

Inside North Korea's Covid-19 Lockdown

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In-country survey interviews with 100 ordinary North Koreans provide a rare window into life under the Covid-19 lockdown, revealing how the government used the pandemic to tighten control while failing to meet basic public health needs.
- The lapse of the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) since 2022, coupled with growing ties between North Korea and other authoritarian states like Russia and China, has undermined U.S. and international efforts to address North Korean human rights abuses.
- Congress should restore U.S. leadership by reauthorizing the NKHRA and reinstating the special envoy to ensure human rights remain a core component of U.S. policy toward North Korea.
- Policymakers can respond to pandemic-specific risks and threats by continuing to offer humanitarian aid, support access to outside information, document abuses, and plan for potential North Korean collapse scenarios.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Between January 2020 and August 2023, the North Korean regime responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by sealing its borders, restricting all internal movement, and imposing strict “anti-epidemic” measures marked by public health mismanagement, egregious human rights violations, and strategic use of the crisis to reinforce authoritarian control. This brief is based on the voices of 100 ordinary North Korean residents interviewed in-country in the second half of 2023 as the lockdown lifted, offering a rare glimpse into lived experiences under the world’s most secretive regime during what was arguably its most extreme period of isolation in history.¹

The survey interviews revealed the following five observations:

1. The regime promoted a false “zero cases” narrative for over two years, despite 92 percent of respondents saying they or someone they knew had contracted Covid-19. Sixty-two of those cases occurred before the government’s first public acknowledgement in May 2022.
2. Prior to May 2022, access to vaccines, treatments, and protective equipment was virtually nonexistent. Only 13 percent of respondents had access to testing, and most who received a vaccine did so after May 2022. Many had to buy, make, or reuse masks.
3. Lockdown and quarantine policies deepened suffering by exacerbating existing food and medicine shortages and creating new justifications for repression. Nearly all respondents reported market shortages and price spikes, and quarantine violators often faced imprisonment or forced labor.
4. Fear of contradicting the regime’s narrative of “zero cases” led to widespread self-censorship and local misreporting, compounding the humanitarian toll.
5. The regime’s authoritarian response fueled resentment, bribery, and quiet defiance that could signal longer-term regime vulnerability. Sixty-two percent of respondents reported paying bribes to circumvent quarantine restrictions, with several voicing deep cynicism toward the regime’s intentions.

¹ We partnered with an organization that has a successful track record of conducting discrete and careful questionnaires in North Korea. The questionnaires were conducted through casual, in-person conversations between interviewers and respondents. The interviewers were carefully trained to avoid leading questions or prompting specific responses to protect the integrity of the survey and the safety of all participants. A full analysis of the survey interviews will be published in an upcoming report by CSIS and the George W. Bush Institute.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Congress should prioritize the reauthorization of the NKHRA and reinstatement of the special envoy for North Korean human rights issues. This is essential to ensure that human rights concerns remain central to U.S. diplomatic and security policy toward North Korea and prevent a further erosion of the institutional commitments that have underpinned U.S. leadership on this issue for over two decades.
- The following recommendations from an upcoming CSIS- George W. Bush Institute report aim to address the specific risks and vulnerabilities revealed in the survey of North Korea's response to the Covid-19 pandemic:
 1. Do not take official North Korean statements or data at face value. Verify everything.
 2. Even if the North Korean government is likely to reject it, continue to offer humanitarian aid when needed.
 3. Devise and support legislative and nongovernmental organization initiatives to increase North Koreans' access to accurate outside information.
 4. U.S. and allied governments working to prepare for potential North Korean regime collapse scenarios need to keep in mind that periods of increased authoritarian control can generate new, less visible sources of regime vulnerability.
 5. Continue to document evidence of human rights abuses to support future prosecutions of North Korean leaders.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Firsthand accounts from the pandemic, detailing denial of basic healthcare, intense regime surveillance, and restrictions on the freedom of movement, highlight the urgent need to revive longstanding bipartisan U.S. leadership on promoting North Korean human rights. Central to this leadership has been the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA), first enacted in 2004 under President George W. Bush and reauthorized by successive administrations until its expiration in 2022. The law authorized support for humanitarian assistance, freedom of information, and accountability for human rights abuses, and required the appointment of a special envoy within the Department of State to report annually to Congress on efforts to advance human rights in North Korea.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS

Despite longstanding bipartisan support for the NKHRA, efforts to reauthorize the legislation have repeatedly stalled in Congress. In 2021, then-Senator Marco Rubio introduced a bipartisan bill to extend the NKHRA for four additional years. While the Senate approved it in 2022, the House version of the bill failed to pass. The legislation was reintroduced in 2023, and this time the House passed it, but the Senate did not. As a result, since 2022, no version of the NKHRA has been in force. Compounding the absence of U.S. leadership is the growing cooperation between North Korea and other authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, which has helped shield North Korea from international accountability and emboldened its repressive practices. These geopolitical realignments and stalled U.S. policy have created a significant policy gap at a time when firsthand accounts from inside North Korea point to worsening patterns of abuse, deprivation, state control, and information opacity, particularly during and after the Covid-19 lockdown.

The consequences of this information vacuum extend beyond North Korea. The global health community still lacks clarity on the scale of Covid-19 spread within North Korea and whether conditions marked by the already dire lack of health care, poor nutrition, rampant disease, and weak vaccine infrastructure may present a breeding ground for new variants. These uncertainties raise urgent global health and humanitarian concerns.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

- Victor Cha, Katrin Fraser Katz, and Seyeon Ji, *Behind Shuttered Borders: A View into North Korea's COVID-19 Experiences* (Washington, DC: George W. Bush Institute and CSIS), forthcoming (est. June 2025).
- Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, *How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses* (Washington, DC: George W. Bush Presidential Center and CSIS, September 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-and-russia-facilitate-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses>.
- Robert R. King, "Marco Rubio and the Outlook for North Korean Human Rights Under Trump 2.0," CSIS, *Commentary*, February 12, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/marco-rubio-and-outlook-north-korean-human-rights-under-trump-20>.

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