

India likely made up more than a third of global infant deaths in Covid slowdown

Economic shocks lead to an increase in deaths among vulnerable groups, such as young children and the elderly in low-income countries.

MOHANA BASU

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Representational image | File photo of a child with his mother at a doctor's clinic | Arjun Claire/Flickr

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New Delhi: The economic downturn caused by Covid-19 may have led to 267,000 excess infants deaths in 2020 in low- and middle-income countries, with India registering 99,642 deaths, said a study.

The study by researchers from the World Bank said the highest numbers of estimated excess infant deaths in the world were in South Asia — a total of 113,141 — with more than a third of the excess projected to be in India.

The modelling **study**, published in the online journal *BMJ Open* Tuesday, suggests that this toll is 7 per cent higher than what was expected for the year.

The study also compares the deaths vis-a-vis birth figures during the economic downturn aggravated by the pandemic. While India has the highest number of annual births — over 24,238,000 — it also has a significantly large projected economic shortfall of minus 17.3% for 2020.

According to World Bank researchers, the global economy is expected to have shrunk by almost 5 per cent in 2020, the first year of the pandemic. As a result, as many as 120 million more people may have been pushed into poverty with a loss of jobs and pay cuts across different economic strata nationwide.



Such economic shocks lead to an increase in deaths among vulnerable groups, such as young children and the elderly in low-income countries.

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'Income shock' impacted births and deaths of children

For the study, the team looked at the impact of the 'income shock' represented by the projected fall in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — the total value of a country's annual goods and services — on the survival of one-year-olds and less in low- and middle-income countries.

The researchers also tried to assess how GDP was linked to 5.2 million births reported between 1985 and 2018 — 82 per cent of these births, the study found, were in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

The researchers also took into account the International Monetary Fund economic growth projections for 2019 and 2020 that predicted the effect of the economic downturn in 2020 on infant deaths in 128 countries.

The calculations indicated that an additional 2,67,208 infants in low- and middle-income countries died in 2020 — just short of a 7 per cent increase in the number of infant deaths expected for that year.

The authors also noted that 28,000 to 50,000 excess infant deaths were estimated for Africa after the financial crisis in 2009. In contrast, there were approximately 82,239 excess infant deaths in 2020, reflecting the larger estimated shortfalls in GDP caused by the pandemic.

“Several mechanisms are likely driving this increase in mortality among children 0–1 year of age: impoverishment at the household level will lead to worse nutrition and care practices for infants and reduced ability to access health services, while the economic crisis might also affect the supply and quality of services offered by the health systems,” the study said.

With countries, health systems, and the wider global community continuing efforts to prevent and treat Covid-19, the team concluded that “we should also consider resources to stabilise health systems and strengthen social safety nets in order to mitigate the human, social, and economic consequences of the pandemic and related lockdown policies.”

(Edited by Paramita Ghosh)

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