



Why Trump's Immigration Suspension Doesn't Make Sense

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President Trump announced recently that he would “temporarily suspend immigration into the United States” to stop the spread of COVID-19. Before the details of this proposed executive order had yet to come out, we could say with confidence that the order will not help the pandemic response. Cato’s research over the last couple of months has shown why:

1. It's based on a misconception: As my colleague Alex Nowrasteh explains in this post. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, there is no correlation between immigrant share of a county’s population in the United States and its rate of cases or deaths from COVID-19 controlling for population density. Ultimately, viruses will spread faster where people are bunched together regardless of where they come from.

2. It's not backed by research: As I have explained in this literature review, the epidemiological research shows that pandemic travel bans are ineffective at stopping the spread of disease. In particular, the “research also indicates that there is no benefit to international travel restrictions once an outbreak has already become an epidemic inside the destination country.” Table 1 below comes from a *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* paper comparing the results of different interventions on different types of viruses (R_0 refers to how contagious the disease is) after an outbreak starts in the United States, finding that long-distance travel restrictions do nothing whatsoever to prevent the spread. The limited COVID-19 research so far shows much the same thing, as Alex has shown. A virus spreads among citizens just as fast.

3. It'll harm first responders. As I explain in this post, immigrants are disproportionately involved in providing essential services during the pandemic. It makes no sense to keep out workers who are helping keep America running. Foreigners have already suspended nonessential travel here, but as Figures 1 and 2 show, the ones who are here are disproportionately involved in industries like health care and agriculture (the post has numerous other examples). Many are also working for companies developing vaccines and treatments for the virus.

4. It's largely redundant. The Trump administration has already “suspended” nearly all immigration to the country by stopping almost all visas from being issued to noncitizens, as I explain in this post detailing all the actions that the government has taken on immigration. If immigrants cannot receive visas, they cannot travel here. But this is counterproductive if they are essential workers. So far, the government has carved out only a few narrow exceptions for health

care and agricultural workers, as well as Canadian and Mexican essential workers, so it remains to be seen if this order will exacerbate this issue.

The United States needs no formal order for immigration to naturally contract. In 2008, at the onset of the last recession, more immigrants left than entered the country. The number of requests for temporary workers plummeted. This will certainly happen again if this recession persists, but the government shouldn't intervene to stop employers from hiring people that they need to keep the essential economy going.

This article was authored by David Bier and originally published on the Cato Institute blog.