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Ex-CDC Director Tom Frieden and New York City's mass casualty event: What he and *The Wall Street Journal* got wrong

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On 17 March 2023, The Wall Street Journal *ran Tom Frieden's op-ed, "What Worked Against Covid: Masks, Closures and Vaccines".*

Frieden, a former CDC director and New York City health commissioner, advanced many falsehoods in that piece, but the one that caught my attention concerned his figure for COVID-attributed deaths during New York City's spring 2020 mass casualty event.

I've re-cast two Twitter threads I wrote in response into essay form below. Where my later research contradicted or refined my initial observations, I've added explanatory footnotes.

I wrote those threads soon after publishing an article on New York City nursing-home death data, a few weeks before receiving Elmhurst Hospital's bed-occupancy records, and two months prior to presenting my emerging hypothesis about the New York event to PANDA.



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What Worked Against Covid: Masks, Closures and Vaccines

Millions of lives were saved in the three years of the pandemic, but millions more were needlessly lost. And the world is far from ready for the next one.

By Tom Frieden
March 17, 2023 at 11:12 am ET

Aa 870 Gift unlocked article Listen (15 min)

At the three-year mark of the Covid pandemic, governments are declaring victory, and most people are eager to resume their prepandemic lives. The past three years of fighting Covid feel like a fog of war.

Did the world perform well or badly in this massive, varied effort? There are many available metrics, but the death rate is the most important way to assess how effectively we managed the pandemic's health risks. "The death rate is a fact," William Farr, a British physician and epidemiologist, wrote 150 years ago. "Everything else is an inference."

March 20, 2023 – In an essay for *The Wall Street Journal*, Dr. Tom Frieden has made inaccurate statements about New York City in 2020 that I am well-equipped to address.

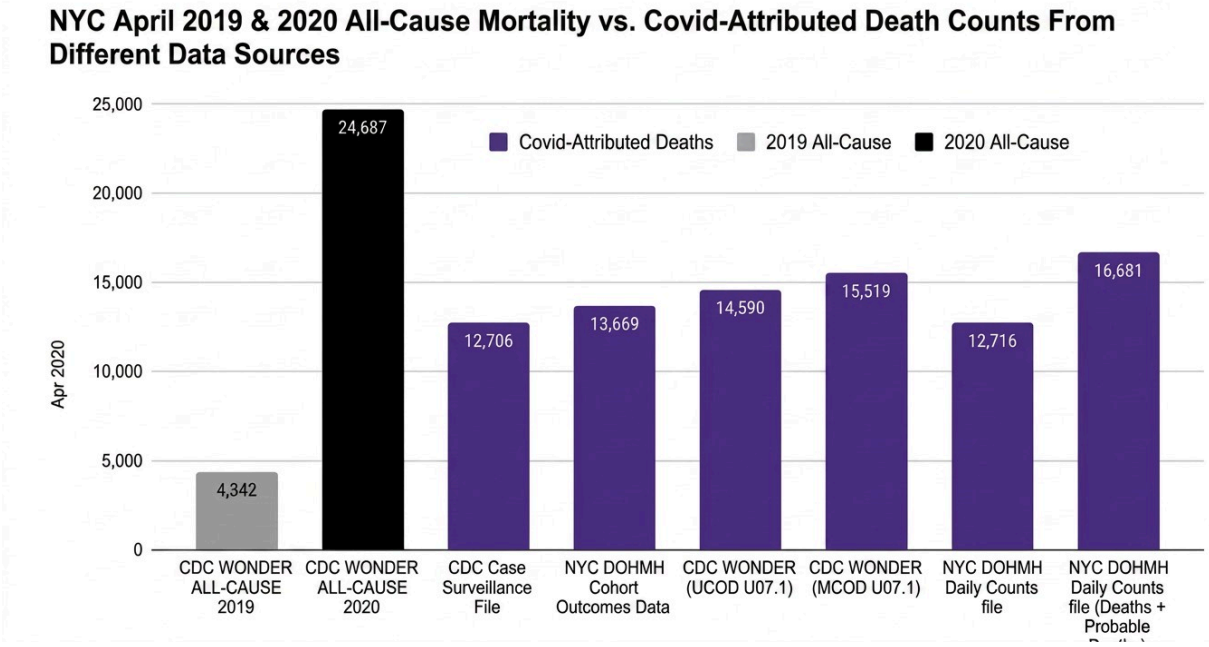
Frieden is a former CDC Director and ex-Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; I am a 'student' of the New York City COVID response.

Dr. Frieden says, "[COVID] deaths in New York City decreased from 100 a day in mid-April 2020 to 40 a day two weeks later and two a day by July 1."

This is false.

On one hand, Frieden could be forgiven for getting this statistic wrong, because data sources for NYC COVID deaths don't agree on either the 2020 or April 2020 number of COVID deaths (Figure 1).

Figure 1



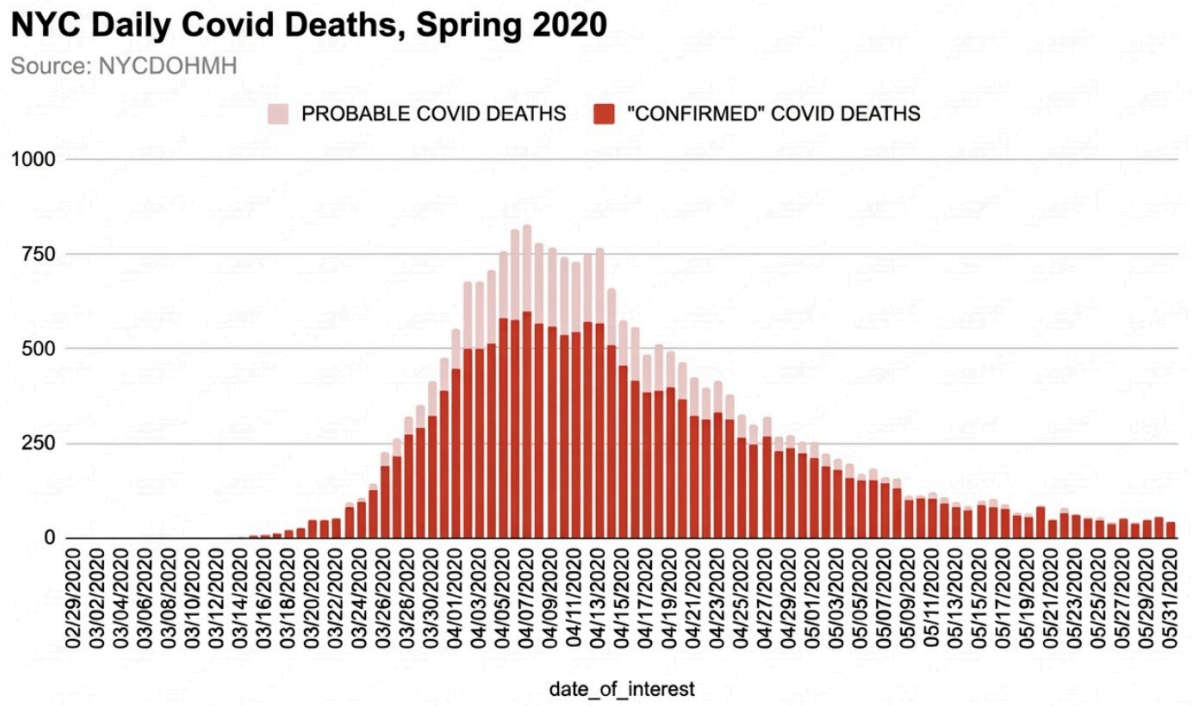
On the other hand, none of these sources shows only 100 covid deaths per day for mid-April.

Since Frieden is the former NYC DOH Commish, let's look at what that agency's data says (figure 2):

- 4/15/20 – 456 confirmed COVID deaths + 121 probable deaths = 577 total.
- Peak for the month (and the wave) was 831.

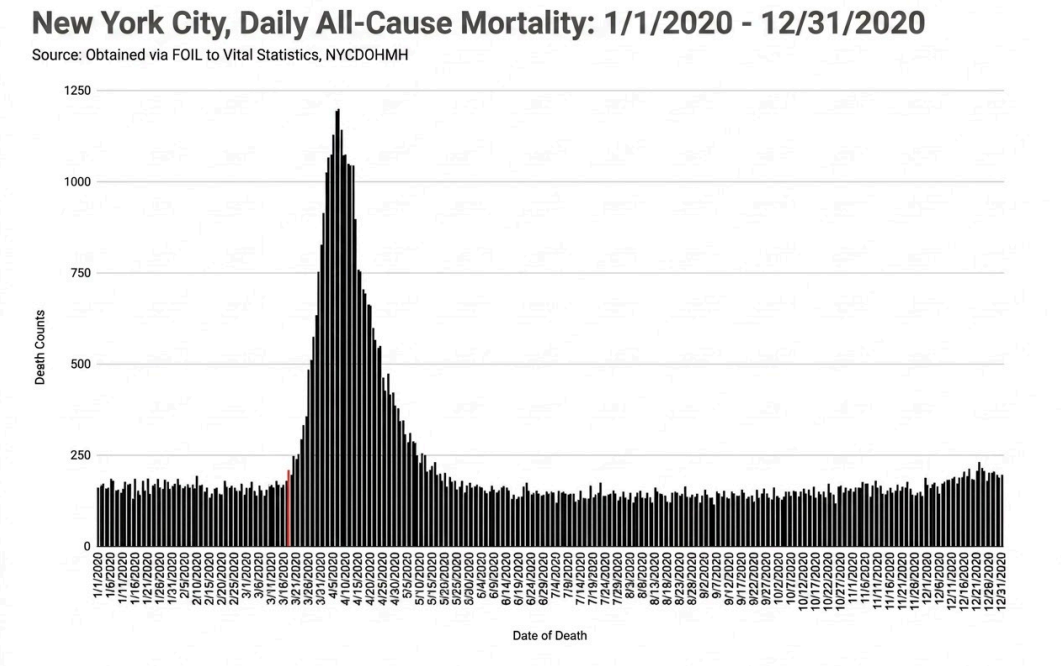
This is *much* higher than Frieden's "100" claim.

Figure 2



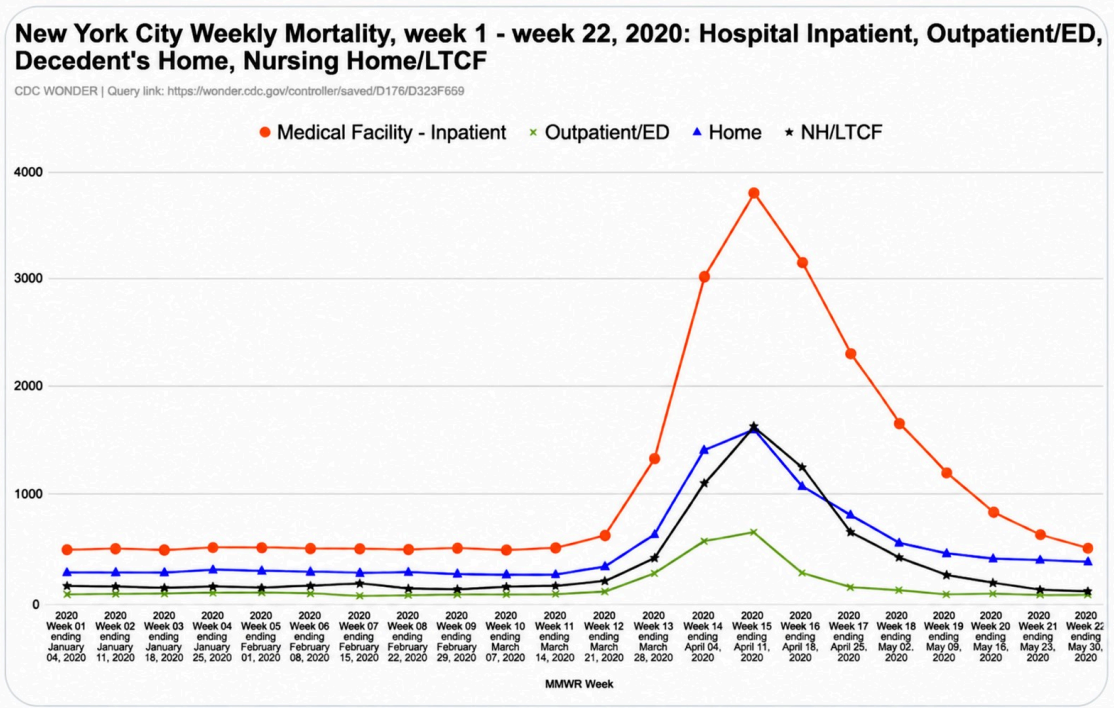
NYC's daily all-cause mortality shows deaths peaked at a whopping 1,200 on April 7th (figure 3). This is a city that normally sees 150–170 deaths a day, yet Tom Frieden doesn't note or seem to grasp the scale of what occurred. Does he get it? Does *The Wall Street Journal?*

Figure 3



NYC's all-cause mortality began skyrocketing on March 18th. Deaths in hospital inpatient shot up first and most steeply. Over 60% of the increase occurred in hospitals, and 20% of the increase at people's own homes (figure 4).[1]

Figure 4



Frieden seems clueless about any of this.

Instead, he claims that "the closure of indoor businesses and gatherings in mid-March 2020 reversed the exponential increase in cases and resulted in a rapid decline in deaths."

> with masking further decreasing spread. New York City's closure of indoor businesses and gatherings in mid-March 2020, for example, reversed the exponential increase in cases and resulted in a rapid decline in deaths, which lag infections by three or four weeks. Deaths in New York City

It did no such thing. There were zero signs of "silent spread" in mortality data before the city started to shut down in early March.[2]

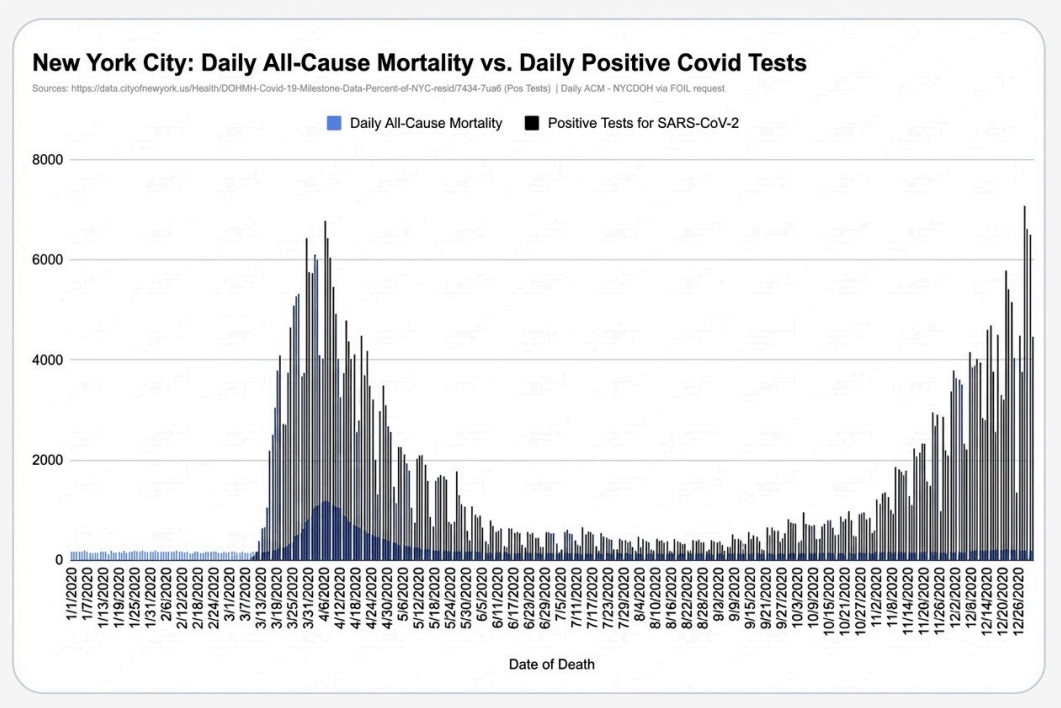
"Cases" were discovered with FDA emergency use authorization for tests/testing – and with the advent of PCR testing in nursing homes/hospitals.

James Crawford from Northwell Healthcare System said during an April 6, 2020 call with the CDC that the sudden COVID focus had crowded out testing for other respiratory viruses:

> "RVP testing uses up real estate on your machinery, particularly if you're using the semi-automated machines in your hospital sites. And so we have discouraged use of RVP testing in favor of COVID testing, just to ensure that we're optimizing our laboratory resources."[3]

Positive tests peaked in mid-April (figure 5).

Figure 5



Only a fool would claim that deaths could've been worse, when all signs point to human interventions making things worse in every way.

The "rapid decline" was multi-factorial. Nursing home/other transfers *into* hospitals dropped. People with heart and other issues died at home. Hospitals pulled back on early intubation and other harmful practices that had been advised. Same with nursing homes, as reports of neglect surfaced.[4]

Frieden also suggests that NYC hospitals were overwhelmed at some point. I don't know what he means by "overwhelmed," which is a feeling, not a term of quantity, or which hospitals he's referring to.

> later and two a day by July 1. Closures prevented or delayed many infections until hospitals became less overwhelmed and better treatments and vaccination became available.

If he means "overrun" by patient volume, no data supports that claim.[5]

Assuming *The Wall Street Journal* cares about accurate numbers and terms, an Editor should at least ask Frieden to cite his source for the NYC COVID death numbers, clarify "overwhelmed," and name any hospitals that fit his definition.

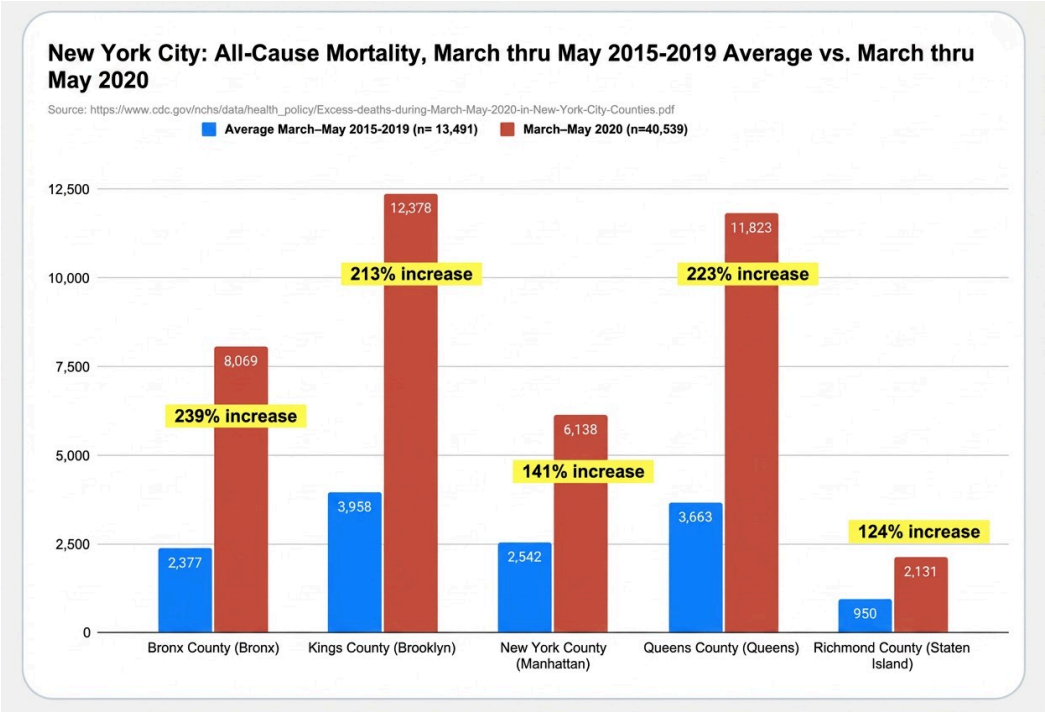
Kelley Krohnert noticed that Frieden's numbers seem to line up with COVID deaths "by report date" for New York County [Manhattan] only. That's a huge, indefensible mistake if true.

> Those numbers from Tom seem to line up with deaths *by report date* for New York *County* (not all of NYC). https://t.co/aQQwqR7vyX
>
> — Kelley K (@KelleyKga), March 21, 2023

In May 2020, CDC published provisional estimates of New York City's spring 2020 all cause mortality. "NYC" is inclusive of all five boroughs (figure 6).

Tom Frieden must correct his essay.

Figure 6 (Jessica Hockett, based on this table)



March 23, 2023 – Earlier this week, I sent two emails to *The Wall Street Journal* regarding Tom Frieden's New York City COVID death errors in his essay "What Worked Against Covid": one to the editors (below) and one to the corrections staff. I also emailed Dr. Frieden's general contact address on his website.

I'm disappointed WSJ editors did not verify claims and data about New York City's COVID-19 deaths in Tom Frieden's March 17, 2023 article "What Worked Against Covid: Masks, Closures, and Vaccines."

Per the city's Vital Statistics department, between March 15th and May 31, 2020, there were 37,469 deaths from all causes in the 5 boroughs. The peak came April 6th, with 1,200 deaths in one day (compare to a daily "norm" of 150-170 daily).

This astounding 240% increase in two and a half months warrants further investigation, especially since the federal mortality database shows approximately 60% of New York's spike occurred in hospitals--and was unlike any other city in the U.S.

Dr. Frieden seems unaware of this broader context and fails to give his readers a sense of scale. He applauds the city and implies that school/business closures, mandatory masking, and restrictions on large gatherings substantially reduced New York Covid deaths. There is no basis for such a claim.

Worse, Dr. Frieden says New York had 100 Covid deaths in mid-April, when NYC DOHMH data shows far more: 456 confirmed deaths and 121 probable deaths on April 15, 2020.

Why Dr. Frieden chooses mid-April as his reference point is unclear, given that the city's peak for Covid deaths came the previous week, on April 7th, with 598 confirmed Covid deaths that day and 233 probable Covid deaths, per health department data.

Please ask Dr. Frieden to correct the error and cite his source. As a WSJ subscriber, I expect any number in any article regardless of topic to be accurate.

WSJ has issued two corrections.

One is for daily NYC COVID-attributed deaths, which Dr. Frieden had greatly understated. The revised numbers don't match the @nycHealthy data I linked in my email, and no source is cited.

Corrections & Amplifications

In the U.S. in the last quarter of 2022, people who had been vaccinated and boosted were about one tenth as likely as unvaccinated people to be killed by Covid, and half to one third as likely as people who were vaccinated but not boosted. An earlier version of this article misstated the proportions as 10 times less likely and two to three times less likely, respectively. Also, Covid deaths in New York City declined from more than 700 a day in mid-April 2020 to 300 a day two weeks later and 15 a day by July 1. An earlier version incorrectly stated that deaths decreased from 100 in mid-April to 40 a day two weeks later and two a day by July 1. (Corrected on March 22)

Appeared in the March 18, 2023, print edition as 'What Worked Against Covid Lives Lost and Saved In Three Years of Covid'.

The other correction relates to vaccination outcomes. I don't keep up with that research/data; I'll let those who do react. [Tagged @TracyBethHoeg @Hold2LLC @KelleyKga @EthicalSkeptic]

> Corrections & Amplifications
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There are scads of problematic claims in the essay that aren't revised, but at least someone reacted to feedback about numbers.

I hope *The Wall Street Journal* raises its standards for pandemic-related contributions.

###

Footnotes *(added 4 September 2025)*

1. See also table below (used in various presentations and in articles on *Wood House 76*, including this overview). ↩
2. See also Hockett, J. (2022, September 19). "Where was Covid?" *Wood House 76.* ↩
3. In other words, testing for the *new* virus was more important than testing for the typical viruses. Fewer RVP tests = Fewer detections | Transcript | Corresponding thread ↩
4. Later analysis of different datasets contradicts some of these explanations. See Hockett, J. (2024, September 27). "Eleven Serious Problems with the New York City Mass Casualty Event." *Wood House 76.* ↩
5. Articles cited in thread: Hockett, J. (2022, November 29). "NYC's hospital system never reached full capacity in spring 2020." *Wood House 76.* | Hockett, J. (2022, October 11). "New York City ER visits plummeted in spring 2020." *Wood House 76.* ***[NOTE: Later analysis suggests that the hospital bed capacity dataset is intentionally incomplete, i.e., has no baseline, and that data are "pushed" from the left. Analyses of various datasets and contemporaneous news reports for Elmhurst Hospital Center (here and here) gives reasons to suspect that the ED visit drop is affected by calls being directed to telemedicine in early April 2020 or other definitional changes.]*** ↩

New York City, Weeks 12-22, 2020					
Place of Death	2019 Deaths from All Causes	2020 Deaths from All Causes	All Cause Increase/ Decrease (2019/2020)	Percent Change from 2019	Percent of Total Increase/ Decrease
Hospital Inpatient	4,837	19,827	14,990	310%	55.5%
Outpatient/Emergency Department	1,026	2,697	1,671	163%	6.2%
Nursing Home/LTC Facilty	1,762	6,642	4,880	277%	18.1%
Hospice Facility	267	231	-36	-13%	-0.1%
Decedent's Home	2,906	8,215	5,309	183%	19.7%
Dead on Arrival (to Hospital)	122	139	17	14%	0.1%
Other	220	403	183	83%	0.7%
Totals	**11,140**	**38,154**	**27,014**	**242%**	**100%**

Source: CDC WONDER | Jessica Hockett, PhD

Table referenced in footnote 1