Title: “Too Much Too Late? Unintended Health Costs of Delaying the Response to a Pandemic”

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Abstract: The pandemic initiated by COVID-19 virus has shocked governments around the world. In an attempt to contain it, countries have adopted various approaches, with some countries opting for immediate, very strict regional or countrywide lockdowns (e.g. Italy and Spain), and others for more gradual step-by-step interventions (e.g. the U.K. and the U.S.). While the epidemiology and economic literature agrees that social distancing is quite effective at flattening the pandemic curve by reducing disease transmission and lowering the pressure on the health system, the extent to which an early response to the pandemic is able to also lower mortality rates unrelated to the epidemic by freeing up valuable health resources has not been discussed. This project addresses this gap by gauging the importance of the timing of implementation of lockdown measures on non-COVID related deaths in Spain – one of Europe’s epicenters imposing a very strict countrywide lockdown, and where the healthcare system was severely affected by the pandemic.

Data Description: We construct a data base containing daily information on COVID-related infection and mortality rates at the province level using data scraping techniques. Subsequently, we merge this data base to administrative data on daily mortality outcomes by province from the Spanish Monitoring System of Daily Mortality (MoMo) for 2019 and 2020. Finally, we use the fact that, while the lockdown was imposed on the entire country at once, the implementation occurred at different levels of the pandemic curve for each province, resulting in distinct lockdown adoption speeds across provinces.

JEL Codes: I18, H12.

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