

Let the Scientists Speak

How CDC Experts Have Been Sidelined during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Appendix: Methodology

<https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/let-scientists-speak>

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This appendix provides a more detailed version of the methodology used to carry out analyses in the *Let the Scientists Speak* fact sheet.

Date Range

The start date in the United States for SARS, H1N1 influenza (swine flu), and COVID-19 was defined as when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) opened its Emergency Operations Centers (CDC 2013; CDC 2019a; WHO 2020). Data on presidential press events, CDC press briefings, and case numbers were collected over the next 13 weeks of the epidemic. After 13 weeks, the CDC changed the way it had defined and reported H1N1 flu cases (CDC 2009); therefore, in order to compare across epidemics, 13 weeks was chosen as the end point for the analysis. The date ranges corresponded to:

- SARS: March 14 to June 13, 2003
- H1N1: April 22 to July 22, 2009
- COVID-19: January 21 to April 21, 2020

Cases in the United States

US case numbers were real-time estimates provided by the CDC at the end of the 13-week period examined. These data should be viewed as the best estimates by the CDC for US cases in the midst of an epidemic, since more accurate assessments may have been carried out after the epidemic concluded.

- **SARS:** the number of cases (8) was pulled from a CDC Morbidity and Mortality report on June 11, 2003, and also represents the entirety of cases diagnosed in the United States throughout the epidemic (CDC 2003). All cases were laboratory-confirmed via serologic testing for the antibody to SARS-CoV and all cases were associated with international travel.
- **H1N1:** the number of cases (43,771) was pulled from a CDC Novel H1N1 Flu Situation Update report, which described the US situation up until July 18, 2009 (CDC 2009). The number of cases represents individual confirmed and probable cases of H1N1 influenza as reported by 55 US states and territories.
- **COVID-19:** the number of cases (776,093) was pulled from the CDC's website reporting COVID-19 cases in the United States. Note that in early May 2020, the CDC changed the way it displayed the data, so the data used in the analysis (total number of cases as of April 21) are currently housed in the CDC's Previous U.S. COVID-19 Case Data website (CDC 2020c). According to the CDC's FAQ, reported cases represented both confirmed and probable cases and were compiled from multiple surveillance systems run in collaboration with state, local, territorial, and academic partners (CDC 2020b).

CDC Press Briefings

We defined CDC press briefings as briefings held with journalists, in-person or over the phone, in which CDC experts provided detailed updates on the epidemic and allowed a question-and-answer session. Press briefings also had to meet the following criteria:

- The press event had to be logged or archived on the CDC's website
- The event had to occur in the 13-week date range set for each epidemic
- The event needed to have the word "briefing" in the title

- The event needed to have the name of the epidemic in the title (i.e, SARS or “severe acute respiratory syndrome”; H1N1 or “swine flu”; coronavirus or COVID-19)

In order to avoid counting the same press briefing more than once, the dates, transcripts, briefing titles, and—when multiple briefings occurred on the same day—time of day were checked to make sure each data point represented a unique press briefing. Transcripts were sought for each press briefing as evidence that it had taken place (in one case, the CDC had scheduled a COVID-19 briefing on March 13 that lacked a transcript because the event did not occur; this event was not counted in our numbers).

For SARS, a count of press briefings came from the CDC’s SARS News and Alerts Archive website and the CDC Newsroom Archives for 2003 (CDC 2011; CDC 2019b). For H1N1, the following two sites were searched: the CDC’s H1N1 Flu (Swine Flu) Press Updates and CDC Newsroom Archives for 2009 (CDC 2010; CDC 2019c). For COVID-19, both the main CDC Newsroom for COVID-19 and the CDC Newsroom Releases were searched (CDC 2020a; CDC 2019d).

Presidential Press Events

We defined presidential press events as press events hosted by the White House, in which the president gave speeches or remarks on the epidemic, and the main purpose of the event was to discuss the epidemic. This included White House press events, press briefings, and addresses to the nation. Presidential press events also had to meet the following criteria:

- The press event had to be logged or archived on the White House’s website (either the live version or the White House archives of the George W. Bush and Obama administrations)
- The event needed to occur in the 13-week date range set for each epidemic
- The president had to have spoken during the press event
- The event had the name of the epidemic in the title (i.e, SARS or “severe acute respiratory syndrome”; H1N1 or “swine flu”; coronavirus or COVID-19), or the event was titled something generic like “News Conference” but the transcript showed the president had spoken and delivered updates or information on the epidemic during the speech’s opening (i.e., before the journalists asked him questions)

For President Trump, the information came from an examination of the White House website’s News section, as filtered by “Remarks” and “Briefings and Statements” (White House 2020). For President Obama, the Obama White House website archives of the Press Office were examined; specifically the “Speeches & Remarks” and “Press Briefings” sections (White House President Barack Obama Archives 2017b; White House President Barack Obama Archives 2017a). For President Bush, the “Presidential News and Speeches” section was searched on the George W. Bush White House archives (White House President George W. Bush Archives 2009).

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