



How Travel Bans Failed To Stop The Spread Of COVID-19

David Bier

May 14, 2020

A new analysis by the Cato Institute shows that U.S. airports recorded nearly 10.7 million entries (mostly by travelers without U.S. citizenship) directly from countries with confirmed COVID-19 cases as of April 7. The government waited an average of 18 days after a country had confirmed cases to impose any travel restrictions, and for more than two dozen countries, it waited more than a month.

Trump's bans didn't and couldn't stop all travel by U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. Even if they were much stricter toward other noncitizens and much earlier, it wouldn't have mattered. Too much travel had already occurred, and too many U.S. citizens travel. Yet Trump relied on these bans as his primary early response to the pandemic. He repeatedly cited them as protecting Americans, but the evidence shows he should have focused far more on domestic measures.

In early February, he assured the public that his February 2 ban on most noncitizen travel from China had "shut it down." Yet by the time of the ban, the United States had already accepted more than 436,000 passengers from China (mostly non-U.S. citizens) since the outbreak there was reported on December 31.