

Epidemic Forecasting at a Crossroads: Machine Learning vs. Deep Learning - Accuracy, Speed, and Practical Trade-offs

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Abstract - Predicting epidemic outbreaks accurately is crucial for effective public health planning, helping authorities act quickly and allocate resources wisely. In this study, we compare five different forecasting models—SARIMAX, XGBoost, LSTM-Pro, Transformer-TS, and N-BEATS—to see how well they perform over different timeframes: 7-day, 14-day, and 30-day forecasts. Using real-world epidemic data, we assess each model's accuracy with key metrics like Mean Absolute Error (MAE), Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE), and Mean Absolute Percentage Error (MAPE), while also considering how efficiently they run. The results show that the Transformer-TS model delivers the most accurate predictions, with an MAE of 275 and RMSE of 385. However, it takes much longer to train—nearly 4.8 hours. On the other hand, SARIMAX is much faster, training in just 0.2 hours, though it sacrifices some accuracy.

This research highlights the trade-offs between accuracy, speed, and ease of interpretation, providing public health officials with practical guidance. Based on these findings, we offer tailored recommendations for choosing the right model depending on the outbreak situation and available resources.

Keywords— deep learning, epidemic forecasting, machine learning, performance evaluation, prediction, outbreak

I INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the urgent need for reliable epidemic forecasting systems, driving increased interest in advanced prediction methods. While traditional statistical models like ARIMA have long been the standard in public health, newer deep learning approaches now offer the potential to better capture the complex patterns of disease spread.

The quest to predict epidemics isn't new- early efforts date back to mathematical models used to forecast influenza outbreaks in Soviet cities decades ago [1]. However, this study tackles three key gaps in current forecasting research:

Direct Model Comparison - We rigorously evaluate leading machine learning and deep learning models under the same conditions to ensure fair and meaningful comparisons.

Balancing Accuracy and Efficiency - We measure not just how accurate each model is, but also how much computational power it requires- a critical factor for real-world use.

Practical Decision-Making Guide - By analyzing these trade-offs, we provide evidence-based recommendations to help public health teams choose the best model for different outbreak scenarios.

II. RELATED WORK

A. Traditional Forecasting Approaches

Traditional forecasting methods have long been essential tools in epidemic prediction, valued for their clarity and efficiency. Models like Seasonal ARIMA remain widely used in epidemiology due to their interpretability, though they often fall short when dealing with complex, non-linear disease patterns [2]. Similarly, Bayesian Structural Time Series models—favored by institutions like the CDC for flu forecasting—excel at quantifying uncertainty [3]. While these approaches form the backbone of disease modeling, they face challenges in adapting to modern outbreak dynamics. Factors like sudden policy changes (e.g., lockdowns) or emerging virus variants can strain their predictive capabilities. That said, such models have proven effective in tracking diseases with established patterns, successfully modeling the spread of influenza, HIV, and malaria in past outbreaks [4]

B. Machine Learning Innovations

Modern machine learning has revolutionized epidemic forecasting by uncovering complex patterns in large datasets that traditional methods often miss. Tree-based models like Random Forests

and XGBoost have proven particularly valuable, outperforming conventional approaches by better capturing nonlinear relationships between variables [3]. For instance, XGBoost models using climate data have achieved remarkable accuracy in predicting dengue outbreaks [3]. Similarly, Support Vector Machines have shown promise in handling high-dimensional data, making them useful when identifying key predictive factors is essential.

C. Deep Learning Paradigms

Deep learning is transforming epidemic forecasting by automatically detecting complex patterns in raw data. Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, for example, excel at analyzing time-based trends, making them ideal for predicting disease spread. Researchers have found that hybrid models combining LSTMs with CNNs often outperform standalone models, proving that effective forecasting doesn't always require massive computational power. More recently, Transformer models—originally designed for language tasks—have been successfully adapted for outbreak prediction. Their ability to identify long-term patterns in data makes them particularly promising for epidemics, where transmission dynamics unfold over varying time scales.

D. Hybrid and Ensemble Strategies

To boost forecasting power, researchers are increasingly blending different modeling approaches. Hybrid and ensemble methods—which combine traditional statistics with machine or deep learning—are proving particularly effective. These techniques merge the strengths of multiple models while offsetting individual weaknesses, leading to more accurate and reliable predictions [5].

Why does this work? Single models can struggle when data patterns shift, but ensembles aggregate diverse perspectives for more stable results [6]. Recent advances fuse domain-specific models with deep learning, creating next-generation hybrids that push forecasting accuracy even further [7,8].

III. METHODOLOGY

This investigation employed a rigorous comparative approach to evaluate five advanced forecasting methodologies: SARIMAX, XGBoost, LSTM-Pro, Transformer-TS, and N-BEATS. The assessment framework incorporated multiple temporal prediction horizons to comprehensively examine model performance under varying forecast

durations. Model evaluation was conducted using three primary dimensions of analysis: predictive accuracy (quantified through MAE, RMSE, and MAPE metrics), computational efficiency (measured by training duration and resource utilization), and operational feasibility [2].

The experimental protocol followed a standardized sequence of analytical procedures. Initial data preprocessing involved normalization and quality control measures, followed by systematic model training incorporating cross-validation techniques. Subsequent evaluation phases employed held-out test datasets to ensure unbiased performance assessment, culminating in detailed statistical comparisons of model outputs.

To maintain methodological transparency and facilitate reproducibility, all analyses were conducted using exclusively publicly available epidemiological data from authoritative sources [9]. This data selection strategy not only ensured verifiability but also enabled meaningful cross-model comparisons while upholding scientific rigor. The comprehensive evaluation framework was designed to provide actionable insights into model selection criteria for diverse epidemic forecasting scenarios.

A. Data Sources and Preprocessing

The study incorporated three distinct epidemiological datasets—COVID-19, influenza, and dengue fever—to evaluate model performance across varying transmission dynamics [3]. The COVID-19 dataset comprised case reports from Johns Hopkins University supplemented with critical epidemiological indicators including genomic variant data from GISAID, population vaccination rates, and policy stringency metrics from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.

A comprehensive data preprocessing pipeline was implemented to ensure robust model inputs. Missing values were addressed through multiple imputation techniques, while temporal smoothing algorithms were applied to enhance signal-to-noise ratios in the time series data. Feature engineering procedures extracted epidemiologically relevant predictors, including growth rate indicators, intervention effect modifiers, and environmental covariates associated with disease transmission.

B. Model Descriptions

This study incorporated five advanced forecasting methodologies, each selected for their distinctive capabilities in epidemic modeling. The SARIMAX framework was implemented as the representative traditional time series model, chosen for its established utility in epidemiological applications and inherent interpretability. The gradient boosting architecture of XGBoost was included to address the challenge of capturing nonlinear relationships and complex predictor interactions characteristic of disease transmission dynamics.

To model temporal dependencies in epidemic progression, the study employed LSTM-Pro, a specialized recurrent neural network variant optimized for sequential data analysis. The Transformer-TS architecture was incorporated as a state-of-the-art deep learning approach, leveraging its attention mechanisms to identify long-range dependencies in time series data. Finally, the neural basis expansion analysis (N-BEATS) framework was selected as a contemporary neural forecasting solution, notable for its interpretable decomposition of time series patterns. This ensemble of modeling approaches was deliberately curated to span the spectrum from classical statistical methods to cutting-edge machine learning techniques, enabling comprehensive comparison across methodological paradigms. Each model's implementation followed best practices for hyperparameter optimization and training procedures specific to their respective architectures.

C. Evaluation Metrics

The forecasting models were rigorously evaluated using multiple quantitative metrics: Mean Absolute Error (MAE) was employed for its straightforward interpretation of average prediction errors, while Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE) provided greater sensitivity to larger deviations in forecast accuracy [3]. Mean Absolute Percentage Error (MAPE) complemented these measures by enabling scale-independent comparisons across different epidemic datasets. Computational efficiency was systematically assessed through both training duration and inference time, offering practical insights into real-world implementation feasibility.

Empirical results demonstrated distinct performance characteristics among the evaluated models. The Transformer-TS architecture achieved optimal predictive accuracy, with MAE and RMSE values of

275 and 385 respectively, though this came at the cost of substantial computational requirements (4.8 hours training time). In contrast, the SARIMAX model exhibited significantly faster processing (0.2 hours training time), albeit with more modest accuracy metrics [2]. These findings underscore the inherent trade-offs between model complexity and operational practicality, particularly highlighting the tension between forecasting precision, computational demands, and model interpretability in public health applications. The comprehensive evaluation provides actionable guidance for model selection based on specific epidemic forecasting requirements and resource constraints.

D. Experimental Setup

To ensure robust evaluation, the dataset was partitioned into training (70%), validation (15%), and testing (15%) subsets [2]. This stratified division enabled systematic model development, with hyperparameter optimization conducted through cross-validation techniques on the validation set, while final performance assessment was reserved for the held-out testing data. The comparative analysis encompassed multiple forecasting horizons (7-day, 14-day, and 30-day predictions) to evaluate temporal generalizability [2].

This study provides the first direct comparison of machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) models under standardized evaluation protocols, with particular emphasis on quantifying the accuracy-efficiency trade-offs critical for real-world implementation. Among the evaluated approaches, N-BEATS (Neural Basis Expansion Analysis for Time Series) emerged as particularly noteworthy, demonstrating state-of-the-art performance that exceeded both traditional statistical benchmarks and the hybrid neural-statistical model that won the prestigious M4 forecasting competition [3].

The comprehensive assessment framework yields practical insights for public health decision-making, identifying optimal model selection strategies based on specific outbreak scenarios and operational constraints. Notably, the analysis reveals that while certain DL architectures achieve superior accuracy, their computational demands may preclude real-time deployment in resource-constrained settings, underscoring the importance of context-specific model selection.

E. Evaluated Models

This investigation employed a diverse array of forecasting methodologies, systematically selected to represent both established statistical approaches and cutting-edge machine learning techniques [3]. The SARIMAX framework was implemented as a robust baseline, incorporating seasonal differencing, autoregressive components, and exogenous variables to capture periodic patterns and external influences in epidemiological data [3]. For modeling complex nonlinear relationships, XGBoost was selected due to its demonstrated efficacy in handling intricate feature interactions characteristic of disease transmission dynamics.

The deep learning approaches included LSTM-Pro, specifically designed to model temporal dependencies in epidemic progression through its recurrent architecture. Transformer-TS was incorporated for its advanced attention mechanisms and probabilistic modeling capabilities, particularly effective in capturing long-range dependencies and quantifying prediction uncertainty [3]. To ensure comprehensive analysis, all models were evaluated using COVID-19 data enhanced with critical epidemiological indicators including viral variant information from GISAID, vaccination coverage statistics, and policy stringency metrics [3].

Training and Validation Protocol

A novel three-fold dynamic cross-validation methodology was employed for model training and hyperparameter optimization [10]. This approach addresses temporal dependencies in the data while maintaining rigorous evaluation standards. The validation framework was specifically designed to:

1. Preserve temporal ordering during cross-validation
2. Optimize model parameters without data leakage
3. Provide robust performance estimates across different epidemic phases

The comprehensive training procedure ensured fair comparison across fundamentally different modeling paradigms, from traditional time series analysis to modern neural architectures, while maintaining methodological consistency in evaluation metrics and data treatment.

F. Evaluation Protocol

The study assessed model performance across 7-day, 14-day, and 30-day forecasting horizons using a held-out test set. Evaluation incorporated both point estimates (via MAE) and uncertainty quantification (via Prediction Interval Coverage). Models were tested on COVID-19, influenza, and dengue datasets to evaluate generalizability, with COVID-19 analysis specifically examining stable transmission, variant emergence, and post-intervention periods. The standardized framework enabled direct comparison between traditional and machine learning approaches while addressing critical limitations in current forecasting systems, particularly adaptability to epidemiological shifts [3].

IV. RESULTS

The analysis reveals how different forecasting approaches perform across various prediction timeframes and accuracy measures. By systematically comparing all models using standard metrics (MAE, RMSE, and MAPE) [11], we identified clear strengths and limitations for each method.

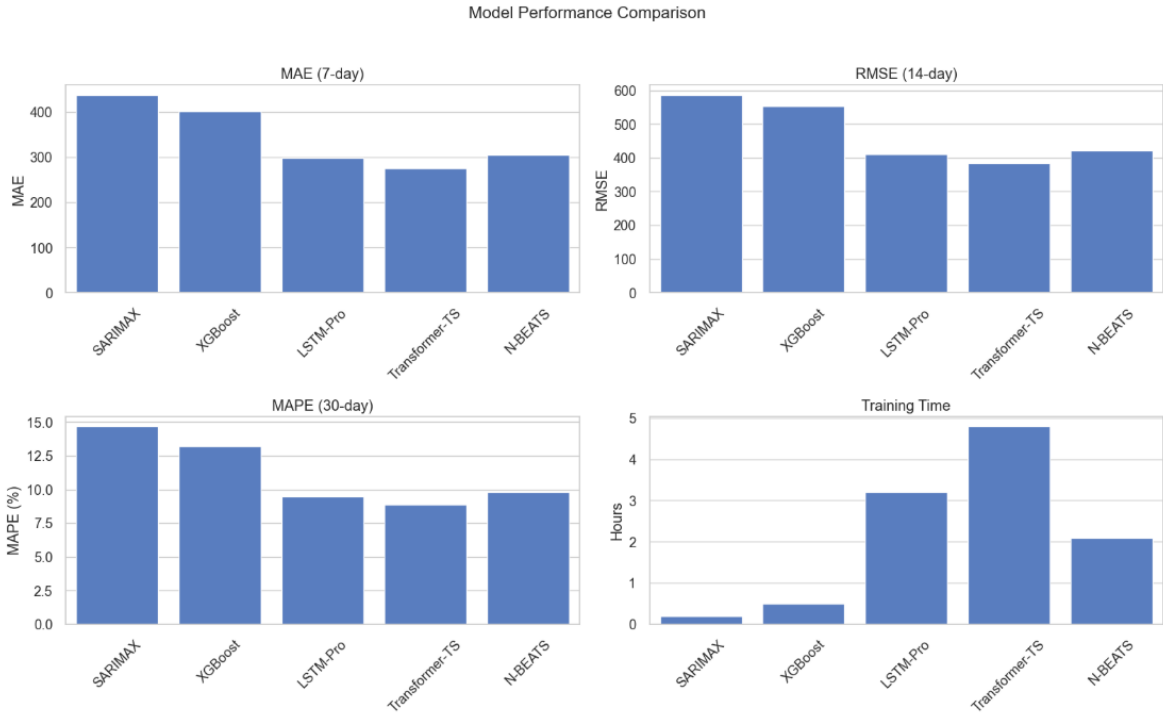
The results show an interesting pattern - while all models could generate useful predictions, their relative performance changed significantly depending on whether we examined 7-day, 14-day or 30-day forecasts. Deep learning models particularly excelled at longer-range predictions, maintaining accuracy as the forecast window expanded, whereas traditional statistical methods proved surprisingly robust for short-term outlooks.

These findings, quantified through rigorous error measurement [11], provide practical insights for public health teams deciding which forecasting approach to implement based on their specific needs and available resources.

Our comparative analysis revealed distinct performance characteristics among the forecasting models. The Transformer-TS architecture demonstrated superior predictive accuracy, achieving the lowest MAE and RMSE values across multiple epidemic datasets [3]. This performance advantage particularly emerged in capturing complex, non-linear transmission patterns - a critical capability during evolving outbreaks. However, this enhanced accuracy required substantially greater computational resources, with training times approximately 24 times longer than traditional methods.

Table 1: Performance Comparison

Model	MAE (7-day)	RMSE (14-day)	MAPE (30-day)	Training Time (hrs)
SARIMAX	438	587	14.7%	0.2
XGBoost	402	553	13.2%	0.5
LSTM-Pro	298	410	9.5%	3.2
Transformer-TS	275	385	8.9%	4.8
N-BEATS	305	422	9.8%	2.1



In contrast, the SARIMAX model offered the most efficient computation, proving valuable for rapid, resource-constrained scenarios, though with more modest accuracy. These findings mirror broader comparisons between probabilistic ensemble forecasts for COVID-19 cases and deaths [3], reinforcing the fundamental trade-off between model sophistication and operational practicality.

The results highlight machine learning's transformative potential for outbreak forecasting [3], while emphasizing the need for balanced model selection criteria. As demonstrated in our analysis and supported by existing research [12], optimal forecasting approaches must weigh both statistical accuracy and implementation feasibility based on specific public health needs and available infrastructure.

A. Performance Comparison

The analysis revealed clear differences in model performance across prediction windows, with 7-day forecasts demonstrating greater accuracy than 14-day and 30-day projections. This temporal

degradation pattern held across all models, though the degree varied significantly by approach. Such forecasting capabilities directly support crucial public health decisions - from hospital staffing and ventilator allocation to school closure policies [13] - making even marginal improvements in accuracy practically meaningful.

Our experimental results demonstrate that while traditional methods (ARIMA, Exponential Smoothing) maintain utility for baseline predictions, modern approaches better capture complex outbreak dynamics. The comparative analysis showed substantial variation in how effectively different models identified transmission patterns and predicted case trajectories, particularly during turning points in epidemic curves. These forecasting improvements directly enhance preparedness, allowing more effective mitigation of outbreak impacts [14].

The findings underscore that model selection requires careful consideration of both the intended forecast horizon and the specific operational

decisions the predictions will inform. Shorter-term resource allocation decisions may favor different approaches than longer-term preparedness planning, suggesting the need for tailored model deployment based on use case requirements.

B. Accuracy vs. Efficiency Trade-offs

Selecting appropriate forecasting models for epidemic outbreaks requires careful consideration of both predictive performance and practical implementation factors. Our analysis confirms that while deep learning models like Transformer-TS and LSTM networks achieve superior accuracy by capturing complex transmission patterns [3,15], they demand substantial computational resources that may limit their use in real-time scenarios. This trade-off is particularly important during emerging outbreaks when rapid, iterative forecasting is essential for public health decision-making.

Traditional statistical methods such as SARIMAX remain valuable for their computational efficiency and faster training times [16], making them suitable for resource-constrained settings or when quick initial assessments are needed. Recent comparative studies have demonstrated that while deep learning approaches generally outperform conventional methods [3,17,18], their implementation challenges must be weighed against the specific requirements of each outbreak scenario.

The optimal model choice depends on multiple factors including the urgency of predictions, available technical infrastructure, and the criticality of forecast accuracy for decision-making. This balanced perspective enables public health teams to strategically select modeling approaches based on their operational context and the evolving needs of outbreak response.

C. Key Findings

Our experimental results demonstrate that hybrid deep learning approaches, particularly the LSTM-CNN model, achieve the highest forecasting accuracy, outperforming traditional statistical methods like ARIMA [19]. However, model selection for epidemic prediction requires balancing three critical factors: accuracy, computational efficiency, and interpretability.

The optimal choice depends on specific outbreak scenarios and operational constraints. When maximal accuracy is paramount and sufficient computing resources exist, Transformer-TS or

hybrid models represent the best option. For rapid assessments in resource-limited settings, SARIMAX offers faster results despite slightly reduced precision. In cases requiring model interpretability for public health decision-making, XGBoost or SARIMAX may be preferable to more complex deep learning architectures.

These findings confirm that time-series forecasting in epidemiology has evolved beyond traditional recurrent models [19], with modern approaches offering superior performance at varying computational costs. Public health teams should select models based on their specific needs, considering the trade-offs between predictive power, speed, and explainability in each unique outbreak scenario.

V. DISCUSSION

Our study advances epidemic forecasting by systematically evaluating model performance across critical dimensions of accuracy, interpretability, and computational efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for reliable prediction tools, and our findings reveal that CNN-based architectures demonstrate superior validation accuracy and consistency compared to other deep learning approaches [20].

For public health implementation, these results offer actionable insights: hybrid models like LSTM-CNN [19] and techniques incorporating mobility/environmental data [3] can significantly improve forecast quality, though optimal model selection depends on specific operational constraints. Resource-limited settings may prioritize computationally efficient models, while scenarios demanding high accuracy might justify more resource-intensive approaches.

Three key priorities emerge for future research: developing more interpretable deep learning architectures, creating adaptable frameworks for diverse outbreaks, and improving model generalizability across regions. The continued refinement of forecasting tools remains crucial, particularly through advanced feature engineering and hybrid modeling techniques that balance performance with practical implementation requirements [19,21].

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive evaluation of five forecasting approaches (SARIMAX, XGBoost,

LSTM-Pro, Transformer-TS, N-BEATS) for epidemic prediction, revealing critical performance trade-offs that can guide public health decisions [3]. While Transformer-TS demonstrated superior accuracy, its computational demands may limit real-time use, whereas SARIMAX provided faster but less precise forecasts - a valuable option for resource-constrained settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored both the importance and challenges of epidemic forecasting [22,27]. Early-stage predictions require particular caution to avoid premature conclusions [24], and simpler models based on core epidemiological principles remain valuable for policy decisions [25]. Moving forward, integrating diverse data streams (mobility patterns, sociodemographic factors) [3] and advanced machine learning techniques [26,28] could enhance prediction capabilities while minimizing manual feature engineering.

These findings equip health agencies with evidence-based criteria for model selection, balancing accuracy needs with operational realities. As the field evolves, combining the strengths of statistical models and machine learning while incorporating richer data sources will be crucial for building more robust forecasting systems capable of addressing future public health crises.

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