

Dorling, D. (2020) Slowing Down: Better Policies for Better Lives, The OECD Forum Network blog: address the COVID-19 crisis, June 15<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.oecd-forum.org/users/409997-danny-dorling/posts/slowing-down-better-policies-for-better-lives>

## The OECD Forum Network

NEW SOCIETAL CONTRACT TACKLING COVID-19 INCOME INEQUALITY HEALTH CLIMATE



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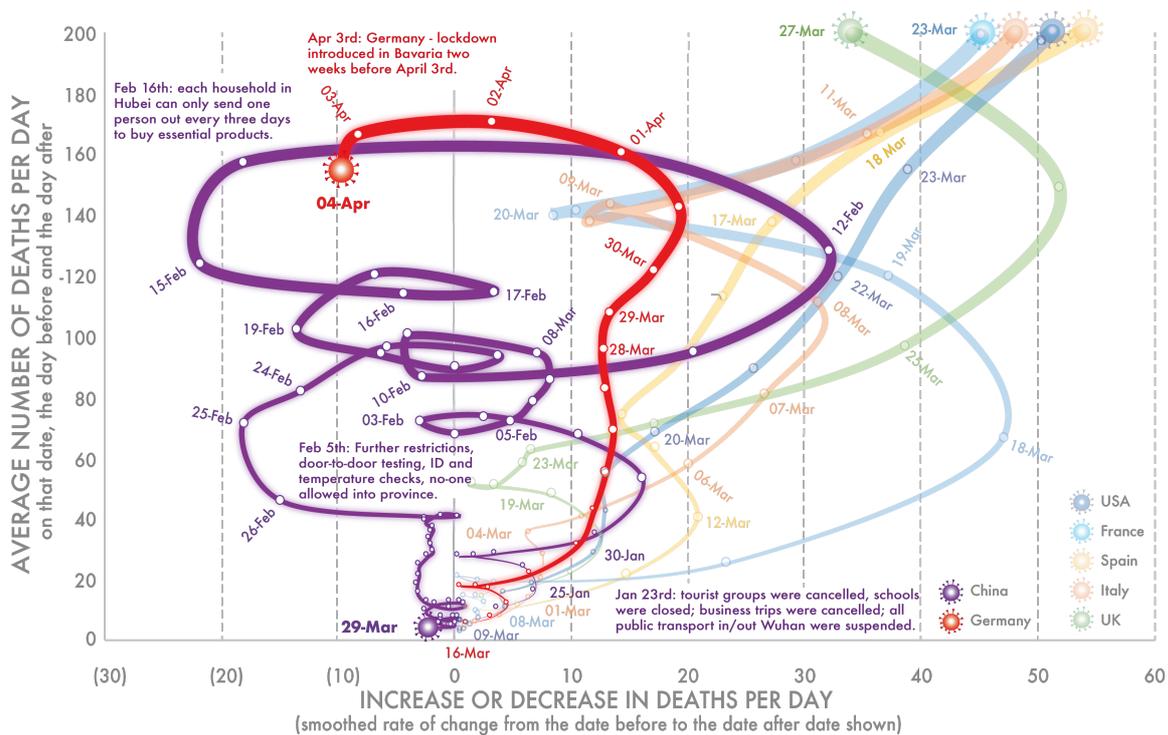
*This article is part of a [series](#) in which OECD experts and thought leaders – from around the world and all parts of society – address the COVID-19 crisis, discussing and developing solutions now and for the future. It aims to foster the fruitful exchange of expertise and perspectives across fields to help us rise to this critical challenge. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the OECD.*

*To keep updated on all of the OECD's work supporting the fight against COVID-19, visit our [Digital Content Hub](#).*



The human world is slowing down and has been for some time. It has been slowing in many ways, and this can be seen most easily in OECD (mostly richer) countries. The slowdown includes not only demographics, as we have fewer and fewer children, but also economics as rates of growth each decade are now slower than in the decades before, especially in countries where they were highest in the 1950s and 1960s.

We have a tendency to ignore long-term trends and to fixate on short-term events. Short-term events transfix us; but a post- (or low-) COVID-19 world will be a world where the future is just as determined by the long-term slowdown already underway. In this way, this coronavirus differs from previous rapid infection pandemics such as those of influenza in 1918, 1951, 1957 and 1968/69. All of those previous, sudden pandemics happened in the era of acceleration. This is different. I have drawn hundreds of charts to show that when it comes to demography, innovation, social trends and economics, the period from the 1820s up to 1968 was one in which there was not just more each year – the rate of growth itself was often accelerating. [Animations of just of these charts can be found here.](#) The charts can initially be difficult to understand, but for people who have just lived through a pandemic, concepts of acceleration and deceleration are more at the forefront of our minds. So if you want to understand those other slowdown charts first consider this one:

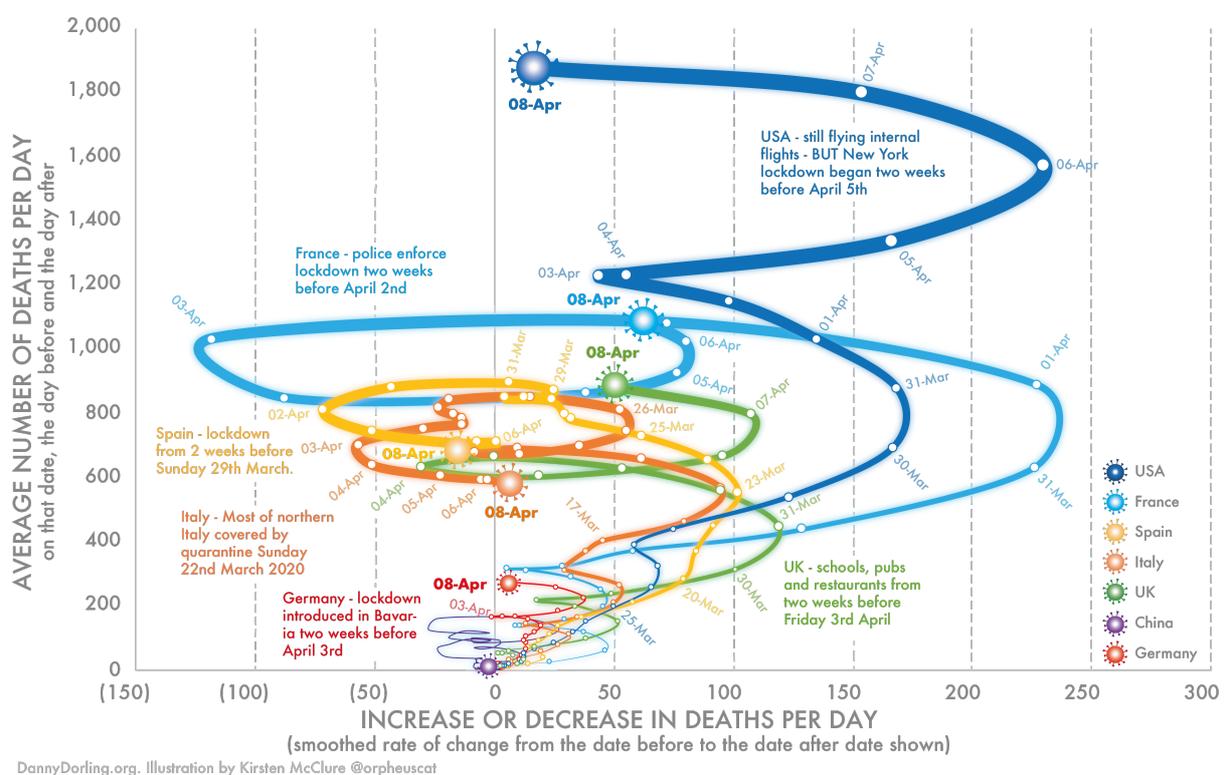


DannyDorling.org. Illustration by Kirsten McClure @orpheuscat

The chart above shows the rise and then fall in the number of reported deaths in China, the USA and five European countries due to COVID-19. At first, the lines rose from the origin (0,0), all to the right, as not only do the number of deaths rise each

day, but so too does the rate of that increase (each and every day at first). During the middle of February 2020, the pandemic began to be brought under control in China, so the trendline then shifts to the left of the vertical axis signifying falls after the initial slowdown. Germany, too, appears to have falling numbers just a few weeks later than China. The data is smoothed to take out the effect of fewer deaths being reported at weekends, but also because trends are always easier to see this way. The “looping down” in China also happened elsewhere, but later. Slowdown is often not smooth.

The next chart below shows what happened next. The numbers of deaths rose unexpectedly in Germany between 4 and 8 April; but that was dwarfed by what appeared to be uncontrollable acceleration in the rest of Europe and the United States. Lockdowns were imposed just before most of these rises. At this time, the trend in France seemed to be the worst in Europe because it was able to include counts of the numbers who were dying in care homes. It turned out later not to be the worst; you can often only see the full picture in retrospect.

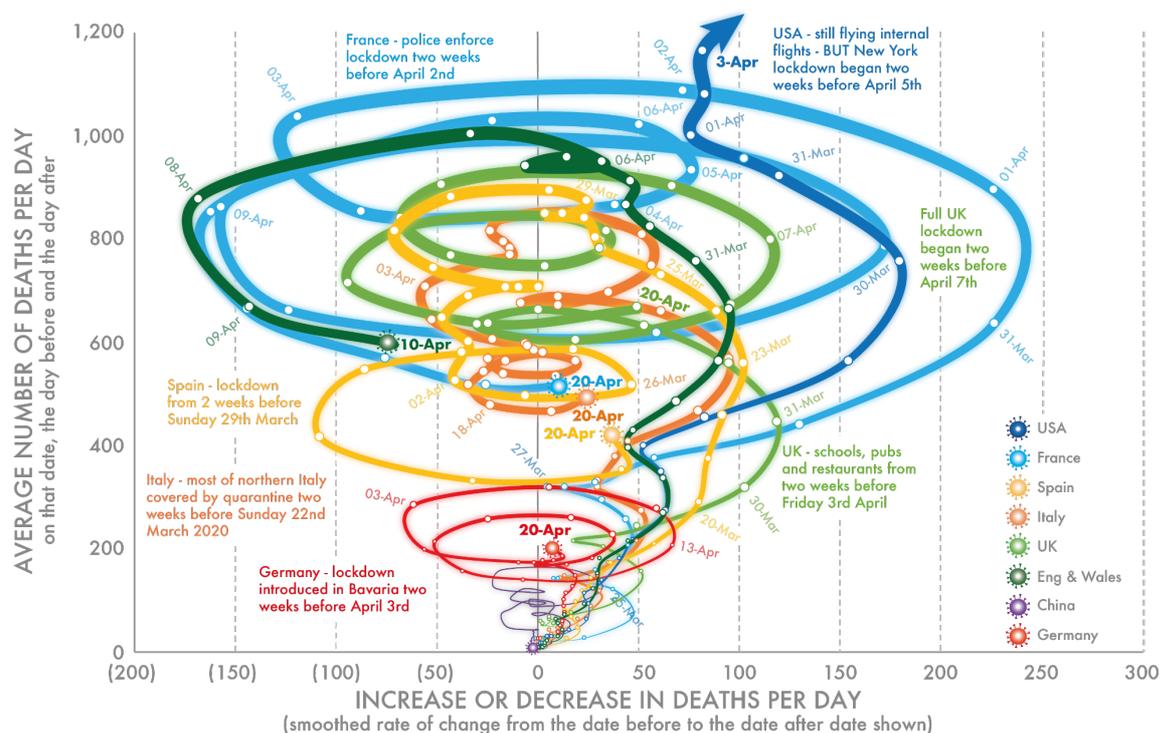


Slowdown is completely different from acceleration. It is the time when the phenomena is still rising, but the rise appears to be coming under some kind of control. Just as this happens in all pandemics, it also happens in almost every other

aspect of our lives – but usually over a matter of years or decades, not just weeks. That is why we find the larger slowdowns in our lives, or the slowing pace of change, much harder to appreciate and accept than the abating of a pandemic. We are impatient, almost always absorbed by what is happening right here and right now. Never more so than when there is something very new to grab our attention.

The penultimate graph below shows how the pandemic began to end in Europe while it was still rising in the United States. Shown again are the seven states of the world which, at this time, recorded the most deaths worldwide. These were places the pandemic came to first, and most quickly, and which also had very many elderly people and very crowded cities. Data for England and Wales is also included on this third and final graph because, by then, care-home deaths were being included but only for those two countries within the UK.

For many months, possibly years, we will be talking about how different nations within the OECD dealt differently with the emergency. But these charts help illustrate just how similar the shape of the trends were in all European countries. Soon, all the European lines will be back very near to the 0,0 origin of the graph, where China is already; and where later in summer of autumn the USA will hopefully be.



DannyDorling.org. Illustration by Kirsten McClure @orpheuscat

Now that you know what a slowdown looks like when drawn out, you can look at many other trends in this way. I have only found four trends prior to 2020 that were not only rising but also accelerating annually: air passengers worldwide, global carbon emissions, planetary temperature, and the number of university graduates. High resolution open access images of these four and over 60 others [can be found here](#) and hundreds of others can be seen within the 67 spreadsheets [made available here](#).

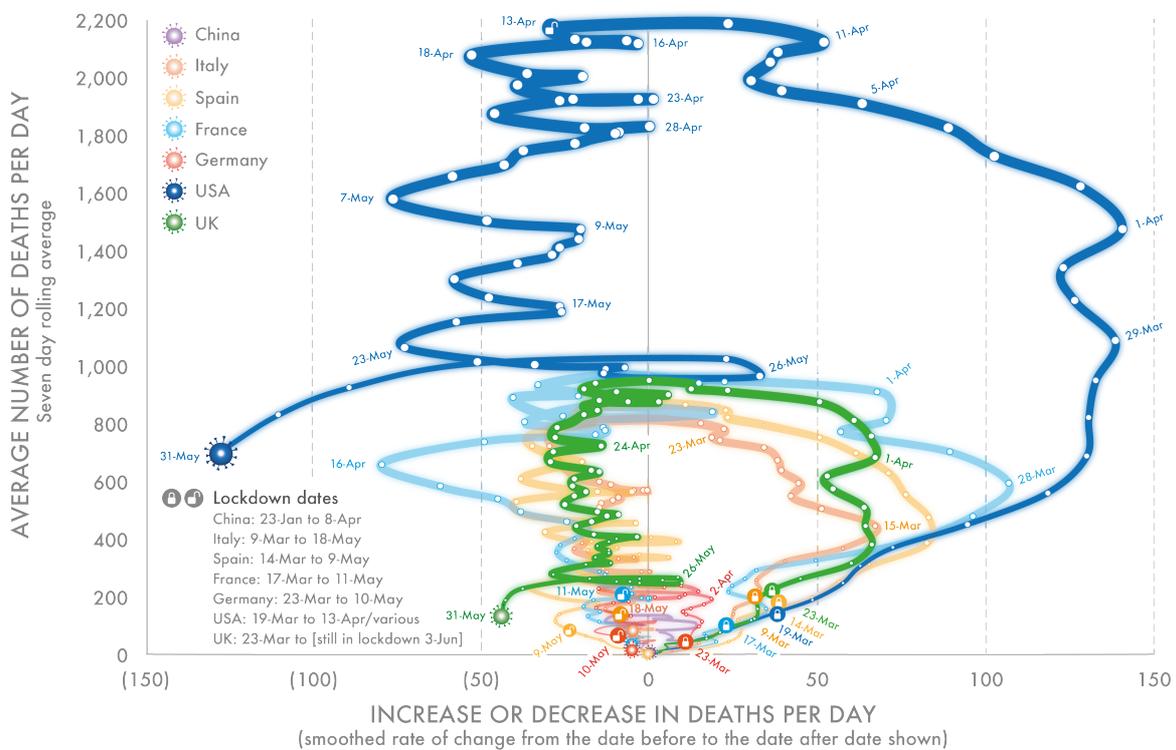
In the short term, you may be worrying about flights and wondering when it might be possible to fly again; but the numbers had to stop accelerating, and this would have occurred at some point regardless of the pandemic. So, too, carbon emissions would have at some point decelerated; the next temperature increase would not rise as fast; and we would also educate more graduates locally, with less acceleration in that as well. There is an absolute limit to the proportion of young people in the world who will go to university, when one day we treat going to university as we do going to secondary school today; however long before that day, the annual rise in graduates will have slowed.

The pandemic has caused huge suffering. But it will also have widened our imaginative horizons. What you thought was not possible just a few months ago clearly is. And the world does not end just because so many of us now consume less, pollute less and worry more about what really matters most – others' and our own health.



This pandemic, terrible as it is, will not dent the [trend in rising global life expectancy](#) that has been rising since 2010, but at a slower pace. It will alter our patterns and volumes of trade, but not the deceleration in the rise of how much we each consume by weight in rich countries – a slowdown that had already begun some time ago.

What this pandemic could do, if we so choose, is help us begin to see more clearly what was already there if only we had stopped and looked. For now, for a time, we have been forced to stop; we should use that experience wisely.



### [Danny Dorling](#)

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Danny is a geographer who now mainly writes books. In 2018 he published “Peak Inequality”. In 2019, with Sally Tomlinson: ‘Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of Empire’. In 2020: “Slowdown: The End of the Great Acceleration—and Why It’s Good for the Planet, the Economy, and Our Lives. And, later this 2020 year, jointly with Annika Koljonen: Finntopia: what we

can learn from the world's happiest country. He is a patron of the road crash charity RoadPeace, and in his spare time he makes sandcastles