interacting in Jewish groups regularly: for daily *minyanim*, Shabbat services and other communal and social activities. 25% of Jewish adults attend synagogue most weeks; the equivalent proportion for church attendance among British Christians is about 10%. And festivals, such as Purim which was celebrated just a few weeks ago, bring even more people together than usual. These are all perfect environments for a virus to multiply. So physical social interaction – typically the essential, even obligatory lubricant which underpins Jewish life – now poses a mortal threat, and any failure by recalcitrant individuals or sub-communities to shut it down may explain elevated levels of mortality among Jews.

But that said, the numbers of Jewish deaths being reported so far are, statistically, very small – too small to draw any firm conclusions. Moreover, the Jewish and wider mortality counts from COVID-19 are not being assessed and recorded in the same way – different methods are being employed which means we are not comparing like with like. Ensuring the counts are directly comparable is not straightforward, and simple differences in data collection methods may at least partially explain why

Jewish numbers seem disproportionately high. Interestingly, available infection data, which are also patchy due to variations in testing, show nothing untoward in areas with large Jewish populations.

In short, any or all of the aforementioned reasons could explain unusual counts, but it isn't wise to read too much into them at the moment – we simply don't know enough yet. The important thing right now is to follow the guidelines being issued by the government and medical authorities and do all in our power to avoid becoming infected or inadvertently infecting others, including stopping all physical communal and religious activities. Meanwhile all of the incredible efforts being made to move communal life online and to safely support the most vulnerable have the potential to mitigate at least some of the worst effects of this awful pandemic. We'll continue to monitor the numbers as carefully as possible, but nothing is yet cast in stone: in the fullness of time, we'll have a much better story to tell if we all just stay at home.

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