

When it is all over, how would you grade your government?

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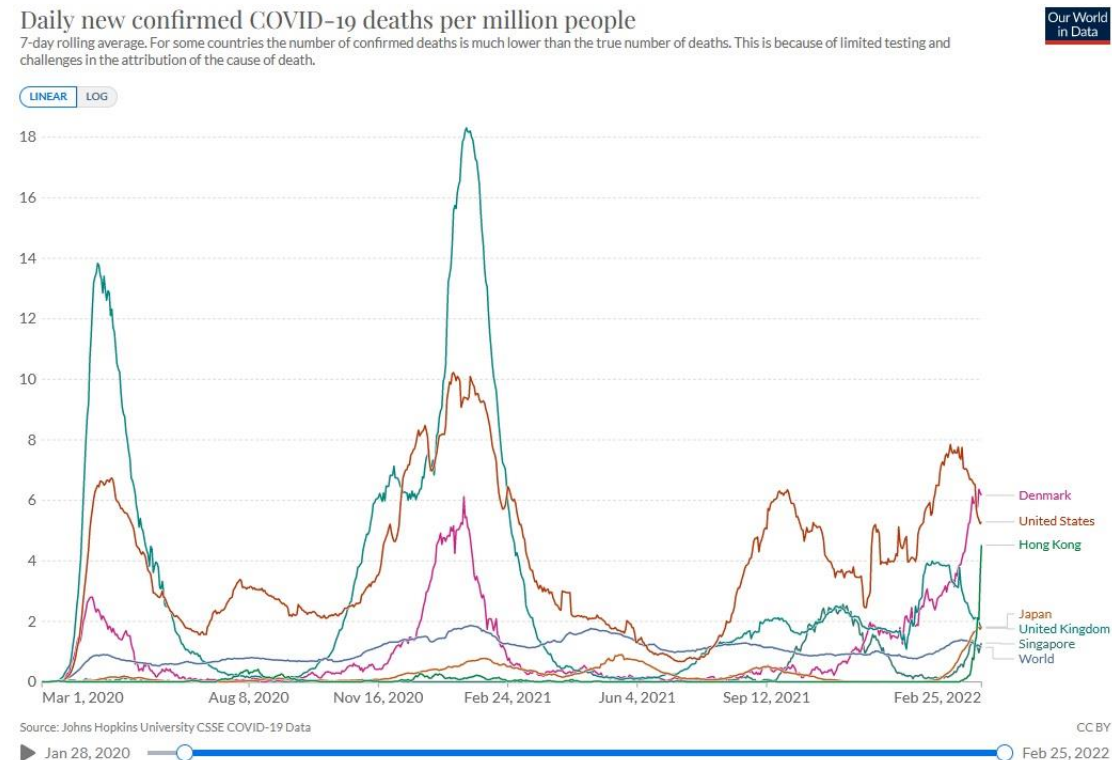
Recently, a much more transmissible variant of Covid-19, Omicron, has caused turmoil for Hong Kong. The public hospitals quickly reached their capacity; when some seniors from elderly homes tested positive, their medical condition may not allow them to be admitted to the public hospital by triage, yet the elderly home they belong to cannot accommodate them as they can infect others at their senior homes. While a lot of our health care workers in the front line were trying their best to deal with the problem, our government seemed to be overwhelmed by certain other mandates for Covid-19 such as “Dynamic Zero Covid”.

Considering the situation, the central government (President Xi) sent a message to Hong Kong. Besides showing his concern of the situation and care for Hong Kong citizens, he also made it clear that this is the job of the Hong Kong government, who must make it a top priority to address. It should be noted that his timely message never stipulated any specific policies, but only offered to help in whatever area needed. Clearly, the central government is following the “One Country, Two Systems” principal here and trusts the Hong Kong government can solve the problem according to Hong Kong’s situation. As many other commentators mentioned, Hong Kong society is somewhat different than the mainland. On the one hand, we do not have local committees in all residential neighborhoods that can help implement strict home quarantine policies, and we do not have the vast government and industrial engines to build temporary hospitals in quick order and do mass testing. On the other hand, we have access to more advanced vaccine technology, we have strong public hospital system, and have strong financial reserve; but at the same time need to consider the different societal needs to support Hong Kong as an International city. Hong Kong government is thus expected to deal with its own challenges, as is made clear from the message from central government.

What is not spelt out in the central government’s message, however, is how Hong Kong government’s efforts will be evaluated. Some people may still stick to “Dynamic Zero Covid” as the rule, but that is only a method, or at best a vague expectation. In a previous letter to SCMP on Feb 26, Regina Ip mentioned that Hong Kong should align its “mindset” to that of mainland’s. By mindset, does she mean how to evaluate, or the kind of policies to set? If the former, it is still rather vague and open to arguments. What we need is a clearly articulated way to evaluate the result, that is reasonable enough to gain majority buy-in from the public.

A few days ago, mainland’s expert Zhong Nanshan sent his encouragements and suggestions to Hong Kong. He mentioned that human life is the ultimate human right. He is quite right, how well we avoid loss of life should be our first concern. How to count loss of life, or death rate, can be confusing as there are different metrics. For certain purposes, it is measured by Case Fatality Rate (CFR), but for Omicron, this is certainly not suitable since the real number of infections can be much higher than the number of cases officially recorded by the government. What we want is Infection Fatality Rate (IFR), but this cannot be easily measured. It seems a more

reasonable metric is the Covid-19 Death Rate (CDR), that is number of people died due to Covid-19 divided by the entire population size. Note, this number is independent of number of infections. This number is monitored by various data providers. For example, the following visualization is provided by **Our World in Data** for data up to 22 Feb 2022.



In this figure, we compare Hong Kong to various other places. As you can see, Hong Kong's CDR has been very low until February 2022, but it is rising at a dangerous rate at the moment. We would like Hong Kong government to focus on this metric, and make sure when it is all over, they can tell its citizens how well Hong Kong's CDR compare to that of other countries in the world. We hope Hong Kong can come out leading most of the world. Since Death Rate is also available for flu (at least estimates), we also want our government to aim at keeping our CDR to be comparable to flu, if it can be managed. This is important, since we know for flu's fatality rate, while the government is still expected to minimize it, it is not singled out as a more pressing matter than other livelihood and social issues. There is another similar metric to CDR called Excess Mortality Rate (EMR), which measures the number of deaths above the average mortality rate during the Covid period. In trying to mitigate deaths due to Covid-19, there might be some additional deaths from other diseases due to Covid-19 saturating hospital's capacity. EMR would be able to track that consequence as well, though we believe CDR is good and similar enough.

Once we have adopted a metric for our first priority, and set the expectation for controlling it in comparison to that for other respectable countries and flu, then there should be room for the government to consider people's livelihood goals as well. This is a complicated matter to measure. It involves not only daily issues, like employment rate, quarterly GDP etc, it also involves how much Hong Kong can

maintain its business role and standing in the global stage, as that determines Hong Kong's longer term livelihood. Our government will use Hong Kong's rich financial reserve for its Covid-19 policies; the extent of the reserve is depleted should also be accounted in this category.

In summary, while Hong Kong is in a dire situation, and there are a lot of specific policies Hong Kong government are adjusting every day, if we set our overall goal clear, we will not be confused and lost in prioritizing our policies. For example, getting the elderly vaccinated is clearly the top priority at this moment, and there does not appear to be enough effort on this urgent matter. The government might also seriously explore the possibility of creating a bubble to protect the vulnerable elderly who cannot or would not get vaccinated, to reduce the damage. In this author's view, Hong Kong government is working very hard, Hong Kong citizens are by and large quite cooperative in social distancing and getting vaccinated, and we should be confident we will manage the challenge caused by Covid-19. We just need to unite, hopefully a clear goal will help this, and support our government in this difficult time.

DM Chiu, Shatin