**Headline:** The U.S. Government’s Pandemic Response Has Hurt Americans—Examples Around the World Show How to Do Better

**Teaser:** Americans are struggling. Around the globe, better responses to COVID-19 offer lessons to the U.S.

By April M. Short

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**[Article Body:]**

In the United States, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has centered on bailouts of mega-corporations and big banks. Citizens have received a one-time $1,200 payment from the government, which amounts to less than a month’s rent for many. Meanwhile, unemployment has skyrocketed, nearing (and arguably reaching) [Great Depression-era levels](https://www.forbes.com/sites/chuckjones/2020/05/19/3-reasons-unemployment-is-already-at-great-depression-levels/#3a1e96df413f). Small businesses and individuals who have little or no income as a result of the pandemic have been left scrambling to navigate a flawed unemployment system or have taken on additional debt through loans.

Since the pandemic and resulting stay-at-home efforts took effect, [domestic violence rates](https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/04/22/domestic-violence-has-increased-during-coronavirus-lockdowns) have been on the rise. While the rate of [child abuse reports](https://www.centerforhealthjournalism.org/2020/05/05/child-abuse-hotline-calls-are-down-during-covid-19-abuse-fears-are) is down, analysts say that statistic is likely an indicator that abuses that would normally be reported by teachers or childcare programs are now going unreported. Some experts theorize that suicide rates will increase due to economic and domestic unrest coupled with the loneliness of self-isolation, and already [mental health has been negatively impacted](https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/physician-health/39-say-coronavirus-stress-worry-taking-mental-health-toll) and some [experts are concerned](https://www.opb.org/news/article/covid-19-drug-alcohol-addiction/) addiction issues may be worsened by the situation.

In the U.S. more than 100,000 have died due to the virus—with significant racial disparities, and African Americans representing a [disproportionate](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/04/coronavirus-disproportionately-impacts-african-americans/) number of those deaths. This may be in part attributed to [racial disparities](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/the-state-of-healthcare-in-the-united-states/racial-disparities-in-health-care/) in American health care, and in part due to the fact that black and Hispanic Americans [tend to hold the low-paying essential worker jobs](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/16/black-workers-coronavirus-covid-19) that require them to risk their health daily to survive.

The recent protests that have erupted across the country against racism and police brutality, set into motion by the [recent murder of George Floyd](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/06/03/the-murder-of-george-floyd-is-normal-in-an-abnormal-society/) at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25, call attention to longstanding disparities across the nation’s systems. While frontline medical care workers [continue to risk their lives](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/05/21/why-dont-hospitals-have-enough-masks-because-coronavirus-broke-market/) due to a lack of basic safety gear and equipment, police officers are showing up in full riot gear as they respond to the mass protests.

The response by U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration throughout the pandemic, and into the mass protests, has been a mixture of confusing, disingenuous and dangerous information. After [destroying the U.S.’s pandemic response plan](https://www.newstatesman.com/world/north-america/2020/03/america-pandemic-response-swine-flu-avian) that was developed over two decades, the Trump administration’s [response](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/05/20/how-the-united-states-government-failed-to-prepare-for-the-global-pandemic/) to coronavirus has largely contradicted medical experts, put countless lives at risk and failed to address the daily struggles Americans now face. His response to the nationwide protests has been to use racist innuendos, gaslight the voices of protesters and call for a violent military and police suppression of the largely peaceful protests.

If this moment is making anything clear, it is the importance of putting people’s lives and health before profits and egos—especially in times of crisis. As the world scrambles to respond to a continually unfolding shift in the global reality, there are many examples of responses that are superior to that of the U.S. government. The following are models from around the world of compassion, leadership and humane pandemic responses that should offer lessons to the U.S. moving forward.

**Nations Led by Women Have Typically Handled the Pandemic the Best**

The nations with the most effective and beneficial COVID-19 responses have largely been nations with women at the helm, as a New York Times [article](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html) by Amanda Taub explores. Such nations also have systems of proportional voting in place.

Among them is New Zealand, whose prime minister is unmarried single mom Jacinda Ardern. New Zealand arguably had the most effective [response](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52344299) to the COVID-19 outbreak worldwide. It relied on science, data and empathy to contain the virus nationwide and eliminate its spread. The country has readied itself to safely return to normal life [by mid-June](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-newzealand/new-zealand-could-return-to-normal-life-as-early-as-next-week-idUSKBN23A0FY) as it had [no active cases](https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/new-zealand-coronavirus-level-one-intl-hnk/index.html) of coronavirus as of June 8. While it’s true that the size and isolated geography of New Zealand likely played their parts, the nation’s leadership played the key role in its successful handling of the pandemic. Before the end of March, the island nation closed all borders and public places, enacted mandatory quarantines for all visitors and put a nationwide lockdown into place, with a moratorium on domestic travel. And, unlike many Americans, New Zealanders by and large got on board with the restrictions. In a [National Geographic article](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/2020/04/what-new-zealand-did-right-in-battling-coronavirus/#close), a resident offers one reason for their nationwide cooperation: New Zealanders trust their leadership.

Julie Anne Genter, a member of the House of Representatives for New Zealand’s Green Party (who also happens to be my cousin), says the country’s proportional voting system, [Mixed Member Proportional](https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/what-is-mmp/) (MMP), is the key to the nation’s successful leadership, and at the root of its success in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Genter says MMP has meant the people are better represented in government.

“Having elected leaders and government that are more diverse and closer to the diversity of the population leads to better decision-making,” Genter wrote in an email. “MMP has meant more women in parliament, more minorities, more young people, and if it weren’t for MMP, Jacinda Ardern would not be prime minister—and she is highly competent,” Genter added. “That is the same in many European democracies with young female leaders: Iceland, Finland, Denmark and Germany all have proportional electoral systems.”

Those European democracies also represent nations with the most successful responses to the pandemic worldwide. Germany has been [praised above many of its European neighbors](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/world/europe/germany-coronavirus-death-rate.html) for its handling of the pandemic, and Chancellor Angela Merkel has offered a straightforward, fact-based response from the beginning. Iceland, Finland and Denmark, as well as Norway (which also has a proportional elections system), are also among the nations in Europe credited with the best responses.

Comparatively, the response in the U.S. (and in particular on the part of Trump) has been convoluted, disregarding facts and expert advice and needlessly endangering countless lives. A recent [article](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/13/leaders-trump-bolsonaro-coroanvirus-toxic-masculinity) by Robin Dembroff in the Guardian dissects how the “macho” responses of world leaders are a liability in times of crisis.

The article explores the tendency of male world leaders like Trump, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro who in March described COVID-19 as a “little flu,” to “deny, falsify and dismiss evidence about public health crises,” and the role of toxic masculinity behind those damaging responses. Dembroff [cites](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/13/leaders-trump-bolsonaro-coroanvirus-toxic-masculinity) the American Psychological Association’s point “that these traditional forms of masculinity harm not only men, but [also those around them](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner)” and adds that men’s health expert Dr. Roger Kirby:

“[observes](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/tre.709) that toxic forms of masculinity, which lead to ‘dominant, aggressive, [and] risk-taking’ behaviour, cause men to see illness or other health problems as effeminate and weak, leading them to choose risk and discomfort over the ‘emasculation’ of seeking medical treatment. As a result, men who pursue these forms of masculinity [display](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1016/j.jomh.2010.09.227) ‘the strongest predictors of individual risk behaviour over the life course.’”

These are the last traits anyone wants to see in leaders during a health crisis.

**Bailouts and Economic Support**

Around the world, many countries have enacted robust [economic relief efforts](https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19) that directly assist individual citizens—such as guaranteed, recurring payments going out to citizens unable to safely return to work—in response to the pandemic’s economic effects. For example, [Canada’s government](https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html) has promised monthly payments worth about $1,450 to anyone affected, and [Australia](https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus/jobkeeper) plans to give about $1,000 every two weeks to each employee of an impacted business. In late May, the European Commission proposed an [$820 billion coronavirus stimulus package](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/28/headlines/european_commission_proposes_820_billion_coronavirus_stimulus_package?fbclid=IwAR2JIc6LVT_IVoElrqKCjvODKmQ2qBnfImOamrPH4lyD16p5W3W2BX0mU10). As [reported by the Miami Herald](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article241525961.html), Colombia’s government plans to redistribute $3 billion from oil companies and $700 million from the national pension fund “to underwrite programs to support laid-off workers and those with reduced wages.” The Chilean government has enacted tax deferrals for small businesses, extending unemployment benefits to workers and protecting their contracts. The efforts by [nations worldwide to offer economic relief](https://howmuch.net/articles/worlds-economic-programs-against-coronavirus) are unprecedented.

Meanwhile, the U.S.’s economic relief efforts have focused on bailing out large and powerful institutions, harking back to the [mistakes and oversights](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/us/politics/coronavirus-economic-package-oversight.html) that led to the economic collapse in 2008. This top-down bailout approach has once again failed to significantly stimulate the economy, which began to enter a [recession](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/business/economy/us-economy-recession-2020.html) in February.

While the U.S. government has distributed [$700 billion](https://projects.propublica.org/bailout/list/index.html) in taxpayer dollars to a bailout bill, as well as a separate [Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac](https://projects.propublica.org/bailout/initiatives/1-housing-and-economic-recovery-act-of-2008) bailout, both of those efforts primarily relieve the automotive industry, big banks and other mega-corporations. ProPublica has been actively [tracking the distribution of those bailouts](https://projects.propublica.org/bailout/list) dollar for dollar since April, as they did following the Bush administration’s unsuccessful and similar stimulus measure in 2008. In an article in March, ProPublica [published a detailed comparison](https://www.propublica.org/article/we-tracked-the-last-time-the-government-bailed-out-the-economy-heres-what-to-know-about-the-1-trillion-coronavirus-plan) between the crises of 2008 and today, and the reasons such top-down stimulus efforts aren’t likely the best way to support people.

**Lessons From Taiwan**

Taiwan’s response to COVID-19 is among the most positive examples worldwide. While many nearby countries, some of them comparable in size and geography to Taiwan, struggled to contain the outbreak, Taiwan did so early and successfully.

Taiwan is a self-ruled, democratic island of 23 million people, with a nationalized health care system and a woman president. It quickly and effectively responded to the outbreak, with a transparent approach that included daily public briefings from top [medical officials](https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/04/asia/taiwan-coronavirus-response-who-intl-hnk/index.html) from the onset. Taiwan has become a key example of how [democratic nations](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/04/asia/taiwan-coronavirus-response-who-intl-hnk/index.html) can successfully contain epidemics.

Taiwan quickly banned all incoming travel from China and elsewhere, and kept an open and honest dialogue with its citizens. Likely informed by the outbreak of [SARS in Taiwan in 2003](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1201971204001766), Taiwan rapidly increased face mask production and employed careful contact tracing to contain the spread of infection. It was able to avoid the social isolation measures many other nations have enacted, while still keeping its cases of the virus way down. As of mid-May, the nation had only 440 cases of the virus and seven deaths, as [reported](https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/15/asia/china-taiwan-coronavirus-ties-intl-hnk/index.html) by CNN.

By contrast, the U.S. has had a largely disjointed response to the virus with confusing messaging from government officials and a president who has fanned the flames of confusion in all directions. Trump and his [officials ignored warnings](https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-05-05/ousted-government-scientist-whistleblower-complaint) ahead of the outbreak and dismantled America’s pandemic response plan. Trump has many times over contradicted the analyses of health authorities throughout the crisis, on everything from the proven effectiveness of protective face masks, to social isolation measures, to pushing for [ineffective and dangerous drug treatments](https://www.nytimes.com/article/hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus.html) and beyond. The U.S. went months without implementing any kind of contact tracing systems, and the generally slow and garbled response led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and a serious economic fallout.

**Mutual Aid and Community Organizing in the U.S.**

In the U.S., efforts by citizens, rather than the government, are offering the most effective examples of responses to the pandemic. In many areas, it has fallen to individuals and volunteer community networks during this unprecedented time to support the survival of the most vulnerable Americans: people who can’t afford their next meal, homeless communities and people of color marginalized due to long-standing systemic racism, who are unable to acquire basic living necessities.

Nationwide, a neighbor-to-neighbor emergency response [mutual aid effort](https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2020/04/mutual-aid-volunteers-are-mobilizing-to-help-the-most-vulnerable-communities-to-deal-with-coronavirus.html) has emerged to provide groceries and essentials to those communities for free, on a volunteer basis. People across the country are organizing their communities to provide what short-term relief they can to those most impacted. (For more information on local mutual aid efforts in the U.S. in response to coronavirus, check out this public Google [spreadsheet](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1HEdNpLB5p-sieHVK-CtS8_N7SIUhlMpY6q1e8Je0ToY/htmlview?usp=sharing).)

Additionally, a [Share My Check campaign](https://www.fundtheneweconomy.org/), focused on supporting those most impacted by this emergency, encourages Americans who are able to donate all or parts of their $1,200 stimulus checks to direct action for people in need.

The Share My Check campaign is spearheaded by the [New Economy Coalition](https://neweconomy.net/) (NEC). The NEC is a network of advocacy groups working to develop a new economic model often referred to as the “solidarity economy,” which is a collection of new systems that would place the health of people and the planet over profits and private capital. The NEC offers donation-based grants to existing neighborhood and community organizations working on-the-ground toward the vision of a new economy.

“I think what we’re seeing with COVID-19 is another watershed moment where the impacts of wealth inequality are so apparent,” says Kelly Baker, a co-director of the NEC. “We’re all equally afraid and confused and adjusting as humans to this global moment, but the lived experience of people in this moment is very different depending on race, depending on class, depending on the different situations that you might find yourself in.”

Baker says she thinks we will be grappling with what is revealed by the coronavirus at this time, regarding inequities in the U.S.’s economic systems, racial divides between who is most marginalized and shortcomings of our health care systems as well as social services, for years to come.

“There are ways we can prep now, and there are ways we can plant the seeds for new institutions and systems that can replace what is currently happening,” she says. “The one heartening thing is that [while] a crisis like this is awful and unprecedented in many ways, the work of people across the country and seeds that were planted years ago are maybe bearing fruit now—or will in the future.”

Baker says that while the NEC is donating some of the money it raises to immediate relief and mutual aid efforts, it is also supporting organizations working to restructure economic and social systems long-term.

**Going Forward With Lessons**

The response on the part of leadership in the U.S. has hurt Americans in ways that continue to unfold and impact lives indefinitely. Going forward, it is imperative that the U.S. look to examples of what works to serve the collective, and what works to serve only a few.

The many effective examples from around the world—including those offered within America by citizens working on the ground for change—make it clear that a better approach to unexpected disaster is possible. And a better approach is necessary. It is time for Americans to ask: What can we learn from this crisis about what a healthy society looks like? What lessons can we receive about the economic, social and environmental impacts of our current systems and our leadership?

This is a pivotal moment of reckoning when it comes to racial injustice and social inequities, as protests across the country are reshaping systems of policing and spotlighting the racist realities many Americans have known for centuries, to the rest of the country and world—and it is likely not a coincidence that this is coming to a head in the midst of this pandemic. When emergencies like the current one hit, people of color, and black communities in particular, are [disproportionately](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-04-08/coronavirus-racial-disparity) impacted. It is time to listen to leaders from marginalized communities about the systemic changes that are called for. This is an election year. Now is the time for people to vote, speak out, look outside of their bubbles and wake up to the changes that have long been necessary, in order to create a society that places human lives and the lived realities of citizens over the egos and profits of a few at the top.