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JESSICA Y. HO

CHARGED WITH THE TASK of providing an assessment of how Covid-19 will shape global demographic research needs over the next five to ten years, my mind immediately turned to the question of what demographers will need to carry out their research: data. We demographers are a data-hungry group—we would like more data, of the highest-quality possible, as soon as possible, and as widely available and accessible as possible.

The pandemic has underscored the pressing need to invest in and maintain the quality and integrity of our essential sources of demographic data around the world. In far too much of the world, and especially in low- and middle-income countries, we still lack high-quality vital registration systems. For example, Indonesia—currently the fourth most populous nation in the world—does not have a vital registration system with complete coverage of the population. Covid-19 has focused the public's attention on the importance of these systems, and it has exerted demands on these systems that they have often been unable to meet, to the great detriment of our understanding of and ability to develop informed responses to the pandemic. It is critical that this acute recognition of how important these vital registration systems are to our understanding of population health, processes, and dynamics is not short-lived.

Of course, data issues are not restricted to developing countries. High-income countries with longstanding vital registration systems have also struggled to provide adequate information to assess the dimensions and impacts of the pandemic. In the United States, there has been a lamentable paucity of data by race/ethnicity and at finer geographic levels available to researchers and to the public. These limitations, along with the slow release of these data, have greatly hampered our ability to derive precise estimates of the pandemic's outsized impact on disadvantaged populations and to compare

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how we are faring relative to other countries. The lack of subgroup- and area-level data and the lags in reporting have contributed to mistaken assumptions about the pandemic, including the belief that children, suburbs, and rural areas would be unaffected.

It is also important to recognize that, even before Covid-19, we lacked timely mortality data in many high-income countries. On average, the lag between the current year and the most recent year for which data are available is roughly one to three years for all-cause mortality and two to five years for data by cause of death. This substantial lag hampers our ability to identify and study contemporary demographic trends. Covid-19 has revealed how dangerous this lack of timely information can be when facing a new and fast-developing threat. It also means that we are years behind in discovering other important phenomena including life expectancy declines, stalled progress in reducing cardiovascular disease mortality, and the direction of the contemporary American drug overdose epidemic.

Around the world, data are being delayed, distorted, and marshaled in support of political agenda precisely because they are so valuable. We have witnessed a tug of war around hospital data once routinely reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and unprecedented challenges in fielding the 2020 Census in the United States. Our data collection systems for births, deaths, and migration are too important—too vital, as their name suggests—to be subverted by political interference and underinvestment. We must also strike the right balance between providing sufficient information to assess the health of populations and the privacy of deceased individuals.

While this may seem like a difficult charge, it is not an impossible one. Central banks provide one potential model of both independent and timely data releases. There is a longstanding tradition in Western democracies of central banks maintaining independence in setting monetary policy and in the collection and dissemination of data. Economic data are prioritized to the point where they regularly have monthly, if not weekly, releases. Surely our demographic data are equally as important. Given the extent of recent political interference in the collection and dissemination of demographic data, demographers should advocate for a similar degree of independence for our statistical agencies to safeguard demographic data. In short, we must find a way to establish and sustain robust vital registration systems and censuses around the world that provide timely data and that are resilient to a wide array of crises and challenges. Ensuring the independence of data collection systems and protecting them from partisan manipulation are integral parts of this task.

As a scholar of health and mortality who is based in the United States but often conducts comparative research, my wish list for data is extensive. Thinking about studying the diverse impacts of Covid-19, my thoughts quickly jump to, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if every country in the world had

a large longitudinal survey that was nationally representative, covered the entire age range, fielded an extensive battery of questions about demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, and also collected a comprehensive panel of biomarkers? Oh, if the response rates were well above 90 percent and the data were publicly accessible, that would be the cherry on top.” Sadly, we are far from this ideal scenario.

It is worthwhile to ask, “What would the perfect data be?” However, demographers have always been acutely aware of data needs and the shortfalls of reality. In response, they have developed a flexible methodological toolkit, a strong comparative advantage in working with scarce data, and a keen understanding of the minimum requirements needed to arrive at meaningful conclusions about population processes. I am confident that at this moment, demographers are working on developing or adapting indirect estimation methods for measuring Covid-19’s impact in countries without robust vital registration systems.

What else will demographers be studying in the coming years, and what does the world need from demographers? Demographers are uniquely well-positioned to make the case for the population perspective. It is increasingly common to focus on the individual determinants of health and other outcomes. Many of the open questions that have been posed about Covid-19 and its impacts operate at the individual level. For example, what will the long-run health consequences be for young adults who contract Covid-19 today? Individual determinants certainly matter, but we should not lose sight of key factors operating at other levels. It is clear that individuals are situated within families, neighborhoods, communities, localities, and countries. The pandemic has underscored the fact that where people live and how those in power have handled the pandemic affect how much exposure individuals will have to the pandemic and its social and economic impacts.

At the time of this writing, the United States has had roughly 20.7 million Covid-19 cases and about 352,000 deaths. Taiwan, whose population is roughly the size of Australia’s, has had about 815 cases and 7 deaths. Glimpses of life in countries like South Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore have seemed unimaginably different from life in the United States during the pandemic. All around the world, countries have their share of racial/ethnic and religious minorities and people who have indigenous ancestry, are obese, are of low socioeconomic status, or are immunocompromised. All else being equal, more advantaged groups tend to have better health. But all else is not equal. The likelihood that a given individual in the global population contracts and/or dies from Covid-19 has much to do with their country’s national-level response to the pandemic. A poor person in a high-income country with poor handling of the pandemic may have an astronomically higher risk of exposure to Covid-19 than a poor person in a lower-income country that has implemented an effective response. It is important to understand the individual

characteristics that put people at risk of dying from Covid-19. It is equally important to understand the factors that have safeguarded the health and well-being of entire national populations. Even if some of these conditions cannot be replicated in other contexts, if we don't ask the right questions, we won't get complete answers.

I believe the field of demography has many important contributions to make, and I hope it will play to its strengths in the coming years. We need to have confidence that we are working with the right figures and the right measures. Demographers have an essential role in helping the public better understand and interpret the statistics being thrown at us in our data-driven world.