



Fact: The Coronavirus Pandemic Stranded 6 Million Foreigners in America

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 150,000 foreign tourists, guest workers, international students, and business travelers entered the United States each day. All these entries come with an expiration date by which the visitor must leave the country or somehow extend their status if they can. While the inflow has almost entirely evaporated, the outflow has too, leaving millions of foreign visitors stranded in the United States desperately trying to stay legal and support themselves.

In fact, new data obtained by the Cato Institute from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) show that of the 17 million air departures initially required to occur from January through April, only 10.9 million occurred. This means that about 6.1 million foreign visitors were unexpectedly stranded in the country beyond their initially required departure date. Of these, about 1.4 million were from Canada or Mexico and could have driven home. This means roughly 4.7 million foreign visitors were stuck in America unexpectedly.

They are attempting to extend their legal stays, but many have already lost status and been labeled illegal immigrants. Foreigners have become stuck here for a variety of reasons. Many other countries have made it virtually impossible to return home. Flights are canceled or entries even by their own nationals have been banned or restricted. Of course, many simply don't want to risk contracting COVID-19 during their travel. The result is millions of people who have missed their initially required departure dates. Now they are scrambling to try to extend their statuses, but many cannot.

Figure 1 shows the number of initially required departures and actual air departures of all nonimmigrants, a catchall for all foreigners with temporary statuses. Throughout April, an average of more than 125,000 foreign visitors missed their initially required departure dates.

Figure 2 compares the difference between required and actual departures by day in 2019 and 2020. While some weeks in 2019 did have more required departures than actual departures, overall about 17 million departures were required and about 17 million departures actually occurred through the nation's airports. This year is a dramatic departure from last year's numbers.

Table 1 shows the number of required and actual air departures by admission classification. About 4.8 million of the 6.1 million were in the tourist visa (B-2) or tourist visa waiver program (WT) classifications—78 percent of the total who missed departure dates. Another nearly 1 million were business travelers under the B-1 visa or WB visa waiver program classifications—16 percent of the total. Other major visa classifications—L-1 and L-2 as well as H-1B and H-4—had tens of thousands of missed departure dates.

The administration did offer to extend Visa Waiver Program statuses during the pandemic if people applied in time, and other visa categories might be able to find a way to extend. But the United States should be doing more to ameliorate the immigration problems caused by the COVID-19 crisis. It should automatically extend statuses without requiring costly filing procedures, and it should correct records to avoid blemishes on someone's immigration record. To have a strong recovery, the United States should avoid damaging its reputation as a traveler-friendly country.

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