Containing the Coronavirus

A bus stop with PSA in the United Kingdom.

In January 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the first case of infection from a new strain of virus, called a coronavirus, in the United States. By early March 2020, there were 150 reported infection cases and over 11 deaths. What is the coronavirus? How did it spread so fast? And what should U.S. policy be to contain its alarmingly fast spread?

Beginning in December 2019, public health officials in Wuhan Province in the People’s Republic of China identified a group of people who seemed to have pneumonia, a respiratory illness. Soon, it became clear they were actually infected by a new strain of coronavirus (COVID-19). Coronaviruses are a family of viruses, some of which affect human beings, including one that causes the common cold.

The COVID-19 virus spread rapidly. As of this writing, it has infected over 100,000 people in over 60 countries worldwide. Over 3,200 people died from the virus by early March 2020, most of whom were in China.

At first, victims of the virus develop a fever and cough, much like a cold or flu. Within a week, victims have shortness of breath, and many require hospitalization. Some who are infected, however, show no symptoms.

The relatively low death rate is due to the fact that the most vulnerable victims are the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, like diabetes and heart disease. About 80% of those infected have only minor symptoms. About 3.4% of cases worldwide result in death.
Ironically, the great danger of the coronavirus outbreaks in so many countries is that the virus is not deadly to so many. That means its victims can be harder to identify and isolate, or quarantine, and it is harder to slow the virus’s spread. This puts the most vulnerable infected people at greater risk of death.

Public health organizations strongly recommend social distancing as an effective means of slowing the spread of any virus. Social distancing literally means keeping your distance from others: Don’t shake hands; avoid going to events or areas with large crowds; and stay home if you feel sick.

What should the U.S. do about the outbreak? First, we can take a look at what countries with the most reported cases have done.

**China** — China has an authoritarian government. It imposed drastic measures to contain COVID-19, including a massive lockdown of Wuhan and nearby cities. At least 50 million people were under quarantine, and the Chinese government built two hospitals in Wuhan in just over a week. Social distancing policies were strictly enforced, in which theaters, sporting events, and other large community events were cancelled. By law, no one in Wuhan could go outside without a medical face mask. By March 2020, the number of new cases of infection dropped considerably. But some public health officials say the drop would only be temporary.

**South Korea** — South Korea has a democratic government. For social distancing purposes, virtually all schools closed for weeks. Churches voluntarily closed and began holding religious services via the internet. Concerts and political rallies were cancelled. “Panic buying,” in which people stockpile large supplies of hand sanitizer and groceries, did not happen. Early on, the South Korean government did not impose a full ban on travellers from neighboring China, sparking much criticism. By mid-February, a temporary ban was imposed. By early March 2020, 35 people had died from the virus in South Korea.

**Italy** — Like South Korea, Italy has a democratic government. At the end of January 2020, the Italian government suspended all flights from China. In northern Italy, the wealthiest part of the country, the COVID-19 outbreak hit hardest. By late February 2020, the government placed 11 Northern Italian towns on lockdown. In one 24-hour period in early March 2020, 41 people in Italy died from COVID-19 infection. The government shut down all schools, as well as theaters and, with the Vatican’s cooperation, weekday Catholic masses.

After the first cases were diagnosed in the United States, President Donald Trump appointed Vice President Mike Pence to be in charge of the federal government’s response to the outbreak. Trump himself downplayed any potential danger of the outbreak, telling the press that the country was “very, very ready for this.”

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**Public health officials Strongly urge everyone to:**

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water
- Stop touching one’s own face, especially eyes, mouth, and nose
- Practice social distancing as much as possible

* Hand sanitizer has limited effectiveness without also hand-washing
On the other hand, many expressed concern that the country was not, in fact, ready. In 2014, in response to the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, President Barack Obama’s administration established a permanent epidemic monitoring and command group in the White House National Security Council (NSC) and in the Department of Homeland Security. Pulitzer-prize winning science journalist Laurie Garrett has reported, however, that in spring 2018 the Trump administration pushed for $15 billion in budget cuts to these and other agencies, as well as an 80% cut to the CDC’s global disease-fighting budget. The administration also shut down the NSC’s health security office. Garrett says that “the government has resorted to improvisation” in confronting the coronavirus threat.

The CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO) urge all affected countries to test as many people as possible for the virus. With that data, the organizations can assess the spread of the virus. However, the CDC reported in early 2020 that they had insufficient testing kits and also respirator kits to give out to hospitals. In early March, Vice President Pence stated that 1.5 million test kits would soon go out to hospitals, but that it is still not enough. At the same time, President Trump signed into law funding for $8.3 billion to combat the spread of the virus.

States like California, Washington, and Florida have responded by declaring states of emergency. In a state of emergency, the governor of each state can order state agencies to speed up aid to affected communities.

**Writing & Discussion**

What should the U.S. federal government’s plan be to contain the spread of COVID-19? Use examples and evidence from the reading.

**Sources**


World Health Organization. “Coronavirus.” [https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus)