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COVID-19 Lessons from South Korea

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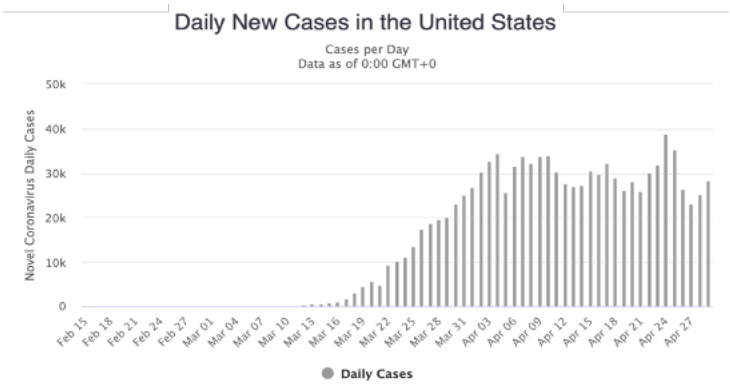
Once an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea has emerged as a sign of hope and a model to emulate. The country of 50 million appears to have greatly slowed its epidemic; it reported only 14 new cases yesterday, down from 1,016 at its peak on March 1. In comparison, the United States is reporting around 20,000 to 30,000 a day.

And South Korea has done so without locking down entire cities, shutting down the economy, or taking some of the other authoritarian measures that helped China bring its epidemic under control. “South Korea is a democratic republic, we feel a lockdown is not a reasonable choice,” says Kim Woo-Joo, an infectious disease specialist at Korea University. The country embarked mass testing efforts and strict social isolation measures but didn’t totally shut down businesses. As a result, it managed to contain the virus outbreak without suppressing economic activities.



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Nearly four million people filed for unemployment benefits last week, adding to the burden states face from an unprecedented wave of initial jobless claims triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Behind its success so far has been the most expansive and well-organized testing program in the world, combined with extensive efforts to isolate infected people and trace and quarantine their contacts.

When someone tests positive, health workers retrace the patient's recent movements to find, test — and, if necessary, isolate — anyone the person may have had contact with, a process known as contact tracing.

This allows health workers to identify networks of possible transmission early, carving the virus out of society like a surgeon removing a cancer.

South Korea developed tools and practices for aggressive contact tracing during the MERS outbreak. Health officials would retrace patients' movements using security camera footage, credit card records, even GPS data from their cars and cellphones.

"We did our epidemiological investigations like police detectives," Dr. Ki said. "Later, we had laws revised to prioritize social security over individual privacy at times of infectious disease crises."

As the coronavirus outbreak grew too big to track patients so intensively, officials relied more on mass messaging.

South Koreans' cellphones vibrate with emergency alerts whenever new cases are discovered in their districts. Websites and smartphone apps detail hour-by-hour, sometimes minute-by-minute, timelines of infected people's travel — which buses they took, when and where they got on and off, even whether they were wearing masks.

People who believe they may have crossed paths with a patient are urged to report to testing centers. South Koreans have broadly accepted the loss of privacy as a necessary trade-off.

People ordered into self-quarantine must download another app, which alerts officials if a patient ventures out of isolation. Fines for violations can reach $2,500.

By identifying and treating infections early, and segregating mild cases to special centers, South Korea has kept hospitals clear for the most serious patients. Its case fatality rate is just over one percent, among the lowest in the world.

The differences between the U.S. and South Korean response is impacting not only the nation's health but the nation's democratic system. At least 47 countries have postponed elections due to the coronavirus outbreak, including Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, France and Ethiopia. Others, like the United States and New Zealand, are still deciding whether to proceed with their scheduled votes.

South Korea made a number of election concessions for the virus. More than 11 million people -- or 26.7% of registered voters -- cast their vote in advance to avoid crowds, according to the National Election Committee. Early voters, and those casting their vote on Wednesday, had their temperature checked at the door. Polling booths were regularly disinfected and anyone with a temperature of more

than 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit had to vote in a special booth. About 20,000 additional workers were dispatched to put in place the extra measures.

Special voting booths have been set up at government-run isolation centers, and those under self-quarantine were allowed to leave their house to vote after polling booths closed to the public at 6 p.m.