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Portugal's Response to COVID-19

[Ana Santos Rutschman](#)



Timely and extensive interventions have facilitated Portugal's success in addressing COVID-19.

The way in which Portugal addressed the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic has been [hailed](#) as one of the most successful national responses to COVID-19. Commentators have [called](#) Portugal's response exemplary while portraying the country's management of the public health crisis as exceptional when [compared](#) to other European countries' responses.

At just over 35,000 square miles—slightly larger than the state of Maine—and framed by Spain along its land borders, Portugal's average width [is](#) around only

88 miles. One could have expected COVID-19 to affect Portugal and Spain in similar ways. Yet that was not the case. The death toll associated with COVID-19 has [been](#) 30 times lower in Portugal than neighboring Spain.

Although Portugal's health care system has [been](#) the subject of recent reforms, health inequalities [are](#) still pervasive. A 2017 study by the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) and the [European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies](#) [found](#) that these reforms are lacking for populations aged 65 and older, precisely the populations at greater risk when exposed to the novel coronavirus. Despite this disparity in health care resources, Portugal has [fared](#) better than several other Western European countries during the pandemic.

Early Declaration of State of Emergency. The first critical factor in the success of the Portuguese response to COVID-19 was its timeliness. Portugal [moved](#) to [declare](#) a state of emergency on March 18, seven days after the [World Health Organization](#) [declared](#) COVID-19 a pandemic. At that point, there [were](#) nearly 650 cases of COVID-19 and two reported deaths among Portugal's population of 10 million. By contrast, in Spain, a country of nearly 47 million people, when a state of emergency was [declared](#) on March 14, there [were](#) already over 4,200 cases and 120 deaths.

Article 19 of Portugal's [Constitution](#) allows the President to initiate a declaration of a state of emergency based on highly disruptive events, including "public disasters." This recent declaration was the first time that the government [declared](#) a state of emergency since Portugal [transitioned](#) from a dictatorship to a democracy in 1974. A declaration of a state of emergency allows Portuguese authorities to [curtail](#) several fundamental rights partially, including the ability to travel nationally and internationally, the right to gather for worship, the freedom of assembly, and the right to strike.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Portugal [imposed](#) all of these types of restrictions as of March 19. The presidential decree [enabled](#) the government to temporarily restrict freedom of movement within the country through the imposition of a general “duty of home isolation,” which roughly matches the concept of a stay-in-place order in the United States. Elderly people aged 70 and over were [placed](#) under a “special duty” of home isolation, which some commentators criticized as stigmatizing and was later dropped. In addition to placing restrictions on social gatherings, religious gatherings were also [banned](#). Commercial establishments were [ordered](#) to shut down unless they were deemed essential, a category that included pharmacies, grocery stores, gas stations, and banks. Restaurants were [allowed](#) to provide take-out and delivery services only. The right of workers in health care and other critical areas to strike was also temporarily [suspended](#).

Even before the declaration of a state of emergency went into effect, Portugal announced that it would be [closing](#) all public and private schools starting March 16 and at least through mid-April. The Portuguese government [made](#) this announcement when there were only about 80 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country.

Additional Restrictions During Religious Holidays. A state of emergency can only be [declared](#) in Portugal for periods of up to 15 days. Portugal renewed its ban twice in April, further [adopting](#) a set of measures especially targeted at the Easter period, which [is](#) normally the second busiest travel holiday in the country after Christmas. Between April 9 and April 13, Portuguese citizens were only [allowed](#) to travel within their municipality of residence, except for movement related to health or other reasons of “imperative urgency.” Some types of workers and public servants, including health care and public safety workers, were [exempted](#) from this prohibition to perform their professional duties.

Both President Marcelo de Sousa and members of the government publicly [addressed](#) Portuguese citizens on multiple occasions, asking those who live in Portugal to forgo Easter celebrations with their extended families and imploring those who live abroad not to visit during Easter. Passenger flights in and out of Portugal were also [suspended](#) during this period of time.

Switch From the State of Emergency to a State of Calamity. The state of emergency in Portugal lasted from March 19 through May 2. After that, Portugal transitioned to a state of calamity, which is [regulated](#) by a different law that [allows](#) the government to impose a state of calamity for limited periods of time without an intervention from the President or the Parliament. This regulation is the same mechanism of response that was [used](#) when Portugal [struggled](#) with summer wildfires in 2019. Even before the declaration of a state of emergency, the government had used a declaration of a state of calamity to [place](#) the small Portuguese city of Ovar, one of the early epicenters of COVID-19, under a cordon sanitaire—a public health measure, recently [used](#) in the response to Ebola, that places a designated area under quarantine for a limited period of time.

The declaration of a state of calamity [ushered](#) in a period of phased reopening in Portugal. The government issued new guidelines that continued to mandate several procedures for disease monitoring, contact tracing, and isolation of infected populations. While public health authorities continued to urge people to avoid unnecessary social interactions, the government [eliminated](#) the distinction between the elderly and populations under 70 years old in connection with the duty of home isolation. Instead, they announced what became understood as a general obligation to minimize social contact.

In early May, the government also started to [permit](#) small gatherings [set](#) at 10 people, a number that was progressively [revised](#) upward as phased reopening continued. In late June, however, the Lisbon metropolitan area [reverted](#) to the

10-person cap, as Portugal's capital started to see an increase in new COVID-19 cases during the later stages of phased reopening.

Initially, the new rules [limited](#) gatherings within enclosed spaces of up to approximately 1,100 square feet to five people. Small commercial establishments, approximately 2,150 square feet or less, were allowed to open first, subject to different conditions [based](#) on the type of establishment. Some businesses, such as hairdressers, were required to operate by appointment, while others were required to operate at a percentage of overall capacity, such as movie theaters.

To further [encourage](#) the use of masks, which was made mandatory at the beginning of the state of calamity, the government [enacted](#) a new law that imposed fines between 120 and 350 euros for failure to wear a mask or other required protective gear, such as a visor. The obligation to wear a mask was [designed](#) broadly, covering the provision of services and entrance into commercial establishments, educational establishments, and daycare centers, among other locations.

Although Portuguese constitutional law scholars agree that a state of calamity carries less severe restrictions to individual freedoms than a state of emergency, there [was](#) heated debate about the precise extent of the measures that the government could adopt during this new phase. For instance, some experts [argued](#) that church gatherings could not be limited during the state of calamity, as there is no parliamentary check on the government's intervention, and a legislative intervention is required to limit fundamental rights that the Constitution protects. The Portuguese government, however, ended up [maintaining](#) restrictions on church gatherings and other forms of religious celebrations through the end of May.

Portugal's Approach to Immigration During Border Closures. The border

between Portugal and Spain [closed](#) on March 15 by mutual agreement between the two countries. Even when Spain opened its border to France in June, the border with Portugal was set to remain [closed](#) until July.

Portugal's strict border closure policy was matched by a generous approach to immigration. The [Ministry of Internal Administration established](#) in March that anyone with a pending immigration-related application, a category that included refugees and asylum seekers, would be given the same treatment as permanent residents throughout the state of emergency and the state of calamity. The government reportedly [stated](#) that the temporary grant of many of the same rights of permanent residents was designed to afford migrants access to fundamental goods as well as the exercise of fundamental rights during the pandemic, [including](#) access to the [National Health Service](#),—Portugal's health care system—the ability to work, and the opportunity to open a bank account.

Overall, Portugal's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been comprehensive in limiting pathways for the virus to spread while also putting in place robust testing and contact tracing protocols. Perhaps most important of all, Portugal acted in this comprehensive fashion early, when the case count was extremely low.

Even though there have been some recent setbacks in major metropolitan areas, Portugal so far has been able contain the virus relatively well and limit some of its most extreme adverse effects on public health. By adopting a wide-reaching package of initial measures and only gradually lifting restrictions, the Portuguese response confirms the need for early interventions matched by phased, closely monitored, reopening strategies.

This essay is part of an ongoing series, entitled [Comparing Nations' Responses to COVID-19](#).