

# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE NEWS



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WASHINGTON DC

# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## 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 months that followed, the disease caused by 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 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 the disease caused by a new type of coronavirus not previously seen in humans. There are many human coronaviruses, ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).<sup>1</sup>

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, loss of taste or smell, a sore throat, nausea, chills, and/or diarrhea as well. Other patients do not develop any symptoms, nor do they feel unwell. People aged 60 years and over and those with existing medical problems, such as high blood pressure, heart or lung disease, diabetes, obesity, or cancer, are more likely to develop a serious condition, such as respiratory failure or organ failure, as a result of COVID-19. Among those who develop symptoms, approximately 80 percent recover without hospital treatment, 15 percent become seriously ill and require oxygen, and five percent become critically ill and require intensive care.<sup>2</sup>



So, how does COVID-19 spread? Doctors and epidemiologists continue to study the virus, but as of late 2020, it is believed to spread mainly between people who are in close contact (within roughly six feet). Transmission occurs when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales small droplets from the nose or mouth, and a person close by 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, but this is not thought to be the main form of transmission.<sup>3</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the most effective ways to stop the spread of COVID-19 are frequently washing hands with soap and water, keeping a physical distance of at least six feet with people who do not live in your household, avoiding close contact with people who are sick, covering your nose and mouth with a mask when around others, covering any cough or sneeze with the bend of an elbow or a tissue, and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces daily.<sup>4</sup> However, because symptoms can be mild, infected people are able to spread the disease before they realize they are sick.<sup>5</sup>

As of early December 2020, there is no approved vaccine to prevent COVID-19 in the United States, although multiple vaccines are under development. Large-scale clinical trials were in progress or being planned for five COVID-19 vaccines in late November 2020.<sup>6</sup>



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

**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 December 8, 2020, nearly 67.8 million cases and 1.5 million deaths had been reported worldwide, on every continent except Antarctica.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, at least 14.6 million cases had been reported, in every state, with 281,253 resulting deaths.<sup>8</sup>
- As of December 2020, the **mortality rate** of COVID-19 remains unclear. On December 4, Johns Hopkins University reported that two percent of observed U.S. cases resulted in death. (By comparison, the U.S. mortality rate of **influenza** during the 2019-2020 flu season was approximately 0.5 percent.)<sup>9</sup> However, this COVID-19 mortality rate could be misleading. The mortality rate for this disease is significantly affected by factors such as age group and underlying medical conditions. Accurate mortality rates also depend on widespread testing, so even mild and asymptomatic cases are identified. If only people with severe cases—who are more likely to die—are tested or seek care, a virus appears more deadly than it is.<sup>10</sup>

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 of the virus' spread.<sup>11</sup> However, the significant effects of the pandemic are not limited to the sphere of public health. Throughout 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? The economy severely contracted, with the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) falling by an astounding 31.4 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Although GDP bounced back (growing 33.1 percent in the third quarter) as businesses began to reopen, many Americans were feeling economic pain throughout 2020.<sup>12</sup> Prior to the pandemic, in February, the unemployment rate was 3.5 percent (the lowest rate in more than 50 years). It jumped to 14.7 percent in April (the highest rate since the Great Depression) and remained at 6.7 percent in November.<sup>13</sup>



## 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:

1. Which proposal(s), if any, do you favor? Why?
2. Which proposal(s), if any, would you change? How?
3. Which proposal(s), if any, would you reject? Why?
4. 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><b>1. The federal government should require that COVID-19 treatment be free to all Americans.</b> On April 7, 2020, Representative Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz., introduced the Emergency Medicaid for Coronavirus Treatment Act, a bill that would make every American automatically eligible for Medicaid if they are diagnosed with COVID-19 or any other illness that rises to the level of a presidential emergency declaration. Medicaid would continue to cover all COVID-19-related testing and treatment after the national emergency ends.<sup>14</sup></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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup></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.<sup>18</sup> 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. Annual Medicaid spending already reached an astounding \$597.4 billion in 2018.<sup>19</sup> This proposal would drive spending even higher, to levels unknown. It would also open the door to unnecessary treatment for even the mildest cases of COVID-19, taking valuable medical resources away from patients with critical cases.</p>
<p><b>2. The federal government should boost funding for unemployment insurance (UI).</b> 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 UI, with weekly benefits averaging \$333 in April 2020.<sup>20</sup> The CARES Act, signed into law by President Donald Trump in March 2020, gave unemployed workers a weekly bonus of \$600 (through July 2020) and extended the benefits period to 39 weeks (through December 2020). When the bonus expired, President Trump created a \$300 per week UI bonus, but most of the funding expired by October. In December 2020, Congress was considering a bill that would provide the \$300 weekly bonus through March 2021.<sup>21</sup></p>	<p>COVID-19 is presenting a unique and devastating situation for workers. As much as Americans would love to dine out, shop, and travel, the need for physical 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 continuing to boost 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."<sup>22</sup></p>	<p>COVID-19 is indeed presenting severe challenges to employers and workers. However, the government must use caution when considering another boost to UI funding. First of all, such a move comes with an enormous price tag. Between early April and the end of July 2020, the federal government spent nearly \$250 billion to provide the extra \$600 per week to unemployed Americans.<sup>23</sup> This is simply not sustainable. Furthermore, UI benefits have an unintended, devastating side effect. They discourage laid-off workers from returning to work, since the government is effectively paying them—and paying them handsomely—not to work. Such a policy will not help reopen businesses, nor will it pull the country out of this economic calamity.</p>
<p><b>3. The federal government should send another round of stimulus checks to Americans to ease the economic impacts of COVID-19.</b> The CARES Act provided the American people with direct payments of up to \$1,200 per adult for individuals whose income is less than \$99,000 per year and \$500 per child under 17 years old.<sup>24</sup> In December 2020, Congress was debating whether or not to approve another round of such payments.</p>	<p>As restaurants, bars, retail stores, and countless other businesses have closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an alarming number of Americans have watched their jobs disappear. Sending money 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 money 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 job through no fault of their own.</p>	<p>Widespread closures related to COVID-19 are placing an immense amount of pressure on American workers. However, at a time of more than \$27 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?

OPTION	WHAT SUPPORTERS SAY	WHAT OPPONENTS SAY
<p><b>4. States, counties, cities, and/or districts should close schools, requiring students to stay home and learn virtually.</b></p> <p> <a href="#">Where are schools closed?</a></p>	<p>Americans' eagerness to have their children attend school in person is absolutely understandable. However, it is a fantasy to insist that it is entirely safe for children to be spending their days in classrooms, in close contact with people outside of their household. The risks of COVID-19 are indeed lower for children, but those risks still exist. As Sophie Bushwick of <i>Scientific American</i> points out, children "might pass the coronavirus to adults, who tend to have much more severe symptoms. Teachers, janitors, bus drivers, and others must all spend significant amounts of time with students in enclosed spaces, where they are at a relatively high risk of contracting COVID-19 from children (as well as one another)."<sup>25</sup> It is unacceptable to expose so many people to risk when there is a viable alternative available—virtual learning on a temporary basis. In-person school will return for all American children at some point. But not just yet.</p>	<p>With existing evidence showing that children are half as likely as adults to contract COVID-19, and that the vast majority of cases in children are very mild, widespread school closures are doing much more harm than good. "There's no doubt in my mind that schools need to be bolder," said Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's School of Public Health. "There is a large mental health cost to children. And we know this is going to very substantially widen the achievement gap between wealthier/white students and poorer/students of color." According to Dr. Jha, "you always have to pay attention to local context," but "schools don't appear to be a place where there is a lot of spread happening." Rather than harming child development and leaving poor and special-needs children to fend for themselves at home (sometimes without internet access), schools can open safely with simple, smart precautions in place, such as masks, staggered classes, and good hygiene.<sup>26</sup></p>
<p><b>5. Governors and/or mayors should mandate that certain private businesses (such as restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and gyms) and gathering places (such as churches and parks) temporarily close.</b></p> <p> <a href="#">What restrictions on businesses and gatherings, if any, are in place in your state?</a></p>	<p>The CDC has repeatedly told the American people to stay at least six feet away from, and avoid direct contact with, people outside their household. In light of this advice, it is smart and prudent for government officials to temporarily close restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and other places where people gather. "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.<sup>27</sup> Americans do indeed have constitutional rights that the government must respect. But those rights have always been subject to reasonable restrictions. Just as the government is allowed to restrict speech that contains obscenity or incites lawless action, it can restrict a person's right to freely attend church or operate a business when it has a compelling interest in doing so. Protecting public health is certainly such an interest.</p>	<p>It is wildly inappropriate and economically disastrous for government officials to close private businesses and gathering places in the face of COVID-19. Governors have single-handedly and arbitrarily chosen which businesses and services are "essential" and "non-essential," stealing jobs and livelihoods from millions of people. It would be one thing if officials were carefully limiting and providing hard evidence for their actions. But they are not. In California, for example, marijuana dispensaries were deemed to be "essential," yet gyms and church services were not.<sup>28</sup> Picking winners and losers in this way denies people the equal protection of the laws. It denies business owners due process when their livelihoods are taken without compensation. If the government is going to restrict Americans' rights, it must show that it has a compelling interest in doing so, and that it is acting in the least restrictive way possible. That is not the case here.</p>
<p><b>6. States, counties, and/or cities should enact another round of stay-at-home orders.</b> On March 19, 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom, D-Calif., became the first governor to enact a statewide stay-at-home order in response to COVID-19, ordering all California residents to remain at home except to engage in a select few "essential" activities. Between March and April 2020, all of the nation's 24 Democratic governors issued such orders; 19 of the 26 Republican governors did the same.<sup>29</sup></p>	<p>The threat posed by COVID-19 is unusual and urgent. As of early December 2020, there is no approved vaccine in the United States. The virus is believed to spread mainly from person to person, even among those who show no symptoms.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it is entirely appropriate for governors to take decisive action and ask residents to stay at home. "Whether you agree with me or not, I'm working to protect your life," said Governor Gretchen Whitmer, D-Mich. "We have to keep listening to the epidemiologists and experts and not listen to the partisan rhetoric, or these political rallies or tweets, for that matter. We have to keep doing the right thing."<sup>31</sup> Over the course of our nation's history, Americans have lived through military drafts, periods of food rationing, and other times of shared sacrifice in the name of supporting the common good. The fight against COVID-19 is no different.</p>	<p>It is one thing to ask vulnerable people to stay home in the face of COVID-19. It is another to demand that everyone does so. The United States sees up to 61,000 deaths from the flu each year, and saw 36,560 deaths from traffic crashes in 2018 alone.<sup>32</sup> Do Americans similarly quarantine in flu season? Or stop driving altogether? When Governor Newsom enacted his order, he outlandishly argued that 25.5 million Californians would contract COVID-19 over an eight-week period without a stay-at-home order in place—an extreme claim that was questioned by experts.<sup>33</sup> But that baseless claim helped him spread fear and declare victory for avoiding a crisis that was not likely to happen in the first place. "If somebody wants to stay in the house that's great ... they should not be compelled to leave," said Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla. "But to say that they cannot leave their house, and they will be arrested if they do, this is fascist. This is not democratic. This is not freedom."<sup>34</sup></p>





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We know that these are challenging times for teachers, students, and parents as we continue to make life changes in response to COVID-19. With students transitioning away from traditional classrooms, Close Up is hard at work to make remote learning as interactive and discussion-based as possible.

Close Up has created, and continues to develop, a suite of reading materials, lesson plans, and interactive virtual experiences that draw on our issue-centered methodology, nonpartisan approach, and expertise in facilitated discussions. These include:

- **Controversial Issues in the News**
- **Ready-to-Use Lesson Plans**
- **Our Current Issues Blog**
- **Virtual Classroom Connections and Seminars**
- **Remote Teacher Training**
- **Virtual Customized Workshops**

Our goal is to create virtual communities in which students have the confidence to discuss issues that matter to them, learn how to listen to each other and respectfully disagree, and work together to build consensus, empathy, and a sense of connection to their local communities and the world around them.

Close Up's balanced, nonpartisan curricular materials, combined with our facilitation training, can help educators create dynamic and engaging virtual experiences that keep young people connected. To learn more about our training, discussion guides, and virtual learning opportunities, please contact [classroom@closeup.org](mailto:classroom@closeup.org).