

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in historical perspective. Epidemics and mortality crises in the last three centuries in Castile and Spain

La pandemia de COVID-19 en 2020 en perspectiva histórica. Epidemias y crisis de mortalidad en los tres últimos siglos en Castilla y España

Enrique Llopis Agelán* 

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Felipa Sánchez Salazar 

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Vicente Pérez Moreda

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Ángel Luis Velasco Sánchez 

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

José Antonio Sebastián Amarilla 

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

COVID-19 pandemic has brought back many features of the great historical epidemics, and it does so in many countries and societies around the globe, such as Spain, that had long forgotten the terrible human, economic and social destructive potential of the great epidemic shocks. To assess the magnitude of the current pandemic in our country, in light of past experiences, this work aims to determine and examine the chronology, frequency and intensity of the most relevant increases in mortality in Castile and / or Spain between 1700 and 2020.

Crude mortality rates (CDR) were estimated for nine Castilian provinces between 1700-1889 and for the whole of Spain between 1890-2020. We use Flinn (1974) and Del Panta and Livi-Bacci (1977) methodology to determine and estimate mortality crises by years and periods. We have introduced two novelties in the estimation: a) we use CDR instead of death counts; and, b) the direct use of Castilian or Spanish aggregate mortality data as opposed to the alternative of obtaining the local aggregate of crisis mortality for each period and then calculating the simple arithmetic means of the nuclei comprising the regional or national samples.

In Castile, catastrophic mortality was much higher between 1700 and 1814 than between 1815 and 1899. Of the 26 crises recorded during the 18th and 19th centuries, 22 took place before 1815. The average excess mortality of the latter was 42.1 %, compared to 48.1 % of those registered between 1815-1899. Consequently, in Castile, the decline in catastrophic mortality after 1815 was due to the notable decline in the frequency of crises, not to the attenuation of their intensity. In Spain, in the 20th century, there were three mortality crises, in 1918, 1938 and 1941. The last two, which took place during the Civil War or at the beginning of the postwar period, had a relatively low intensity, but the 1918 influenza pandemic caused an excess mortality greater than 50 %. So far in the 21st century, the only crisis, 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, has been relatively mild compared to 1918 or 1700-1899: excess mortality in 2020 does not seem to have reached 20 %. However, its high morbidity, the enormous economic recession that it has caused, its important social and health consequences, and its prolongation, at least in 2021, suggest that its impact ends up being much larger than that inferred from the estimated excess mortality.

Our contribution has three main conclusions: a) catastrophic mortality, after falling enormously in 1750-1799 with respect to 1700-1749, and increasing sharply and abruptly in 1800-1814, fell back from 1815; b) although less frequent, the mortality crises did not disappear until 1942, reviving in 2020; c) in terms of excess mortality, the crisis of 2020 has been less intense than those registered in Castile or Spain between 1700 and 1918.