

The Daily 202: South Korea, a coronavirus success story, warns against easing social distancing guidelines too soon

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with Mariana Alfaro

The first cases of the novel coronavirus were detected in the United States and South Korea on the same day.

South Korea's success at quickly ramping up testing, plus much more aggressive contact tracing by its government, helped flatten the curve of infections. South Korea's mortality rate from the virus is one third of what it is in the United States, and the country has tested about [three times](#) as many citizens per capita.

This contrast is especially relevant against the backdrop of mounting revelations about President Trump's slow response despite being presented with a litany of early warning signs and recommendations by his public health team to act earlier to slow the spread.

A nurse adjusts her mask as she reports for a shift on Monday at Dongsan Medical Center in Daegu, South Korea. (Kim Do-hoon/Yonhap via AP)

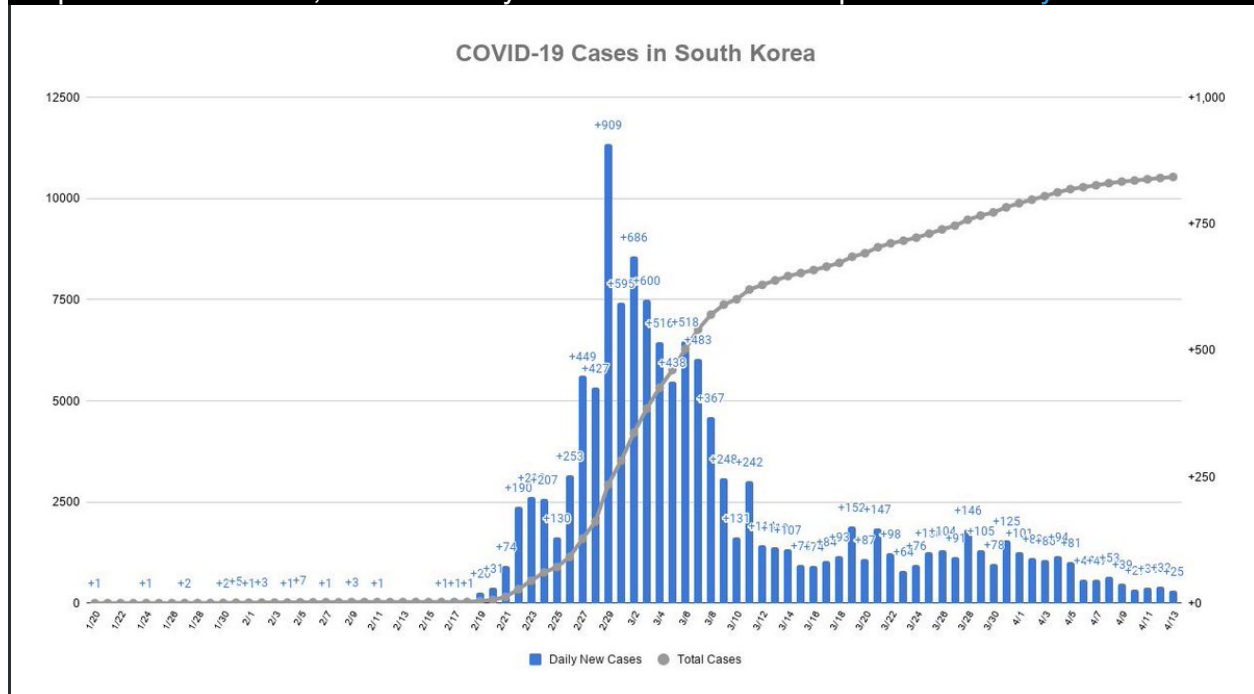
As U.S. deaths from covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, [topped](#) 22,000, Trump lashed out on Easter Sunday against the New York Times for [the latest reporting](#) on [his early mistakes](#). The president [retweeted](#) a supporter's call to fire Tony Fauci after the government's top infectious disease expert acknowledged on CNN that a quicker response "could have saved lives." Trump also [attacked](#) "Fox News Sunday" host Chris Wallace after a guest on his show, Tom Inglesby, the director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said the United States would "be in a much better position" if the Trump administration had acted more quickly.

Meanwhile, Trump's first commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration shared this chart Sunday night with the latest good news from Seoul:

[Scott Gottlieb, MD](#)

[@ScottGottliebMD](#)

Recovering from #COVID19, South Korea reports only 25 new cases today, a new low for past seven weeks; with recovery rates above 70%. Graphic h/t [@AndyBiotech](#)



2,730

10:19 PM - Apr 12, 2020

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Trump's handling of the crisis has been quite different than that of South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who has been [more deferential](#) to public health experts and allowed them to take the lead on updating citizens.

As the United States races to catch up, both Seoul and Washington face pivotal decisions about when and how much to relax guidelines related to social distancing. "In South Korea, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun said officials were discussing new public guidelines that would allow for 'certain levels of economic and social activity' while also maintaining distance to slow the virus' spread," [the AP reports today](#). "[Moon] vowed Monday to focus on saving jobs and protecting the economy amid a sharp increase in the number of people seeking unemployment

benefits. ... But South Korea's vice health minister, Kim Gang-lip, said a quick return to normality was 'virtually impossible' considering the threat of new transmissions. 'A premature easing (of social distancing) would come at an irrevocable cost, so we should approach the issue very carefully, and invest deep thought into when and how to transition,' Kim said Monday."

Several Trump administration officials cautioned on Sunday that a target date of May 1 for reopening portions of the U.S. economy — floated by Trump — may not be realistic. During his news conference on Friday afternoon, Trump said that the decision about whether to relax federal guidance will be the biggest of his life because so many lives — and jobs — are at stake. He said to stay tuned.

"It is a target, and, obviously, we're hopeful about that target, but I think it's just too early to be able to tell that we see light at the end of the tunnel," FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said on ABC. "I think it's just too early for us to say whether May 1 is that date."

Fauci said "it is not going to be a light switch," argued there should be a "rolling reentry" back to normal life based on local conditions and said that process could "probably start, at least in some ways, maybe next month."

"I mean, obviously, you could logically say that if you had a process that was ongoing and you started mitigation earlier, you could have saved lives," Fauci told Jake Tapper on CNN's "State of the Union." "But what goes into those kinds of decisions is complicated. ... Obviously, if we had, right from the very beginning, shut everything down, it may have been a little bit different. But there was a lot of pushback about shutting things down."

Trump spent part of the weekend asking confidants about their thoughts on Fauci, [the Daily Beast reported](#), before retweeting the post saying he should fire him.

As part of his Twitter [spree](#) on Sunday, Trump also continued to [put the onus](#) on governors to take the lead, instead of the federal government.

"I fear if we open up too early ... that we could be pouring gasoline on the fire," New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) said on CNN. "Right now, the house is on fire, and job number one is to put the fire out."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) plans to issue an executive order this week laying out a process for businesses reopening in his state. "We will focus on protecting lives while restoring livelihoods," Abbott said, [per the Dallas Morning News](#). "We can do both."

"Public health experts say that for the economy to be safely reopened, certain steps will need to be taken first," [Felicia Sonmez, Taylor Telford and Elise Viebeck report](#). "Among other things, the United States should mount a large-scale effort to identify people who have been in contact with the infected and conduct widespread testing, and it should build up health-care capacity. Because the virus has a 14-day incubation period, experts also say that states should refrain from moving toward relaxing their restrictions until they have seen a sustained reduction in new cases for at least that long."

Trump said last week that the United States does not need mass testing to begin easing restrictions. But that has been critical to South Korea's efforts to get the outbreak under control. Gregg Brazinsky, a professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University, said South Korea's efficient response hinged on two factors [rooted in history](#): the close cooperation between the state and the private sector and the public's willing embrace of a large-scale medical intervention. "The origins of both of these phenomena lie in the South Korean experience of rapid industrialization and nation-building during the Cold War," he explained.

"The quick response can be attributed to the lessons South Korea learned during the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak in 2015," former National Security Council Asian Affairs director Victor Cha notes [in Foreign Affairs](#). "During that epidemic, South Korea suffered the largest number of cases outside of Saudi Arabia, in part because the government's response was slow and inadequate."