

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted inequalities?

1. Introduction

Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, many have promoted various ideas about the virus. In early 2020, some had predicted that COVID-19 would bring equality. It was cited as the “Great Leveller” [1] as it would target the rich and the poor equally. This refers to Walter Scheidel 2017 book, in which Schneidel proves the Black Death had violently flattened economic inequalities.

However, the lethality between COVID and the Black Death differed hugely. For COVID-19 to be considered such a “levelling” event, it would need to cause much more damage to society. Compared to the Black Death, it will be much easier to return to the status quo. Scheidel agrees that COVID would need to turn “into something more serious” [2] to cause any radical change which could remake societal structures. If anything, the pandemic has served as damning emphasis on how lopsided the level of inequality is.

Nevertheless, we still see those in power, such as the previous UK Cabinet Office Minister, Michael Gove heedlessly claim that:

“The fact that both the prime minister and the health secretary have contracted the virus is a reminder that the virus does not discriminate,” [3]

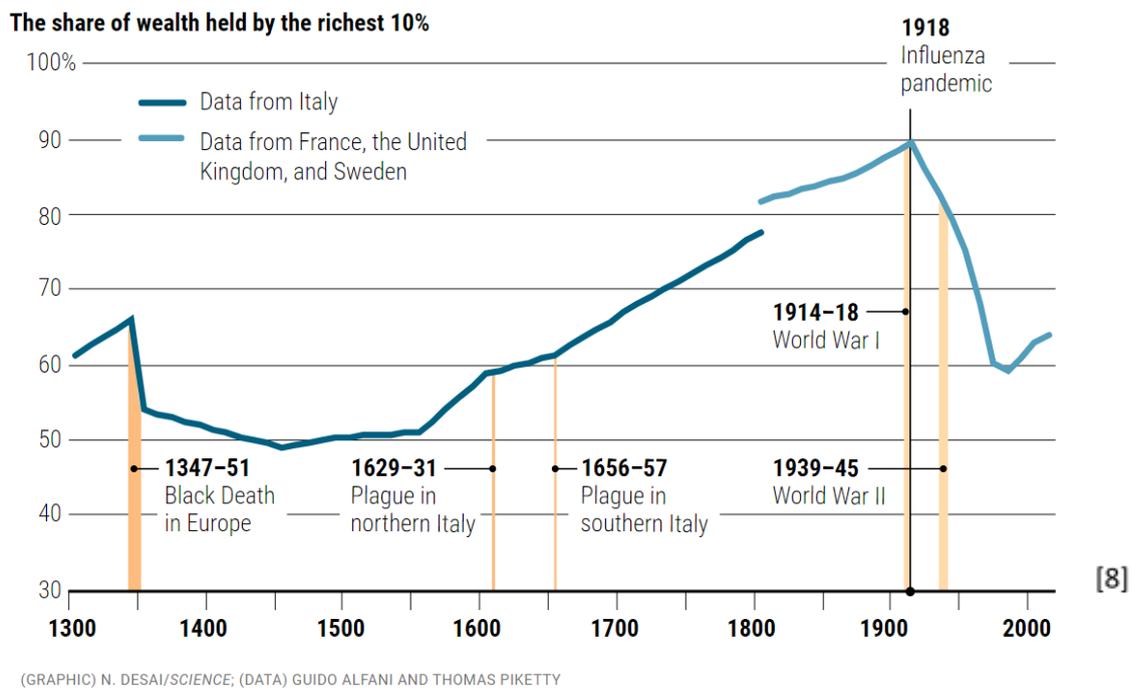
Whilst the statement is intrinsically justified, it lacks consideration of the broader picture. As the pandemic has developed, it is clear, that its impact has discriminated against those less well-off.

Whilst “high income” countries are vaccinating one person every second [4], impoverished nations are only to receive their first COVID vaccines by 2023 [5].

The COVID-19 pandemic has made inequality more salient. Within this piece, I aim to reveal the disparities which have widened, on a national, but also more global level.

2. Background

COVID-19 is not the first to be hailed as the “great equalizer”. Most studies during the 1918 Spanish influenza suggested the disease did not damage any class specifically and insisted that the “Rich and poor suffered alike” [6]. More careful statistical analysis in 1931 by Edgar Sydenstricker [7] found the death rate among the class classified as “very poor” was “nearly three times as high” as those in the two highest classes, making it one of the first reports acknowledging the correlation between rising inequality and pandemics. In fact, the Black Death remains as the only pandemic to conclusively level the wealth inequality and it is highly unlikely that COVID-19 will do the same:

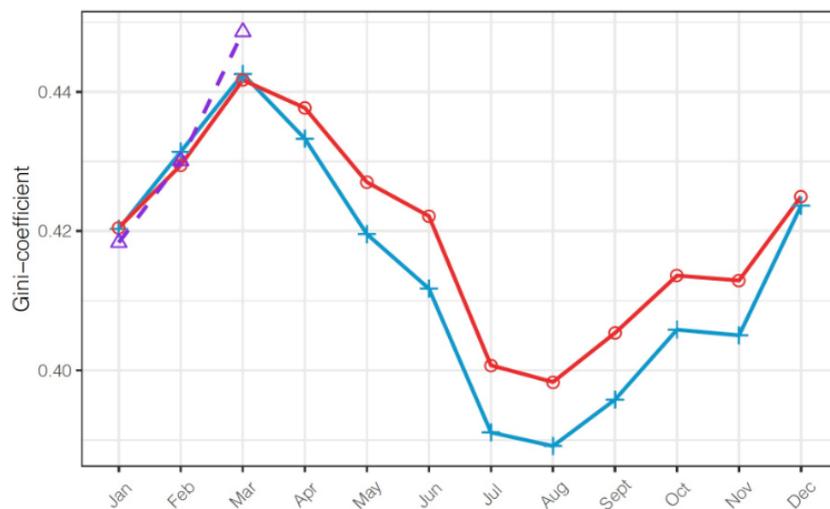


3. COVID-19

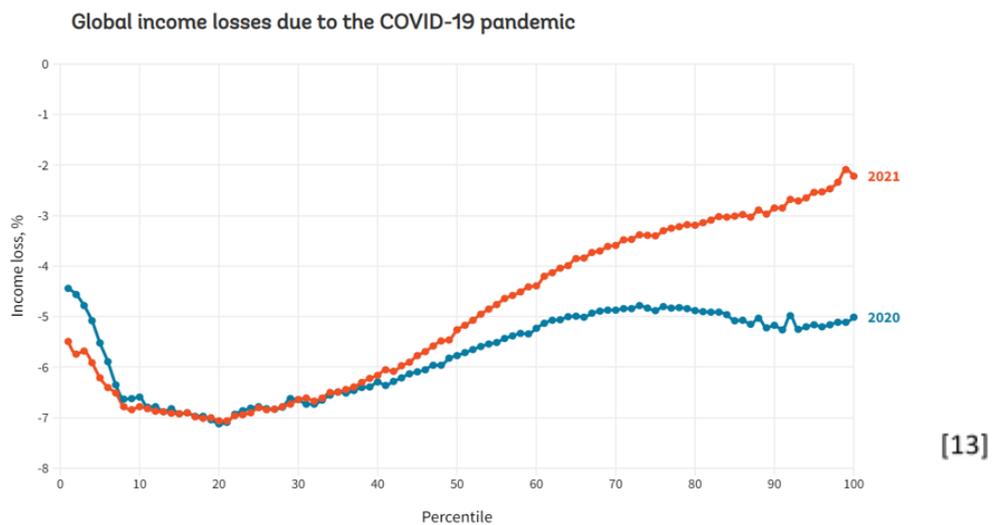
3.1 Economic Inequality

One of the main headlines we hear about the COVID-19 pandemic is how much it has damaged our economy overall [9]; less is spoken about the disproportional impacts the pandemic has had on those in varying economic classes. During the beginning of the epidemic, there was not enough data to make justified claims of the impact of COVID on inequalities.

One of the earliest papers on the topic [10], suggested there was a “fall in income inequality during COVID-19” crisis thanks to government compensation schemes. Whilst this may have been beneficial during the start of the pandemic, constant compensation of income will eventually be unsustainable for the government. The paper uses data from January 2021 and earlier. The pandemic has now drawn on for nearly a year longer and constant government compensation is no longer viable. This has caused inequality to skyrocket. The study uses a common method of measuring income inequality called the Gini coefficient. This measures inequality across the whole society rather than between income groups. If income was perfectly distributed, there would be a coefficient of 0, if all income went to one person, the coefficient would be 1. The study found that in some countries, the coefficient dropped by nearly 12 percent between May 2020 and January 2021. However, using more recent data we find that some European countries found exponential increases in Gini-coefficient past January 2021 [11]:



Employment and changes in income have also differed greatly between the social classes. In September 2021, there was still 5 million fewer jobs than pre-pandemic [12]. Many of these jobs were lost in industries with below-average wages. Construction workers and waiters cannot simply digitalise their work and begin working from home. Higher-income professions have this ability and the financial backing to allow employees to work from home. Low-income jobs had accounted for nearly 56 percent of jobs lost between February 2020 to September 2021. [12] Those in the lowest income percentiles found their wages drop by more than 7 percent in 2021 whilst those in the top tenth saw drops of only 2 percent:



It is clear, that COVID, will follow its predecessors such as the Spanish Flu and further widen income and wealth inequalities. Whilst the ordinary folk have suffered as essentials have surged in prices due to “pandemic-related supply chain issues” it is interesting to see the biggest US corporations, hitting the peak of profits that previously had never been attained [14]. It seems that the lower- and middle-income earners have been fed a clear story: They must use a higher proportion of their comparatively lower incomes on ever-expensive goods due to a theoretical collapsing economy, whilst the highest income earners have still not seen their incomes fall, even during the worst pandemic since the Black Death.

3.2 Inequality of Access

Personally, I find that the most disturbing instances of inequality are the discrepancies in access to healthcare and education. Things which in today's societies should be considered basic human rights. These problems not only exist globally but are also obvious in the country I live in.

I have already spoken about the grotesque inequality when considering vaccine rollout. Out of the 9.6 billion doses administered globally, only 9.5 percent of these have gone to those in low-income countries [15]. In May, we heard that countries such as Malawi were forced to destroy over 20,000 doses of vaccine as expired jabs had been donated [16]. Whilst doses had also expired in higher-income countries such as France (50,000 doses of AstraZeneca were said to be returned [17]), France is still able to vaccinate 75 percent of its population while Malawi has only vaccinated 4 percent [18]. COVID-19 has exposed the irrefutable inequalities which exist globally. If this lack of access to the vaccine is continued, low-income countries will never recover from the pandemic, only widening the gap further.

National inequality has also exacerbated during the pandemic, data suggests those living in the most deprived areas of England were nearly twice as likely to die after contracting COVID-19 [19], this was mainly due to lack of access to healthcare after cuts in spending for public services during the pandemic. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that poor access to healthcare paired with cuts to the universal credit and the job retention scheme pushed a further 500,000 people into poverty in these already disadvantaged areas [20].

The widening gap in education is also something I have heard about first-hand. In March 2020, all schools in the UK were forced to close, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some schools struggled to adapt to the ever-changing school closure announcements. According to Ofcom's Technology [21], around 559,000 students were not even able to access an internet connection at all. In a survey by the Sutton Trust [22], 50 percent of working-class applicants felt COVID-19 would negatively impact their chance to get into university. Children from less affluent backgrounds had

already struggled to do well at school and progress to higher education. Because of the COVID pandemic, the disadvantaged have suffered even more as they have less access to quality education. This has made them less qualified for potential careers, dramatically lowering their income and potentially pushing them into poverty. They are also rid of the opportunity to gain valuable work experience but instead will be pushed into less-skilled professions or no work at all. Youth unemployment had tripled between February and April 2020, jumping from 7.8 percent to 27.4 percent [23] predominantly being lower/middle-class students who had their education ripped away from them because of this pandemic.

4. Conclusion

This piece is far too short to cover all the drastic inequalities which have widened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, I have shown that it is always the more vulnerable socio-economic groups and countries which have suffered greater financial burden and health risk throughout the course of this pandemic. I have also shown that throughout history, pandemics have consistently widened the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished. COVID-19 has followed its recent pandemic predecessors and reversed decades of progress on poverty prevention. It most

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definitely will not cause a catastrophe-stimulated “levelling” event as it does not have the same lethal capabilities of the medieval plagues, which we should be grateful for. Our greatest concern should be to contain this virus so that the effects of these widened inequalities do not resonate for future generations. Society will never recover from COVID-19 unless those most at risk are supported.

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