Fear in the Age of COVID-19: The Implications of Death Counts, Tests, and Reported Metrics

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Due to the global SARS COVID-19 pandemic, social restrictions have impacted human behaviors and states of mental well-being. While several studies observe the role message framing has, few examine the patterns of fear and COVID-19 data. Reported metrics such as COVID-19 cases, deaths, ICU patients, and tests have the potential to affect individuals' fear. This study seeks to understand the role of these metrics and their correlation to a fear of contracting COVID-19 in the United States. Over 16,000 responses were obtained, spanning about 8 months. All COVID-19 information was sourced from Johns Hopkins University. A significant correlation was discovered between fear and daily death counts, with a statistically significant ($p = .000$) Tau b correlation coefficient (tb) of .422. Fear and daily death counts had the highest correlation coefficient, followed by new cases with .388, then ICU patients (.304), and daily tests (.25). Another pattern noted; fear usually increased before any spike indicating temporal association or another variable is leading to increased fear (possibly reported media predictions [more research required]). Correlation between deaths and fear could be pivotal in understanding the role of message framing. A recent study found that “the only predictor of positive behavior change (e.g., social distancing, improved hand hygiene) was fear of COVID-19” (Harper et al., 2020). The effect fear has on behavior is evident. Further research benefits health professionals and social scientists in creating government policy and messages to mitigate the spread of COVID-19; as well as the potential role of functional fear in a global health crisis (Harper et al., 2020).

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