



# Mask-Wearing Policy/Practice and Medical Experts in South Korea during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jaehwan Hyun (History of Science/Science and Technology Studies)  
Pusan National University, South Korea

# Activities and publications



**The “Mask-Arrayed” Project at the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) (Mar-Dec 2020)**

**“The Socio-Material History of Masked Societies in East Asia: A Virtual Workshop” at MPIWG (Oct 26 2020)**

**“Forum Issue: The Socio-Material History of Masked Societies in East Asia” at *EASTS* (Mar 2022)**

**“The Emergence and Development of Hygienic Masks in Colonial Korea” at *The Korean Journal for the History of Medicine* (Apr 2022; in Korean)**

***Mask Panorama: Science and the Politics of Masks from the Black Death to COVID-19* (Sep 2022; in Korean)**

# A Korean case

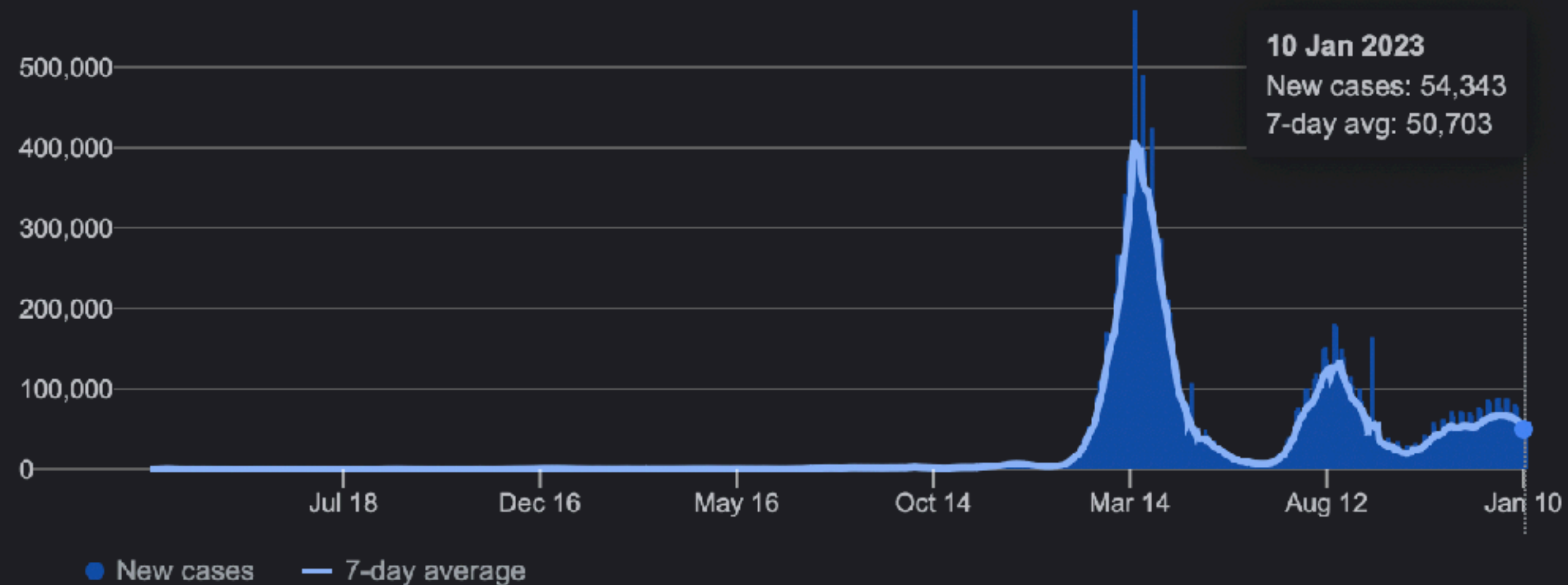
## New cases and deaths

From [JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data](#) · Last reported: yesterday

Cases Deaths

## South Korea

All time ▾



Reporting data is subject to change and might not reflect all new cases · [About this data](#)

## All-time cases and deaths

Total cases

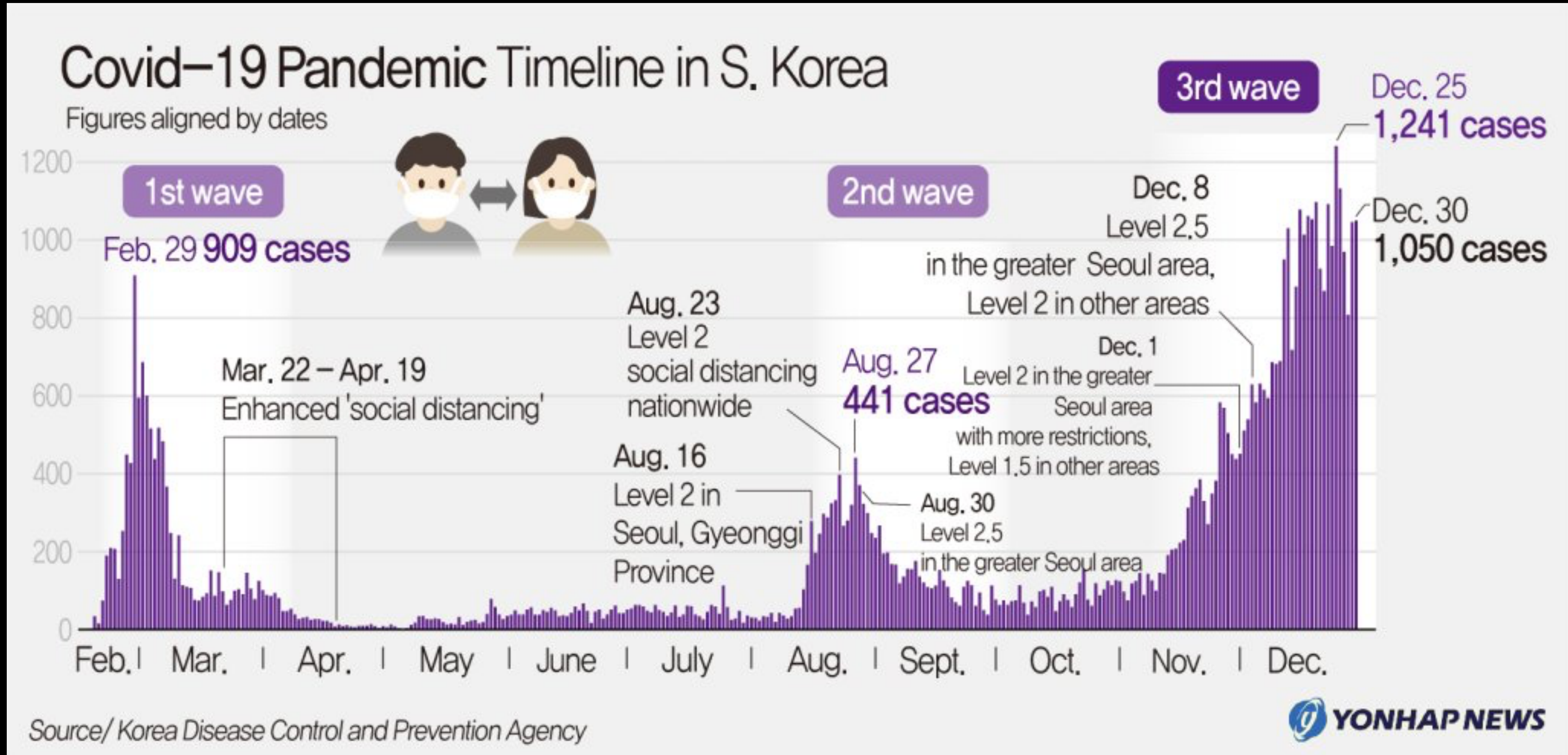
29.7M

Total deaths

32,745

# A Korean case

## An early COVID-19 timeline (in 2020)



# A Korean case

## The COVID timeline and mask rules

First COVID case in Seoul (from Wuhan, China) on **January 20, 2020**

WHO Interim Guidance on the Use of Masks (29 January, 2020): In the “community setting, a medical mask is not required, as no evidence is available on its usefulness to protect non-sick persons”

First wave from early February to mid March, 2020

WHO Interim Guidance on the Use of Masks (5 June, 2020): “encourage the general public to wear masks in specific situations and settings as part of a comprehensive approach to suppress SARS-CoV-2 transmission”

First (indoor) mask mandate enacted on **October 13, 2020**

Outdoor mask mandate enacted on April 12, 2021

Outdoor mask mandate was partially lifted on May 2, 2022  
and completely lifted on September 26, 2022

The lifting of the indoor mask mandate became a socio-political issue in November-December, 2022

# A Korean case

“A longitudinal survey on personal hygienic behaviors during the early COVID-19 pandemic period” (Yoo 2020: 116)

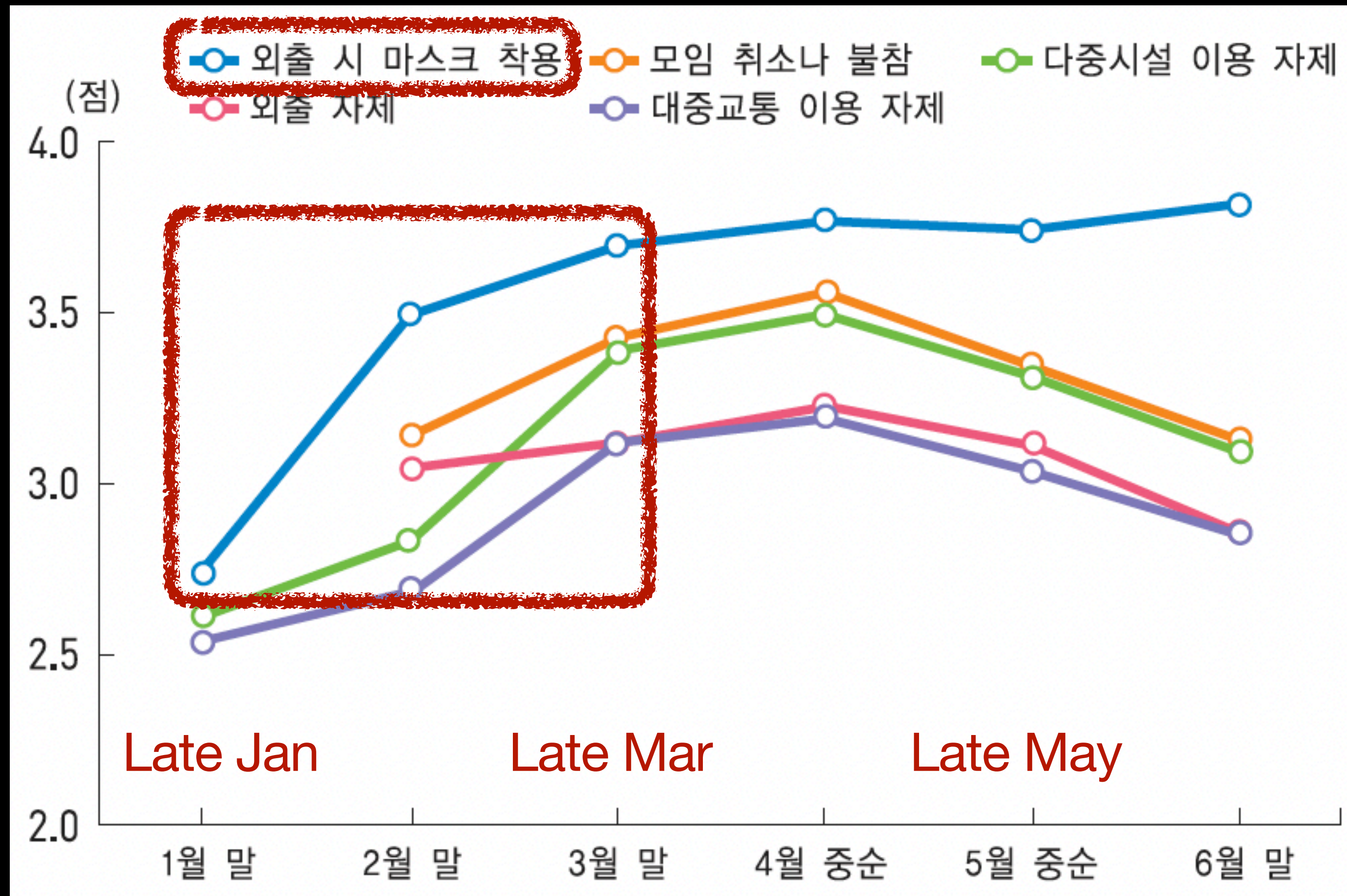
Late January - Late June 2020

1,000 Korean subjects (randomly selected)

Score: 1 (none), 2 (rarely practiced), 3 (frequently practiced), 4 (practiced everyday)

Blue dot-line: “Mask-wearing”

-> A high score of mask-wearing already before the October mask mandate



# A Korean case

**Mask crisis: public demands and shortage of mask supplies**

“Mask crisis” in early February 2020 and the establishment of the public mask supply system (March 5-July 12)



# A Korean case

## The quarantine authorities' apology for the “lukewarm” mask-wearing guidelines

Director General Jun-Wook Kwon at the Korean Central Disease Control Headquarters (K-CDC) on July 18, 2020 (a month after WHO's revised mask guideline published)



“Apologies for not more convincingly urging the Korean citizens to wear masks in the early pandemic period [February and March 2020] while following the WHO guidelines”



# Literature review & questions

## **A Korean specificity of mask-wearing policy and practice**

**Previous studies (Public Health Policy and Medical Sociology):** (1) deal with mask regulation only as part of a set of governmental strategies, (2) focus on the governmental intervention in the mask supply during the early COVID period, (3) explain why the public wore masks widely even without government regulations in terms of cultural peculiarities (e.g., collectivism), and (4) assume mask measures to be scientifically sound (Ahn 2021; Koh and B Kim 2020; Chung et al. 2022; Ha 2022; Lim et al. 2020; Yu et al. 2020; Yoo et al. 2021; Shin 2022)

**Previous studies (History of Science, Technology, and Medicine and Science and Technology Studies(STS)):** mostly take a social constructivist approach to the knowledge of mask effectiveness (Jung 2021; HM Kim 2022), while some literature pays attention to the material culture of mask use and production (HW Kim and Choi 2021; Jang and Yim 2021)

# Literature review & questions

## **A Korean specificity of mask-wearing policy and practice**

**Gaps in the previous research:** due to the exclusive focus on cultural factors and the wearing behaviors of the public, the role of medical experts in making mass-masking and mask-wearing policy has not received much attention

**Questions:** what role did medical experts, ranging from epidemiologists and public health scientists to infectious disease specialists, play (or not play) in encouraging citizens to wear masks and the government to implement mask-wearing recommendations and regulations? how did they determine whether mask-wearing was scientifically sound (or not)? Which criteria did they adopt to evaluate the “scientific effectiveness” of mass masking?

# Approach

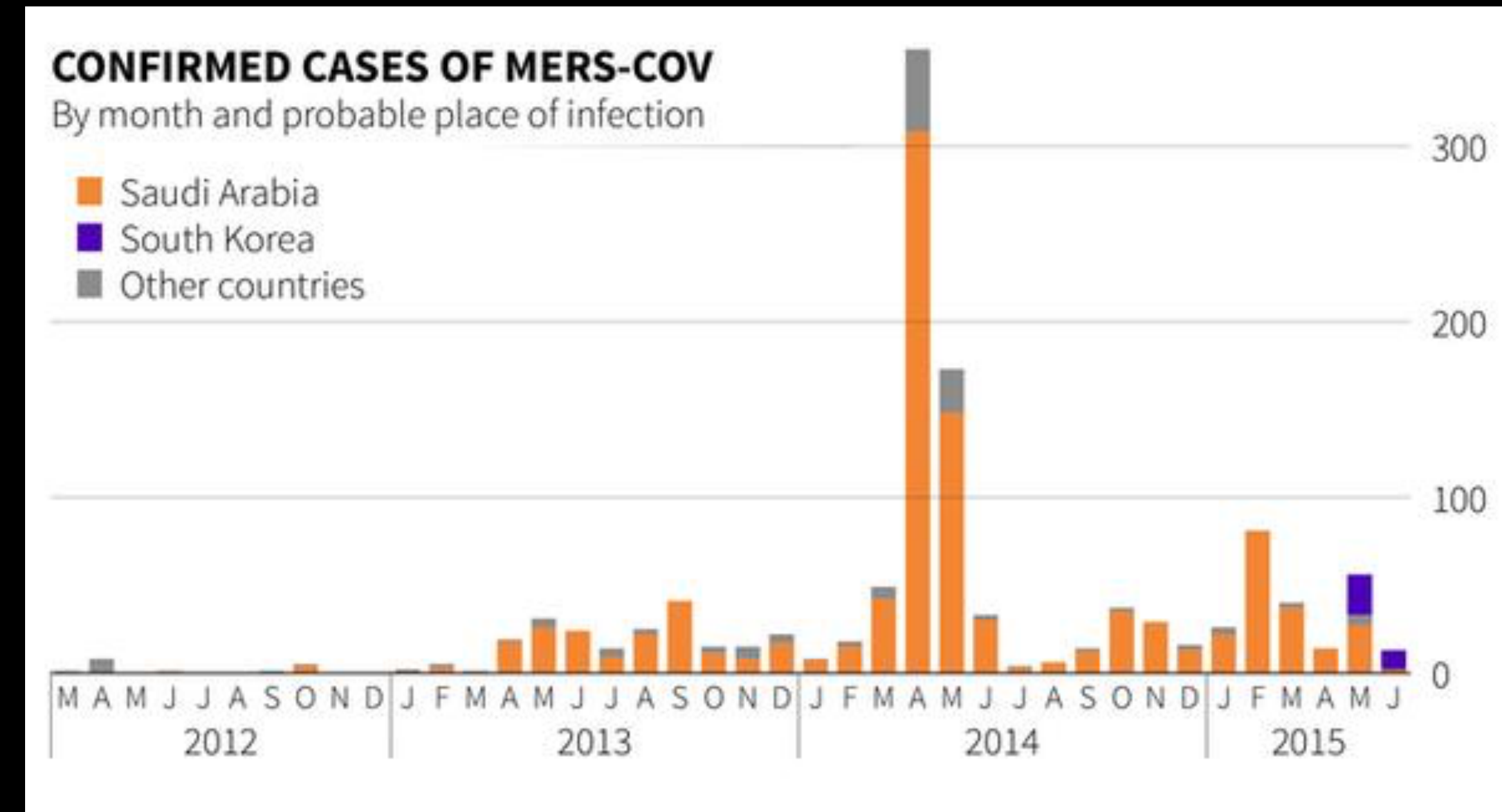
**(1) Document analysis:** examine clinical guidelines and recommendations produced by medical associations and organizations, the governmental quarantine guidelines, and reports and minutes of mask-wearing related public hearings and expert committees

**(2) Qualitative interviews:** interview experts who closely cooperated with the Korean public health authorities and contributed to mask-wearing policy  
(Candidates: Ki-Suk Jung (respiratory medicine), Jaehun Jung (public health), Moran Ki (infectious disease), Eun-Kyeong Jeong (public health), Jaegab Lee (infectious disease), and Woo-joo Kim (infectious disease))

# A pilot study based on document analysis

## A “modest” emphasis on mask-wearing from the outset:

due to the MERS-Cov outbreak in 2015 and its aftermath, the statement “wear a mask if you are coughing or if you visit medical facilities” was already enclosed in the first governmental guidelines against COVID-19 on January 26, 2020, and in the expert statement from infectious disease-related medical societies on February 1, 2020



World Economic Forum, June 11, 2015; <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/06/the-mers-virus-graphs/>

# A pilot study based on document analysis



**A rationale for “mild” rejection (or flexibility) of the WHO mask guidelines: Experience of interactions with WHO during the MERS outbreak**

Two factors convinced Korean medical experts that “the WHO mask-wearing guideline for COVID-19 cannot be 100% applied to Korea due to the specificities of local situations” and led them to acknowledge a need for public mask-wearing in early February: (1) The Korean-WHO joint research, finding the MERS-Cov outbreak’s cause to be Korea’s unique medical culture and crowded environment, and (2) the difficulties of Korean health practitioners applying the WHO guidelines to the local situation (Ki 2020)

# A pilot study based on document analysis

**EBM(evidence-based medicine) as slogans and non-production of mask knowledge:** Early guidelines and statements made by Korean medical experts emphasized the need for further scientific evidence to evaluate the benefits of public mask-wearing, but they did not conduct any relevant research or write any technical reports; nor did they apply the EBM rule when mentioning recent research outcomes



The Expert Meeting on the Regulation of Indoor Mask Mandate, organized by the K-CDC, December 15, 2022

# Suggestion

**Multinational comparison with a focus on mask-wearing policy/practice and medical experts**

**Stark differences with European countries:** (1) Early dismissal of public mask-wearing by medical experts (at least in Germany/UK), (2) ASPHER's series of work on technical reports or expert statements concerning the use of masks and mask-wearing, (3) Go along with WHO guidelines generally, and (4) Active scientific debates on the effectiveness of public mask wearing