



Insight

The State of Immigration During the Coronavirus Outbreak

JACQUELINE VARAS | MARCH 24, 2020

Executive Summary

- The Trump Administration has made several changes to immigration policy to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.
- The new policies aim to limit the flow of immigration with travel restrictions, border closures, and a temporary halt in new legal immigration.
- While these restrictions may be justified from a public-health standpoint, they also have the potential to significantly harm the U.S. economy, depending on how long the crisis lasts.

Introduction

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, the U.S. government has taken several steps to stem the flow of the virus into the United States. These include closing U.S. borders with Canada and Mexico and suspending visa processing, effectively bringing all new legal immigration to a halt. It is certainly arguable that these measures are justified due to the public health crisis. Depending on how long the crisis persists, however, they have the potential to exacerbate the economic downturn.

Travel Restrictions

The Trump Administration's first action in response to the coronavirus was on January 31, when it [barred the entry](#) of individuals who have traveled to China in the previous 14 days. This order does not apply to returning U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, or their families, who instead are directed to specific U.S. airports for screening and then asked to self-quarantine for 14 days. Since then, the Trump Administration [has expanded](#) these restrictions to individuals traveling from Iran and 28 nations in Europe.

These travel restrictions will remain until the president removes them. The most obvious effects will be felt in the travel and tourism industry, which [employs over 9 million individuals](#). One study [estimates](#) that the U.S. economy could suffer a loss of \$809 billion due to the decreases in tourism and 4.6 million travel-related jobs could be lost in 2020. Due to losses in tourism-related industries, the global economy could shrink by [\\$1 trillion to \\$5 trillion](#) this year.

Border Closures

The Trump Administration has also responded by [closing U.S. borders](#) with Canada and Mexico. This closure will be in effect for one month, from March 20 to April 20, and aims to prevent nonessential travel between the three nations. There are numerous exceptions: Individuals may continue to enter the United States if they are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents, noncitizens studying or working in the United States (such as individuals with temporary worker visas), members of the U.S. government or military, individuals traveling to

receive medical treatment, emergency responders, or individuals transporting cargo for cross-border trade. Canada and Mexico have laid out similar requirements for individuals crossing the borders into their nations.

Border closures can potentially have huge impacts. Each month [on average](#), 4.5 million people legally cross the U.S.-Canada border and 15.7 million people legally cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Under current administration guidelines, many of these individuals will be unaffected. If the border closures are extended to impede cross-border trade, however, nearly [\\$102 billion](#) of trade in goods will be jeopardized each month.

Restrictions on Legal Immigration

The Trump Administration has also enacted several measures to restrict legal immigration during the coronavirus outbreak. The first policy is to immediately remove all asylum seekers apprehended between ports of entry on the southern border without the opportunity to show they have a credible fear of persecution in their home countries. It is also unlikely that the Trump Administration is processing asylum claims of those who do cross through ports of entry because individuals claiming asylum are not explicitly exempted from the border closure and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) offices – which normally process asylum applications – are closed [until at least April 1](#).

While it is difficult to estimate exactly how many individuals this policy will impact, data on border apprehensions gives a sense of scale. In FY2019, the United States apprehended [550,000 individuals](#) that were either unaccompanied children or traveling with family members – many of which were [likely seeking asylum](#). The administration is reportedly [delaying already-scheduled asylum hearings](#) due to concerns over the coronavirus. This delay could apply to [over 55,000 individuals](#) awaiting their asylum hearings in Mexico under the Remain in Mexico program.

The move away from humanitarian immigration during the coronavirus outbreak is not just confined to the United States. For instance, Canada is taking [similar measures](#) to bar asylum seekers caught crossing between ports of entry, and the United Nations is [temporarily suspending](#) all refugee resettlement activities due to global travel restrictions.

Finally, the State Department has [halted](#) all visa processing services for individuals seeking to live and work legally in the United States, effectively ceasing all new legal immigration. In the near term, this halt will harm employers that disproportionately rely on foreign-born workers, especially employers in the agricultural industry. Because of this risk, the State Department [announced](#) it will continue processing visas for returning temporary workers in both agricultural and nonagricultural industries. If the suspension of visa processing were to continue, cutting the United States off from new immigration would likely have significant long-term negative impacts on [productivity](#), [output](#), and [economic growth](#).