

Denmark - Challenges in removing public health measures

Katelyn Jetelina



Feb 24

293 1

Denmark

After initially escaping the Omicron wave without overwhelming hospitals and very little mortality, Denmark decided to remove all public health mitigation measures in the

beginning of February. This decision was made regardless of their exponential, out-of-this-world COVID-19 transmission rate at the time.

While controversial (and risky), the policy decision provided the world a front row seat to a natural experiment: *Are Denmark's vaccination rates (10th most vaccinated and 4th most boosted population in the world, which equates to a 83% vaccination rate overall and 62% booster rate) high enough to go back to "normal" despite a massive case surge? What would this look like?*

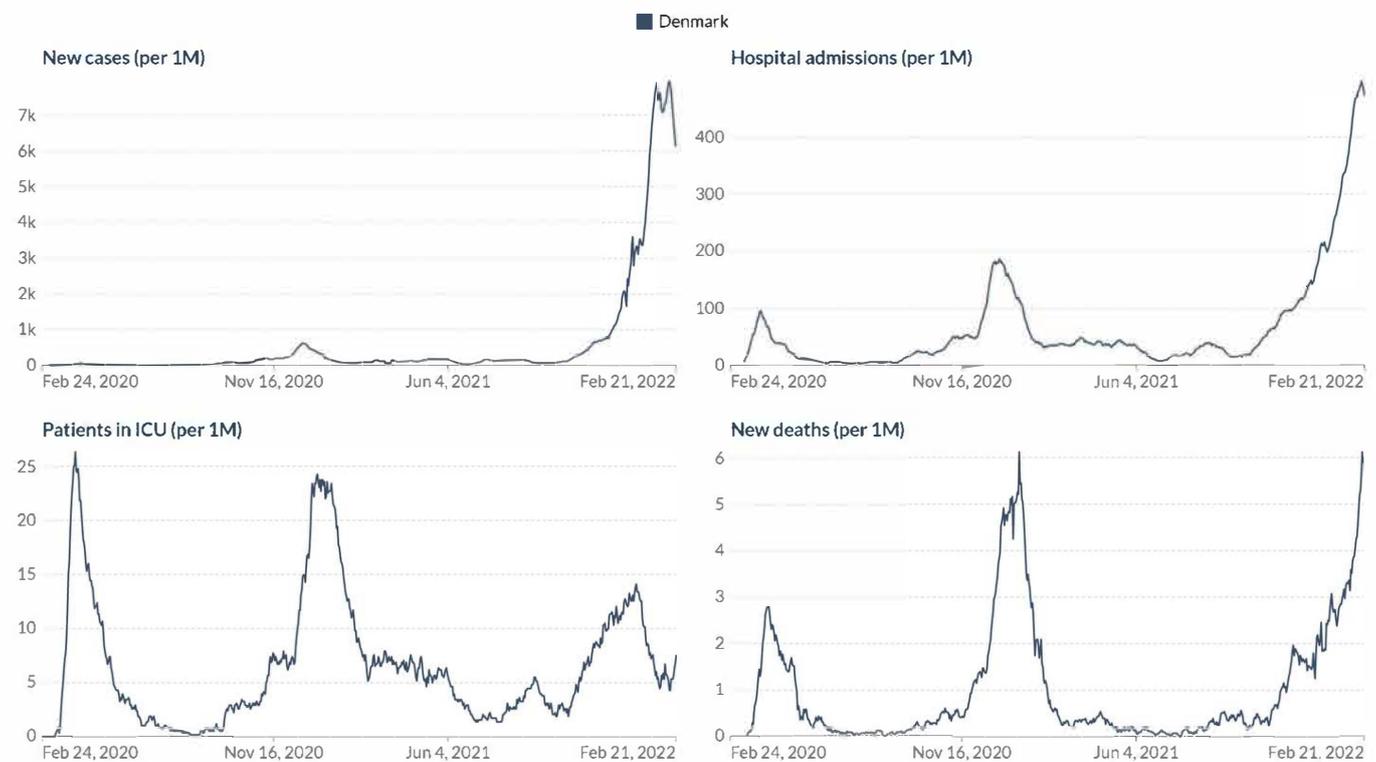
Well, to no one's surprise, cases continued to skyrocket. Interestingly, ICUs decreased but then plateaued and just recently began increasing. Denmark's deaths continued to exponentially increase. In fact, just recently they reached a record-breaking high.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases, deaths, hospital admissions, and patients in ICU per million people

Limited testing and challenges in the attribution of cause of death means the cases and deaths counts may not be accurate.

Our World
in Data

LINEAR LOG Uniform y-axis



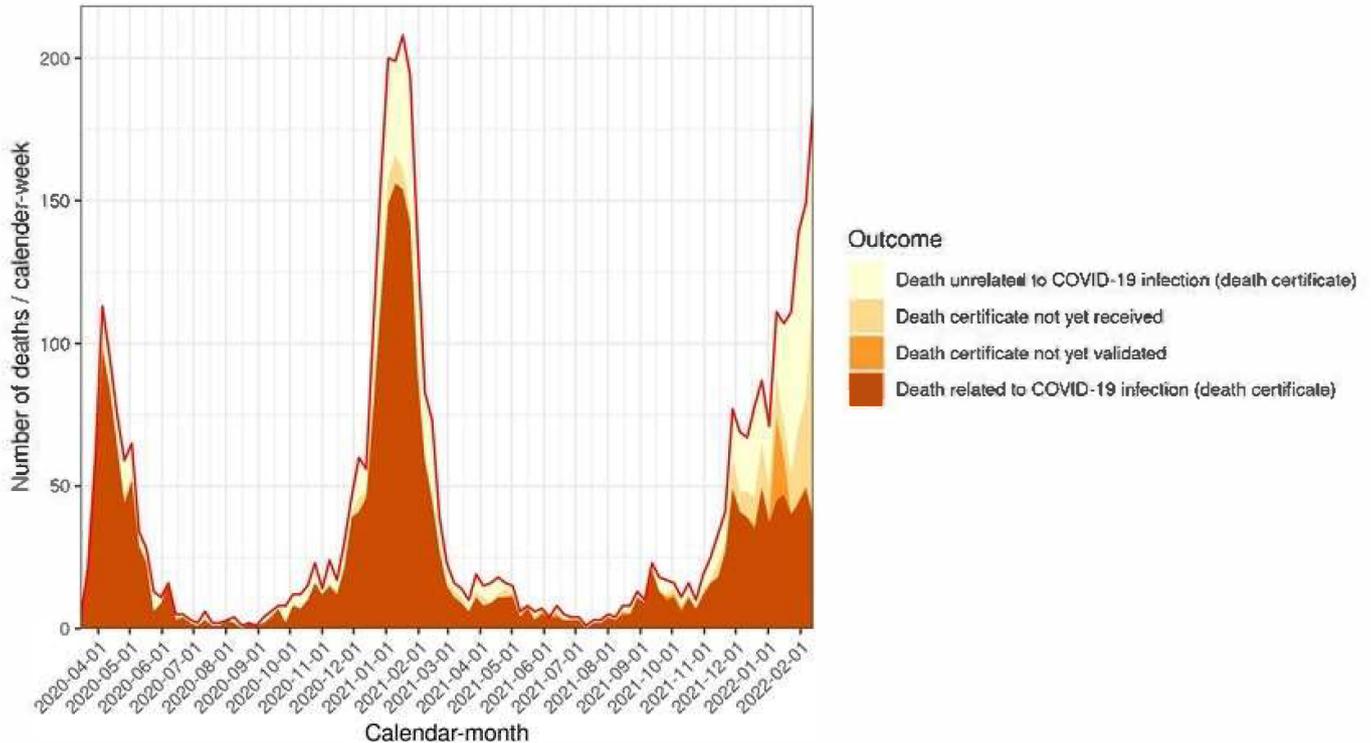
Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data, Official data collated by Our World in Data

CC BY

Many people specifically focused on exponential deaths: *did Denmark make a mistake?* There are two camps of thought:

1. Some continue to support Denmark's decision. This was specifically the case after the Danish Health Authority clarified an important caveat: official Danish death counts combine those that died "from COVID" and died "with COVID." After stratifying deaths by cause (see figure below from a Danish [report](#)), it's clear that mortality composition has shifted in this wave compared to previous waves. Some

think the mortality rate “from COVID19” is now low enough to warrant dropping public health measures altogether.



Deaths “due to” and “with” COVID-19 based on death certificates, from March 2020 to February 2022. Reports from the Danish Causes of Death Registry, the Danish Health Data Authority and the SSI. Source [here](#)

2. On the other hand, many believe the Danish policy was a mistake. One reliable signal of the severity of the pandemic is excess mortality, as it removes all the noise from case definitions. Denmark’s [report](#) this week found a substantially high number of excess deaths, particularly among those aged 85+ years old. Unfortunately, this data is delayed, so excess deaths may continue to increase, too. This confirms that even though there is a high vaccination rate, the vulnerable are not guaranteed protection in a high transmission environment. Vaccines work great, but are not perfect.

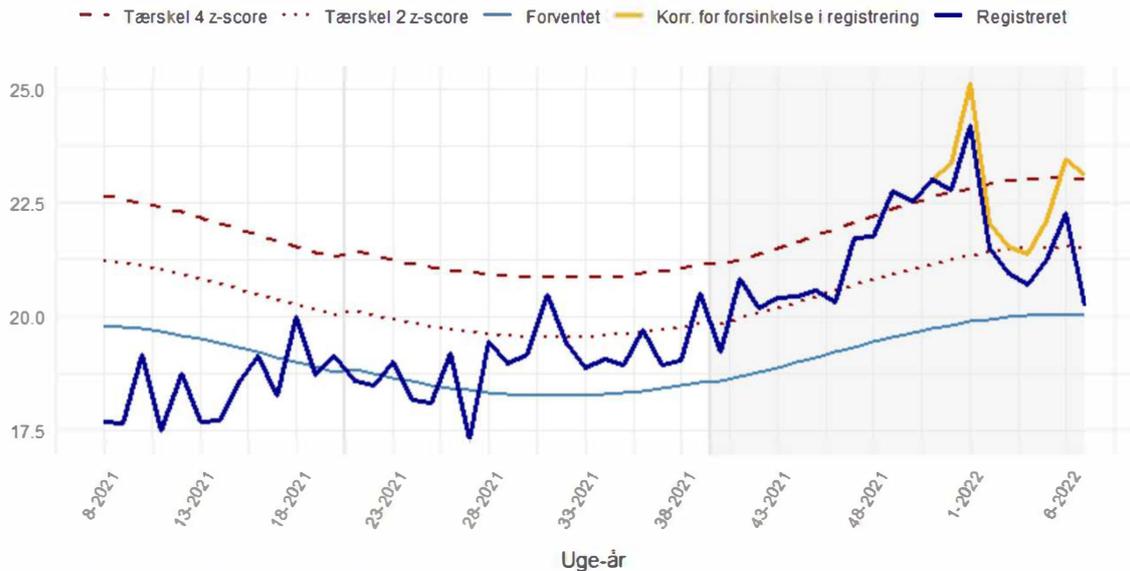
Latest mortality figures for Denmark

Inventory for week 7-2022

There are signs of a slight excess mortality in Denmark, especially among the elderly aged 85+.

However, the figures from the last week in particular must be interpreted with caution due to delays in registration.

Antal dødsfald i alt per 100.000 person-uger det seneste år



De grå vertikale streger viser hvornår data er fastlåst, og den grå skravering markerer endnu ikke fastlåste data
For uddybelse af signaturforklaring, se fanen Definitioner nedenfor.

Statens Serum Institut 22.02.2022

Vaccination rates play a big role, but as Denmark has shown, it's not the only factor at play. Other country-level factors like general health, age distribution, strength of a healthcare system, and the availability social safety nets also need to be taken into account. The country also needs to decide how much excess death and excess morbidity (long COVID19) they're willing to culturally accept.

This public health policy debate is an important one, as the public is constantly looking for a goalpost: *When can we go back to "normal"?* We first need to recognize that we have a new virus in our repertoire, and we aren't going back to 2019 normal. How we move forward, though, is a legitimate question and a decision that needs to be made country by country. As Dr. Mike Ryan said yesterday at the WHO press conference, *"If countries start parroting each other and just doing what the other guy or girl did, then they're going to find themselves in real trouble."*