

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 nearly 200,000 people in over 60 countries worldwide. Over 6,000 people died from the virus by mid-March 2020, a number expected to drastically increase. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the crisis a *pandemic* or a disease that spreads widely over the globe.

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.

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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. It becomes 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 the effective means of slowing the spread of any virus. Social distancing literally means keeping your distance from others (more than three feet): Don't shake hands; avoid going to events or areas with crowds; and stay home if you feel sick.

**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*

What should the U.S. do about the pandemic? 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. 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 said 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 canceled. "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, but by mid-March, new cases had declined.

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. In one 24-hour period in early March 2020, 41 people in Italy died from COVID-19 infection. Realizing it had not instituted social-distancing policies fast enough, the Italian government placed the entire country on lockdown.

The term *lockdown* means everyone must stay home except to buy essential groceries, seek essential medical help, or to do essential business or government work. Healthcare workers do essential work. Public health experts worry that without strict social distancing, hospitals and health clinics will be overrun and unable to care for surges in patients. This happened in Italy.

After the first cases were diagnosed in the United States, President Donald Trump initially downplayed any potential danger of the outbreak. He told the press that the country was "very, very ready for this."

On the other hand, many expressed concern that the country was not, in fact, ready. Pulitzer-prize winning science journalist Laurie Garrett has reported 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 a permanent epidemic monitoring and command group in the White House National Security Council, which had been put in place under President Barack Obama.

The CDC and the 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 tests 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.

The economic effects of the pandemic were devastating. The stock market plummeted, threatening a global recession as very little business was done wherever lockdowns and social-distancing precautions were taken. On March 13, 2020, President Trump declared a national emergency, which essentially eased federal restrictions on hospitals and healthcare providers to provide services to those infected.

Writing & Discussion

1. Why do public health experts strongly urge social-distancing practices?
2. 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

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