

Opening statement to the Economics Legislation Committee – 4 June 2024

Dr David Gruen AO, Australian Statistician

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement on the topic of excess deaths.

Given recent statements in parliament and on social media, I thought it would be useful for the committee if I briefly explained how and why our estimates of excess deaths have evolved.

The ABS started publishing Provisional Mortality Statistics in June 2020 to measure changes in patterns of mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In these initial reports we compared counts of deaths to a baseline – the average number of deaths recorded over the 5-year period to 2019.

We noted that the ‘average’ baseline served as a proxy for the expected number of deaths, to provide what we called ‘an indication of excess mortality’.

This was the best we could do in the limited time available given our desire to provide timely, useful information in such an extraordinary period.

With more time we were able to improve our methodology.

In November 2020, the ABS began publishing official excess mortality estimates, initially on an ad-hoc basis. More recently, we received funding from government to report these estimates six-monthly.

These official estimates use an adaptation of the Serfling model – a model that has been used, both internationally and in Australia, to produce excess mortality estimates for influenza.¹

It is an ‘adaptation’ because the ABS worked closely with the Centre for Epidemiology in the New South Wales Ministry of Health to adapt aspects of this model for COVID-19.

Several agencies with expertise in these methods, including jurisdictional health authorities, peer-reviewed our model.

The official estimates from the model are superior because they account for changes in the age-structure and size of the population, for seasonality in observed deaths and for any trend in mortality.

From March 2022, we sought to avoid confusion by clarifying that the baseline average estimates in the Provisional Mortality Statistics publication do not constitute official estimates of excess deaths.

From April 2024, we removed the baseline estimates from the provisional publication, given we now publish the superior official estimates six-monthly.

We continue to look for ways to improve the quality of our official estimates, and in July 2023 we made some refinements in our model to do just that.

¹ R.E. Serfling, ‘Methods for current statistical analysis of excess pneumonia-influenza deaths’, Public Health Rep (1896). 1963 Jun; 78(6): 494–506.

As you'd be aware, there is currently a Senate Inquiry into Excess Mortality. A submission by the Actuaries Institute compares our official estimates to three others derived by other groups and concludes "each of these four estimates of excess mortality gives similar results".²

The ABS has also made a submission to the Inquiry that explains our approach in more detail. ABS staff will appear at the Inquiry.

I did though want to take the opportunity now to stress we have sought to be transparent throughout and have always been motivated by the desire to produce the most accurate estimates possible.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering questions the committee may have.

² The three others are the Actuaries Institute's Mortality Working Group, Kobak and Karlinski, and The Economist. Submissions to the inquiry are available from the Parliament of Australia's website (aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ExcessMortality47/Submissions).