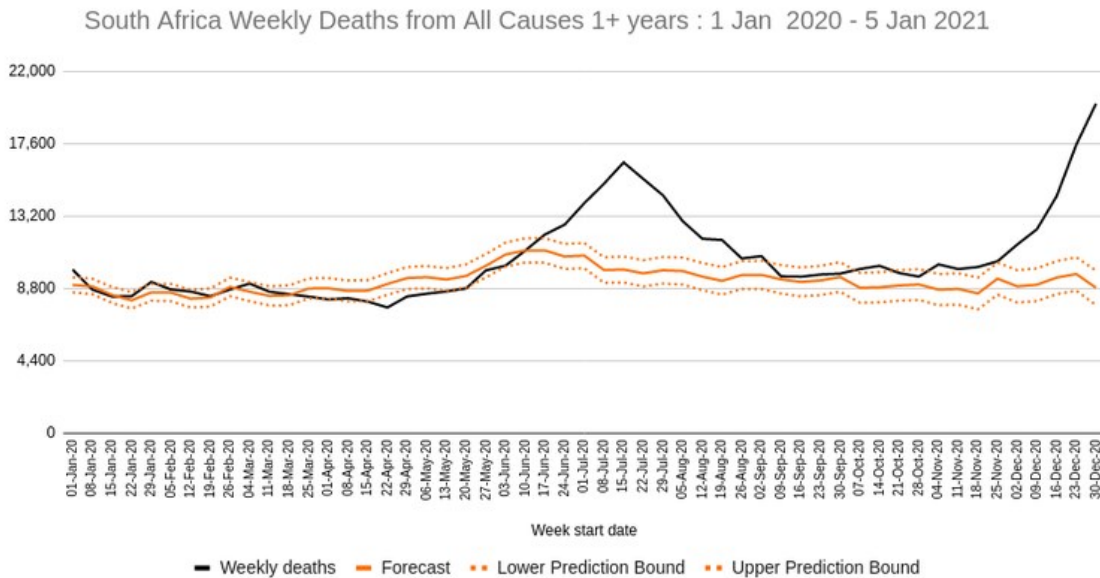


Record number of South Africans died in first week of 2021

By [James Stent](#) and [Nathan Geffen](#)

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South Africa had a record 10,907 excess deaths from natural causes in the week of 30 December to 5 January, according to the 11 January [mortality surveillance report](#) from the Burden of Disease Research Unit at the South African Medical Research Council. In total, 20,063 people died in one week.



This graph published by the MRC shows how much worse the second Covid-19 surge is than the first one that peaked in July.

The latest mortality surveillance report presents a harrowing picture of the devastation wrought by the second wave of Covid-19 infections.

By comparison, in the worst years of the Aids epidemic (in the 2000s), there were at most about 6,000 excess deaths due to the disease each week. But this went on year after year, while the current Covid-19 surge will subside in the short-term.

KwaZulu-Natal was the province with the highest number of excess deaths due to natural causes, with 3,389. In eThekweni alone, there were 875 excess deaths in the first week of the new year. While excess deaths in the Eastern Cape grew at a slower rate, 2,298 were recorded. Gauteng faced a rapid increase, with 1,725 excess deaths. The Western Cape recorded 1,432 excess deaths in one week, more than double the weekly peak of the first wave in July of 601 excess deaths.

Meanwhile, the MRC reports that deaths due to unnatural causes (vehicle collisions, murders, suicides, accidents) in the week of 30 December to 5 January fell below the lower bound of predicted unnatural deaths.

Methodology

Depending on the methodology used, the MRC estimates there have been 78,000 or 84,000 excess deaths since 6 May, the date at which an uptick in excess deaths was first noted. (The first figure, 78,000, is a comparison against historical data. The second takes into account the fact that mortality actually dropped in the first few weeks of lockdown and uses a different basis of comparison.) Of these excess deaths, about 55,000 were people over the age of 60, and about 30,000 were people between one and 59 years old.

The minister of health's 12 January press release reported that 34,334 people have died of Covid-19. The reason that this is so much lower than the MRC estimate is that many people would have died of Covid without being diagnosed. Also, it's possible that some people with other diseases did not have the same level of care they might have had before Covid because the hospitals are so stretched. The MRC report states that "a significant proportion of the current excess mortality being observed in South Africa is likely to be attributable to Covid-19".

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