

# Nuclear war, public health, the COVID-19 epidemic

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## **Nuclear war, public health, the COVID-19 epidemic: Lessons for Prevention, Preparation, Mitigation, and Education**

Andrew Futter, Samuel I. Watson, Peter J. Chilton and Richard J. Lilford

**Abstract:** The current COVID-19 pandemic has focused attention on the vulnerability of the human race in the face of communicable disease. But the pandemic also serves as a wake-up call to the cataclysmic impact that would befall the world if nuclear weapons were ever to be used again. Overwhelming pressure on health-services, considerable disruption to normal life, difficult choices regarding suspension of civil liberties, how to protect key workers and ensure society continues to function—these would all be magnified many times over in the event of a nuclear explosion. Thus, in addition to refocusing attention on the prevention and mitigation of global pandemics, the lessons of the current crisis are much more wide-ranging, and should lead to a renewal of public education, interest, and activism in reducing nuclear dangers.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, public health, nuclear weapons, nuclear war, nuclear risk.

It may seem tactless, even perverse, to write about other sorts of disasters that might befall our planet in the middle of a pandemic. But write we must. For the current crisis is a harbinger of crises to come, whether human-made or natural. While many of the lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 outbreak are specific to communicable disease, they may also provide insight into a broader set of challenges that the world may face if nuclear weapons were ever to be used again.

Dealing with a pandemic is trivial compared to dealing with the aftermath of a nuclear incident or attack. Thermal injury, followed by radiation illness, not to mention the disruption to society and the impact on the environment, would dwarf the effect of COVID-19. The basic infrastructure of government, the criminal justice system, finance, telecommunications, and food supply could be severely disrupted, whereas they have

remained largely intact during the current pandemic. But public concern over nuclear weapons has faded from a high point a generation ago. In part this may be because of psychological biases that do not properly weight the impact of an event by its probability of occurring. Consequently, the public must once again be educated about and sensitized to nuclear risk.

The task of prevention and preparation cannot be left to governments alone. As with climate change the whole of society must be engaged in pushing to transform how humans think about and manage our nuclear world. Only then will governments have the incentive to reduce systemic risk and plan for the unthinkable.

It is paradoxical that the prevention of nuclear war, so prominent in the public mind during the 1980s, has almost faded from view despite the continued proliferation of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them; despite the unravelling of the nuclear arms control edifice that has undergirded international order since the 1960s; despite rising political tensions across the world; despite well-documented near misses resulting from accidents and miscalculation; and despite the risk that nuclear materials could fall into terrorist hands. During the Cold War, governments and civil society groups planned extensively for the impact of a nuclear weapons, and the general public was encouraged to read or watch a series of “duck and cover” or “protect and survive” pamphlets and TV programs explaining what to do in the event of a nuclear war. Today that seems strange, even slightly comical. It should not be.

A sober analysis of the risks and consequences of nuclear catastrophe reveals that they are unacceptably high. But by learning lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and applying them to the nuclear realm, engaged citizens can help to reduce those risks.

### **The consequences of nuclear attacks**

The consequences of nuclear use depend on the size, number, and types of weapons, the altitude at which the explosion occurs, and population density. Alex Wellerstein’s NUKEMAP is an online tool that allows users to calibrate the gruesome effects of nuclear strikes of different magnitudes over any part of the world (Wellerstein 2020). As the tool makes clear,

nuclear weapons destroy human life in three zones radiating out from the epicenter: the fireball; the shock wave; and the area of a residual radiation, whose direction depends on prevailing winds. As an example, the 455-kiloton W88 warhead currently deployed on missiles inside US nuclear-powered submarines, if detonated above London, would kill an estimated 675,000 people and injure over a million more, not taking into account radiation damage and subsequent fallout. The Tsar Bomba, a 50-megaton bomb released into the atmosphere by the Soviet Union in 1961 and the most powerful bomb ever to be tested, could have killed up to 7.6 million people and injured a further 4 million if detonated over New York City. During the Cold War, experts estimated that the use of just 1 percent of the world's nuclear stockpile could kill about 56 million people and injure another 61 million (Daugherty, Levi, and Von Hippel 1986).

The medical effects of nuclear war are summarized in a report of that title, published by the British Medical Association's Board of Science and Education in 1983 (British Medical Association 1983). Its conclusions derive from the generic effects of blast, thermal, and radiation injury, as well as from observations made following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and from over 2,000 nuclear tests (Simon and Bouville 2015). The fireball destroys everything at close hand, while at a greater distance thermal radiation causes flash burns and fires. A blast wave follows. Travelling at 90 meters per second, it wreaks havoc, crushing people in buildings, injuring them with flying debris, or choking them with dust. Survivors of thermal and blast injury, and those at greater distance from ground zero, are exposed to nuclear radiation and fallout. In the short term, they are at risk of radiation sickness, the main features of which are bone marrow suppression, gastrointestinal symptoms, and skin damage. The severity of the disease depends on the radiation dose. Longer-term effects of radiation include reduced fertility, congenital abnormality (especially microcephaly), and cancer (especially of the thyroid).

However, just as the impact of a pandemic does not end with health effects, the impact of a nuclear strike would also go beyond the immediate death toll. Supply chains, including those for food and medicine, would be severely disrupted. Law and order would probably break down on a massive scale. There are also risks that are theoretical and controversial, but which would be cataclysmic if they occurred. Prominent among these is the risk of a so-

called nuclear winter resulting from particles released into the high atmosphere (Sagan 1983; Scouras 2019). Another theoretical risk is that of electromagnetic pulse disruption of electronic systems. Such an effect caused satellites in low orbit to fail following the high-altitude Starfish Prime nuclear test, carried out by the United States in 1962 (Plait 2012). Many writers have tried to imagine life in the aftermath of a nuclear strike, and the descriptions make the reader wonder if those killed immediately are not the fortunate ones (Whitcomb 2019; Witze 2020).

### **How might a nuclear incident arise?**

Although the major nuclear powers have reduced stockpiles from their peaks in the 1980s, there are still over 13,000 nuclear weapons in the world today (Ploughshares Fund 2020). The bombs released in Japan in August 1945 relied entirely on fission, while in modern warheads fission is merely the detonator for an immensely more powerful fusion reaction. Several hundred of these weapons are held at high states of readiness for an attack. What might trigger their deployment? There are four main risks.

First is a planned attack. The 1945 attack on Japan is the only example to date. During the Cold War, potential belligerents were ostensibly restrained under the condition of mutual assured destruction, which itself relies on retaliation, rationality, and uncertainty about how the other side would act. Such gamesmanship may have been successful while there were only two actors, the United States and the Soviet Union, but it has become more complex and arguably more fragile in a world where nine states can deploy nuclear weapons, and where new flashpoints have emerged in East Asia, South Asia, and possibly the Middle East.

Second is miscalculation. There have been numerous nuclear near misses in our past: most famously, the near launch from a Russian nuclear submarine during the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, and as a result of the NATO military exercise, code-named Able Archer, which led to a nuclear war scare in 1983. But also, more recently during the India-Pakistan Kargil war of 1999, just a year after both had conducted nuclear tests.

Third is an accident. It is at least conceivable that nuclear weapons could be used by accident, possibly through a computer malfunction or human error. Perhaps the best example of this would be the so-called “Petrov incident” in 1983, when scattered rays of sunlight tricked a Soviet alert system into thinking a US nuclear attack was incoming (Lewis, et al. 2015).

Fourth is by non-state actors, such as terrorist groups. The chance of a nuclear detonation by a terrorist group may be limited; but perhaps more worrying is the possibility that by simulating an attack from one country they could provoke retaliation from another, or from some other interference that leads to nuclear use.

Most commentators think that miscalculation or accident is the most likely progenitor of a nuclear strike, by a considerable margin; if that is true, then nonuse of nuclear weapons for 75 years has been the result mostly of luck rather than judgement (Pelopidas 2017).

### **Quantifying the risk of nuclear events**

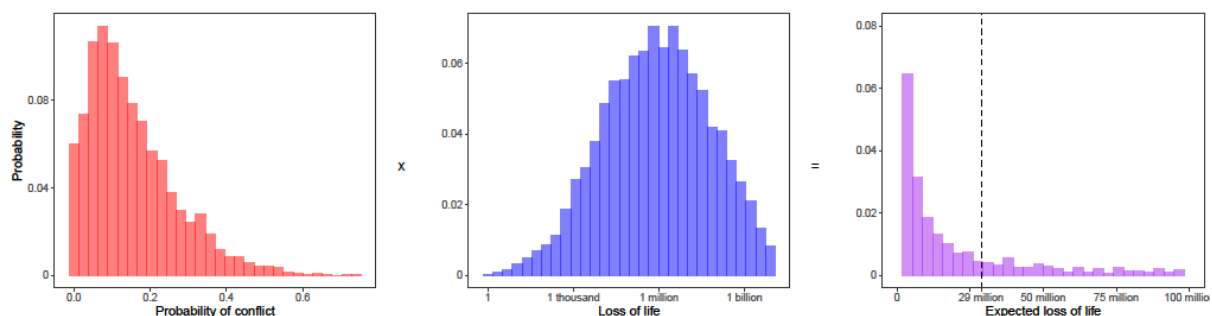
The magnitude of the risk of a nuclear event is hard to estimate. The risk of a single incident, leading to the death of, say, one million people, might be as high as 50 percent over the next 50 years, according to one model (Barrett, Baum and Hostetler 2013). Another widely cited figure is a 2 percent chance per year (Hellman 2008). A survey of experts found a wide range of estimates of the probability of nuclear war over a 10-year period; only one of the 79 respondents put the risk at zero percent, and 60 put it at over 10 percent (Lugar 2005).

The expected loss from a future event is the product of its probability and its impact, both of which could themselves be assigned probability distributions to represent the associated uncertainties. The impact could be calibrated in disability adjusted life years or even just life years lost. As a simple illustration, a 5 percent probability of an event with 50 million casualties results in an expected loss of 2.5 million ( $0.05 \times 50m$ ) lives.

However, the skewed distribution of impact means the probability of losses that are orders of magnitude larger than this cannot be ignored. Figure 1 provides an example of the

expected life years lost from a nuclear conflict by providing probability distributions based on estimates from the literature. In this example, the expected number of lives lost is 29 million, even though the median probability of a nuclear conflict is “only” 10 percent and the median number of lives lost is 1 million. By way of comparison, the World Health Organization estimated that climate change would be responsible for around 241,000 additional deaths each year to 2030 (or about 2.5 million over ten years) (World Health Organization 2014). Neither of these calculations take into account loss of life due to indirect economic effects. Nor do they include suffering caused by chronic illness and disability. In the case of nuclear exposure, this also includes terrible effects on unborn children. However, even without taking these considerations into account, it is clear that both nuclear war and climate change are huge threats to public health and wellbeing. But there is little reason to conclude that climate change is the greater hazard. The effects of nuclear war are immediate, whereas climate change provides plenty of warning, allowing infrastructure to be preserved, even if at high cost.

**Figure 1. Probability densities**



*The plot on the left shows a plausible probability distribution for a nuclear conflict. This plot reflects the uncertainty with a small chance of very high probabilities and a median value of 10%. The center plot shows different values for the number of casualties (on a log scale) should a nuclear strike occur. There is a fifty percent probability that there would be a million or more deaths given a strike. The plot on the right is the product of the previous plots and shows the expected loss of life resulting from a nuclear conflict over the next 50 years. The dashed line indicates a mean expected loss of life of 29 million. The mean remaining life years across the UK population is 43.4 years, so the loss of life years resulting from such an attack on the United Kingdom would amount to 1,258,600,000 (29m x 43.4), spread randomly across the population. (Note that we have not discounted the value of those future life years in line with recent persuasive arguments against doing so.) (Drupp 2018).*

## Public perceptions and social concern

A generation ago, nuclear risk was at the forefront of the public debate. Citizens across the globe were genuinely worried that a nuclear war might break out between East and West, and this spurred huge public protests and a strong anti-nuclear movement. However, today, the appreciation of nuclear risk appears much lower, with far less public concern beyond elite-level discussion and civil society activism. Notwithstanding the work of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (an international federation of medical groups), the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the recent Humanitarian Initiative on Nuclear Weapons, and the 2017 Nuclear Ban Treaty, nuclear risks appear to have fallen below other global societal risks, such as climate change, and, following the outbreak of COVID-19, global pandemics. Why has the risk of nuclear war almost dropped out of popular concern when there is little or no objective reason for citizens to lower their guard? There are four main reasons.

First is a failure to consider both the probability and magnitude of nuclear events. As the above calculations show, probability should not be considered in isolation from the magnitude of an event if it occurs. The expected loss should be kept in mind when assessing threats.

Second is the general public's bandwidth for giving attention to important issues. There appears to be a limit to the number of issues that can rise to prominence at any one time; issues must compete for public and journalistic attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). But other issues, important as they may be, should not crowd out the nuclear risk.

Third is the availability heuristic. People are more engaged by things they have experienced than things they must imagine. Expect public support for investment to prevent and prepare for pandemics in the near future. However, the hidden danger is often the greater danger, in part because it is hidden and less tangible.

Fourth is a sense of futility. Challenges such as climate change and pandemic prevention are perceived to be more "doable" in the sense that people feel they can influence the course



of events. Such a sense of powerlessness may induce a nihilistic attitude. However, citizens are not powerless to reduce nuclear risk.

### **Learning nuclear lessons from COVID-19 and preparing for the unthinkable**

The current COVID-19 crisis, in addition to serving as a timely reminder of the very personal nature of global catastrophic risk, can also shine light on the ongoing nuclear challenge that global society faces.

The first objective when dealing with global catastrophic risks, such as that posed by nuclear weapons, is the importance of prevention. It is easy to think that nuclear prevention differs from pandemic prevention in the sense that pandemics arise from the natural world while nuclear events are entirely human made. However, pandemics involve human actions at all levels, from the way the environment is managed (Brulliard 2020), through containment in facilities that experiment with modification of the viral genome, and through the nations and international agencies that respond to emerging threats. Both viral and nuclear risks can be mitigated by international co-operation. The risk of pandemics can be reduced through international agreement covering early reporting of communicable disease outbreaks. Delayed reporting resulted in delayed action in the case of COVID-19.

Worryingly, similar bilateral and multilateral agreements, supported by trust building, are eroding in the nuclear arena. Ensuring that the current global arms control architecture—including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty agreed in 1968 and the New START agreement between the United States and Russia that is due to expire next year—survives into a new era is essential. Likewise, continued international efforts to reduce the risks posed by nuclear terrorism through securing nuclear facilities and accounting for all fissile materials are also vital.

Genuine political commitment to nuclear disarmament would of course be the ultimate prevention mechanism, but whether nuclear disarmament is possible in our lifetimes is a moot point. Indeed, global engagement with nuclear disarmament appears to be on the wane even after the high point of agreement of the 2017 Nuclear Ban Treaty. Nevertheless,

if the world cannot disarm, at least it could create a regime where all, or the great majority, of armaments are taken off high alert and various confidence building and risk reduction mechanisms are put in place, given the well-documented risks of accident or miscalculation. All these measures require strengthening international bodies that can carry out inspections and help overcome suspicion through increasing transparency. For example, governments will be more confident to reduce the high alert status of nuclear weapons if they can be assured that other governments are doing likewise.

If prevention is not possible, then attention must turn toward preparation. It has been argued that the world was not properly prepared for the current pandemic, from a lack of personal protective equipment to economic planning for lockdown, meaning that decisions had to be made on the fly. However, if governments were not prepared for the pandemic, then they are likely not prepared for other global disasters either, the most significant of which would arguably be a nuclear disaster.

Duncan Campbell's 1982 book *War Plan UK* gives an unnerving insight into the limitations of planning for life after a nuclear attack even in an age where such an event was taken seriously (Campbell 1982). And it is not clear that much societal contingency planning beyond the continuity of government exists in most states today (see Graff 2017). COVID-19 has highlighted the enormous pressures on the health service, police officers, and other essential workers, and has shown that these workers can become ill or even die. Moreover, even if just one city was attacked by a nuclear weapon, it would be necessary for other parts of the country to come to its aid, and the government would have to step in to put emergency measures in place for the distribution of food and water, shelter, and healthcare.

Policy makers can't just wring their hands and say how catastrophic it would be and hope for the best. The fact that it would be difficult to manage such a scenario is the very reason why the plans should be made. Such plans would have to involve the whole of society, just as they did in the 1960s. Citizens need to persuade their governments to spend money and energy on difficult questions. How to maintain food supplies? How to get money to people who need it? Who is an essential worker? Which industries or parts of society should be

prioritized? What is the correct balance between state and private industry in the response? How much should the population be allowed to know? How far should human rights be suspended? What should the parts of the country that are functioning do to help those that are not?

The current COVID-19 crisis also provides insight into the challenges that citizens would face in the event of a nuclear attack (whether small or large in scale, or indeed just threatened). A nuclear crisis is likely to create far greater levels of panic, hoarding, and shortages of medical supplies than has COVID-19. There would be a rush to stockpile iodine, for example, to counter the effects of radiation on the thyroid, but also of the equipment necessary to treat burns or gain access to clean water. A nuclear attack would also almost certainly mean the curtailment of civil liberties, as well as lockdowns and restrictions on travel (both domestically and abroad). Rather than to prevent the spread of illness, this would be done to allow the authorities to try to manage the crisis and prevent lawlessness. It may even include martial law and possibly a restriction of citizens' ability to access reliable information. To some extent, this is easier today with 24-hour television news reporting and myriad online resources to keep everyone up to date (assuming TV and radio transmission is still possible), but the flip side of this is that knowing what is real or believable is difficult (Lazer, Baum, Benkler et al. 2018). This also highlights the importance of clear and unequivocal messaging on the part of trustworthy governments (another significant challenge highlighted by the response to COVID-19).

Perhaps the most important pieces of the nuclear risk puzzle are education and engagement. Notwithstanding the excellent work by organizations such as the Nuclear Threat Initiative, the public is probably less familiar with the basics of nuclear weapons and nuclear risks than at any point since the 1940s, so it is essential that more be done to educate the public about them, perhaps in a similar way to what has happened with climate change. With respect to engagement, a nuclear disaster, and certainly a nuclear war, would be a catastrophe that extended beyond borders, and while an immediate reaction might be to close borders and look inward, it is clear that any response would have to be global.

### **A nuclear wake-up call**

In 1966 the BBC docudrama *The War Game* depicting a hypothetical nuclear attack on the United Kingdom was deemed so upsetting that it was initially banned from being broadcast. Two decades later, the films *The Day After* and *Threads* portrayed the harrowing impact of nuclear attacks on towns in the US Midwest and on Sheffield, England, respectively. Upsetting as these films may have been, they nevertheless played an important role in educating the public about nuclear risks. A generation later, in the midst of the challenges and politics of the modern world, people seem to have forgotten the dangers posed by nuclear weapons or are at best blissfully ignorant. It is essential, however unpleasant it may seem, that citizens think about the unthinkable and make a concerted effort to hopefully prevent, but in a worst-case scenario mitigate and manage, the threats posed by nuclear weapons. The world has survived for 75 years without the use of nuclear weapons in war, but this does not automatically mean that the same will be true in the future. That governments have avoided catastrophe thus far is, at least in part, due to luck. There is no reason to assume that this luck will hold out indefinitely.

There is a limit to how far governments are prepared to move without the support of their citizens. As was the case in the abolition of the slave trade two hundred years ago or with climate change today, the causal chain is often from citizen to government, rather than the other way around (Jennings 2013). Citizens should hold politicians to account. It is crucially important that scientists and other experts are humble about how much is known—or how much can be known. However, the gradual awakening to the dangers of climate change, and more recently virulent disease, shows that the public can absorb abstract ideas and incorporate them in their worldview beyond just reciting empty slogans. But a societal movement requires engagement from a broad swath of groups including the press, teachers, the judiciary, and humanitarian and religious groups to ensure that the issue of nuclear risk is placed at the center of the public agenda in a sober but serious way.

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