



CENTRAL QUESTION



How should the government respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

INTRODUCTION



On December 31, 2019, a new—and in some cases, fatal—type of human coronavirus appeared in Wuhan, a city in central China. In the weeks and months that followed, the virus, known as COVID-19, began to cross international borders, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a pandemic and sending shockwaves across the global economy. In this *Close Up in Class Controversial Issue in the News*, we will take a look at COVID-19, examine several policies that the government, at various levels, is considering or has enacted in response, and challenge you to weigh the pros and cons of the various paths forward.

BACKGROUND



 [The World Health Organization answers your questions about COVID-19](#)

What Is COVID-19? COVID-19 is a new type of coronavirus not previously seen in humans. There are many types of human coronaviruses, which range from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).¹

In the case of COVID-19, the most common symptoms are fever, tiredness, and a dry cough. Some patients experience shortness of breath, aches and pains, nasal congestion, a runny nose, a sore throat, or diarrhea as well; other patients do not develop any symptoms, nor do they feel unwell. Older people and those with existing medical problems, such as high blood pressure, lung disease, cancer, or diabetes, are more likely to develop a serious condition, such as pneumonia or organ failure, as a result of COVID-19.² According to the WHO, most infections—approximately 80 percent—are mild or without symptoms, 15 percent are severe (requiring oxygen), and five percent are critical (requiring ventilation).³

So, how does COVID-19 spread? Doctors and epidemiologists continue to study the virus, but as of early 2020, it is believed to spread mainly from person to person. Transmission occurs when an infected person coughs or exhales small droplets from the nose or mouth, and a person close by (within roughly six feet) breathes the droplets in. The droplets can also land on a nearby surface, infecting others when they touch the surface and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. According to the WHO, the most effective ways to stop the spread of COVID-19 are frequently washing hands with soap and water, covering any cough with the bend of an elbow or a tissue, staying home when feeling unwell, keeping a distance of at least three feet from people who are coughing or sneezing, and not touching the eyes, the nose, and the mouth.⁴ However, because symptoms can be mild, infected people are able to spread the disease before they realize they are sick.⁵

As of March 2020, there is no vaccine or specific medicine to prevent or treat COVID-19. Instead, patients receive care to relieve symptoms, and most patients recover with supportive care.



How many people have contracted, and died from, COVID-19 around the world?



How many people have contracted, and died from, COVID-19 in the United States?

How Dangerous Is COVID-19? Ever since COVID-19 first appeared, public health organizations have worked furiously to develop a fuller understanding of the virus.

- As of March 22, 2020, at least 311,989 cases and 13,407 deaths had been reported worldwide, in 169 countries and on every continent except Antarctica.⁶ In the United States, at least 26,490 cases had been reported, in every state, with 340 resulting deaths.⁷
- As of March 2020, the precise mortality rate of COVID-19 remains unclear. On March 6, the WHO estimated a 3.4 percent mortality rate (by comparison, the mortality rate of seasonal influenza is usually below 0.1 percent). However, the COVID-19 mortality rate varies greatly across age groups and between countries, and it is likely to evolve over time as the number of cases changes.⁸ Furthermore, many experts believe that the mortality rate could be lower than reported. At the beginning of an outbreak, if only people with severe cases—who are more likely to die—seek care, a virus appears more deadly than it is as milder cases go uncounted.⁹

On March 11, 2020, the WHO officially characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic—a global outbreak of a disease—in an effort to acknowledge the seriousness and scale of the virus' spread. "We are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction," said WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom.¹⁰

However, the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are not limited to the sphere of public health. In the early months of 2020, fears of the virus' spread created enormous disruptions in the global economy, as airlines, hotels, and other travel-related businesses experienced mass cancellations, and schools, offices, restaurants, bars, retailers, and small businesses were subject to widespread closure—some on a voluntary basis and some by government order. The result? Markets plunged, with the S&P 500 falling by 29.5 percent between February 19 (its record high closing) and March 17, and forecasters began projecting a steep economic contraction, possibly even a depression.¹¹ U.S. employers shuttered their businesses and began laying off workers at a rapid rate. Weekly claims for unemployment insurance spiked from 211,000 applications in the week ending March 7 to 281,000 applications in the week ending March 14, with Goldman Sachs analysts suggesting that jobless claims could skyrocket to a record 2.25 million in another week's time.¹² And in a March survey by NPR, PBS NewsHour, and Marist, 18 percent of American adults reported that they had been laid off or had their work hours cut.¹³



How should the government respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following pages contain six proposals that the government, at various levels, could incorporate, or has incorporated, into its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider the pros and cons of each proposal, conduct any additional research, and answer or discuss the following questions:

- Which proposal(s), if any, do you favor? Why?
- Which proposal(s), if any, would you change? How?
- Which proposal(s), if any, would you reject? Why?
- Are there any other proposals that you would put forward? Explain your answer.

HOW SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

OPTION	WHAT SUPPORTERS SAY	WHAT OPPONENTS SAY
<p>1. The federal government should require that COVID-19 testing and treatment be free to all patients. On March 3, 2020, Representative Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz., announced that he would introduce a bill in Congress to require that Medicaid cover COVID-19 testing and treatment for every American, no matter how they get their health insurance.¹⁴</p>	<p>It is an uncomfortable truth that nine percent of Americans do not have health insurance, because they feel they do not need it or because they cannot afford to purchase it.¹⁵ This is a serious problem in the era of COVID-19, and it leaves gaping holes in the nation's response to the pandemic. Studies show that people often skip medical treatment because they worry that they cannot afford the costs.¹⁶ The federal government must act decisively to make sure this does not happen with COVID-19. "Coronavirus could spread even more quickly if people avoid testing and treatment due to astronomical medical costs," said Representative Gallego. "Nobody should be forced to put their own health and lives—and the health and lives of those around them—at risk because they can't afford critical medical care."¹⁷</p>	<p>If the government is looking to overload the health care system, bankrupt Medicaid, and hinder the response to COVID-19, Representative Gallego's bill is the surest way of doing so. An overwhelming 91 percent of Americans already have their own health insurance to cover any medically necessary expenses related to COVID-19.¹⁸ But this bill would force the government to assume responsibility for those people, instead of allowing private insurance companies to share the burden. That is not feasible. Medicaid spending already reached an astounding \$597.4 billion in 2018.¹⁹ This proposal would drive spending even higher, to levels unknown. It would also open the door to unnecessary testing and treatment for even the mildest cases of COVID-19, taking valuable resources away from patients with critical cases.</p>
<p>2. The federal government should boost funding for unemployment insurance (UI). UI is a federal-state system that helps people who have lost their jobs by temporarily replacing part of their wages. Workers in most states are eligible for up to 26 weeks of benefits; ten states provide fewer weeks of benefits and one state provides more. In January 2020, the average weekly benefits were about \$385. Additional weeks of benefits can become available under the Extended Benefits program, when the unemployment situation in a state has worsened dramatically.²⁰</p>	<p>COVID-19 is presenting a unique—and devastating—situation for many workers. As much as the American people would love to dine out, shop, and travel, the need for "social distancing" is preventing them from doing so. As a result, businesses are closing their doors and workers are losing their jobs through no fault of their own. But by boosting UI funding, the government could rapidly, effectively help workers pay their bills until the crisis subsides. As Andrew Biggs, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, noted, "Boosting unemployment benefits would be well-targeted to workers in need, easy to administer via the existing state-run systems, and affordable within the contexts of the stimulus packages being considered."²¹</p>	<p>COVID-19 is indeed presenting severe challenges to employers and workers. However, the government must use caution when considering a boost to UI funding. First of all, such a move would come with an enormous price tag. In 2019, states paid out roughly \$27 billion in UI benefits at a time of near-record low unemployment; during the recession of 2008, UI payments were nearly \$100 billion higher.²² This sum is significant in an era of more than \$23 trillion in national debt. Furthermore, UI benefits have an unintended side effect—they discourage laid-off workers from finding new jobs, since the government is effectively paying them not to work. Such a policy will not help reopen businesses, nor will it pull the country out of this economic calamity.</p>
<p>3. The federal government should send cash payments to Americans to ease the economic impacts of COVID-19. On March 18, 2020, the Treasury Department proposed sending \$500 billion in direct payments to Americans. If adopted, the payments would come in the form of two checks, to be mailed beginning on April 6 and again on May 18, with the amounts based on a person's income level and family size.²³</p>	<p>As restaurants, bars, retail stores, and countless other businesses closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an alarming number of Americans watched their jobs disappear. Sending checks is a simple, fast, no-nonsense way for the government to help Americans pay their rent, buy groceries, and stay afloat until the panic subsides. Unlike other forms of government aid, such as UI benefits or food stamps, sending checks does not require Americans to apply for benefits or follow specific rules on how the money must be spent. Instead, the government can immediately ease some of the pressures that workers face when they lose their jobs through no fault of their own.</p>	<p>Widespread closures related to COVID-19 are indeed placing an immense amount of pressure on American workers. However, at a time of more than \$23 trillion in national debt, the government must carefully tailor the aid that it provides and not indiscriminately send cash to those who do not need it. The wealthier recipients could simply decide to add the money to their savings; this would fail to help jumpstart the economy and would waste scarce taxpayer dollars that are better spent on the truly needy. The government should instead boost spending on food stamps, welfare programs, and UI benefits, to ensure that the billions of dollars being spent are targeted to those who actually need help.</p>

HOW SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT RESPOND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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<p>4. The federal government should suspend certain travel into the United States. As of March 21, 2020, the United States had closed its borders with Canada and Mexico to all nonessential travel, and barred the entry of foreign nationals who had visited China, Iran, or one of 28 European countries in the previous 14 days. All U.S. citizens who had been in high-risk areas for COVID-19 transmission were required to fly to one of 13 U.S. airports for health screening.²⁴</p>	<p>COVID-19 did not originate in the United States. It was first brought into the country by a man who contracted the virus in Wuhan and traveled back home to Washington state. Since that time, the United States has enacted sensible travel restrictions to make sure the government can screen U.S. citizens who have been in high-risk areas and temporarily keep out foreign nationals who have visited COVID-19 hotspots. "Crowded travel settings, like airports, may increase chances of getting COVID-19, if there are other travelers with coronavirus infection," noted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).²⁵ "If you don't have to travel, I wouldn't do it," added President Donald Trump. "We want this thing to end."²⁶</p>	<p>It may sound like a reasonable response to the COVID-19 pandemic to cut off certain travel into the United States. However, such a policy is neither justified nor wise. As of March 22, 2020, there have been only 26,490 COVID-19 cases and 340 resulting deaths reported in the United States, a country of more than 329 million people.²⁷ Every death is a tragedy, but those statistics do not warrant the incredible economic disruption that comes with travel bans. U.S. airlines have already suffered enormous losses due to cancellations related to COVID-19, forcing them to cut flights, lay off workers, and seek \$50 billion in federal assistance.²⁸ Overreactive travel bans will only drive the nation into a catastrophic economic depression.</p>
<p>5. Governors and/or mayors should require that certain private businesses, such as restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and gyms, temporarily close. As of March 21, 2020, California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington are among the states that have enacted such measures.²⁹</p>	<p>On March 16, 2020, the CDC recommended that all events of ten or more people be canceled in order to slow the spread of COVID-19.³⁰ In the wake of this advice from medical professionals, it is smart and appropriate for government officials to temporarily close restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and other establishments where ten or more people regularly gather. This short-term measure is necessary in the global effort to protect public health. "These are very difficult decisions, but hours count here and very strong measures are necessary to slow the spread of the disease," said Governor Jay Inslee, D-Wash. "I know there will be significant economic impacts to all our communities and we are looking at steps to help address those challenges."³¹</p>	<p>It is inappropriate, alarmist, and economically devastating for government officials to close private businesses in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. It would be one thing if officials were carefully limiting such actions to COVID-19 hotspots. But they are not. Oregon, for example, had seen only 137 statewide cases and five deaths as of March 22, yet Governor Kate Brown still decided to ban all seated dining at the state's bars and restaurants.³² Such overly zealous actions devastate small businesses and rob workers of their livelihoods. "Business has plummeted," said Kevin Canetti, a restaurant server in Seattle. "Something or someone has to intervene for us in the service industry who mainly survive paycheck to paycheck."³³</p>
<p>6. States, counties, and/or cities should enact quarantine lockdowns. On January 23, 2020, China locked down Wuhan, a city of 11 million people where COVID-19 first appeared. The lockdown banned journeys in or out of the city, suspended public transportation, barred private cars from city roads, closed most shops (other than supermarkets and pharmacies), and allowed residents to leave home only to get essential supplies or seek medical help.³⁴</p>	<p>In February 2020, Wuhan was dealing with thousands of new cases of COVID-19 each day. But after weeks of lockdown and strict quarantine measures, Chinese authorities announced on March 19 that the city and its surrounding province had no new cases of COVID-19 to report. "Today we have seen the dawn after so many days of hard effort," said Jiao Yahui, a senior inspector at the National Health Commission.³⁵ Wuhan offers a model for other areas of the world affected by the spread of COVID-19. It is not pleasant, desirable, or in keeping with the societal norms of a liberal democracy to live under lockdown and quarantine. But these are extraordinary times, and Americans would be wise to make a few short-term sacrifices in the interest of defeating the virus.</p>	<p>It is one thing to ask the elderly and other vulnerable residents to stay home in the face of COVID-19. It is quite another to demand that all residents do so. Whereas Wuhan is the epicenter of COVID-19 (in a country that had seen 81,395 cases and 3,265 deaths as of March 22), the same conditions do not exist in the United States (which had seen only 26,490 cases and 340 deaths as of March 22).³⁶ The United States sees between 12,000 and 61,000 deaths from influenza each year, and saw 36,560 deaths from traffic crashes in 2018 alone.³⁷ Do Americans similarly quarantine during flu season? Or stop driving altogether? To impose a lockdown in the United States would fan the flames of panic, destroy the world's largest economic engine, and decimate the livelihoods of U.S. workers.</p>



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