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Study: Leading indicator of international arrivals by air, April 2020

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Study: Leading indicator of international arrivals by air, April 2020

by **Walter Omariba** and **Larry McKeown**

International travel was among the first areas of the economy to experience the impact of COVID-19 as governments across the world closed their borders to contain the spread of the virus. The number of international arrivals to Canada by air, which started a steep decline in the second half of March 2020 due to restrictions on international travel, almost completely halted in April. This study examines international arrivals to Canada using Primary Inspection Kiosk (PIK) data (see Methodology).

Border restrictions imposed to halt spread of virus

On March 16, 2020, the federal government closed its international border to foreign nationals, with certain exceptions that included American citizens, to contain the spread of COVID-19. At the same time, the Prime Minister advised all Canadians travelling outside of the country to return home.

As of March 18, international flights to Canada were redirected to just four airports: Toronto/Pearson, Vancouver International, Montreal/Trudeau and Calgary International. A 30-day restriction on non-essential travel across the Canada-U.S. border took effect on March 21 and was extended for another 30 days on April 18.

In response, major Canadian airlines initially suspended many transborder and international flights to focus on repatriation and then began reducing all services or ceasing operations entirely.

Arrivals from overseas countries comes to a near standstill

At the major Canadian airports equipped with PIK, the number of overseas residents arriving during the month of April fell 97.7%, from 257,000 in 2019 to 6,000 arrivals in 2020.

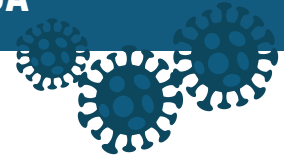
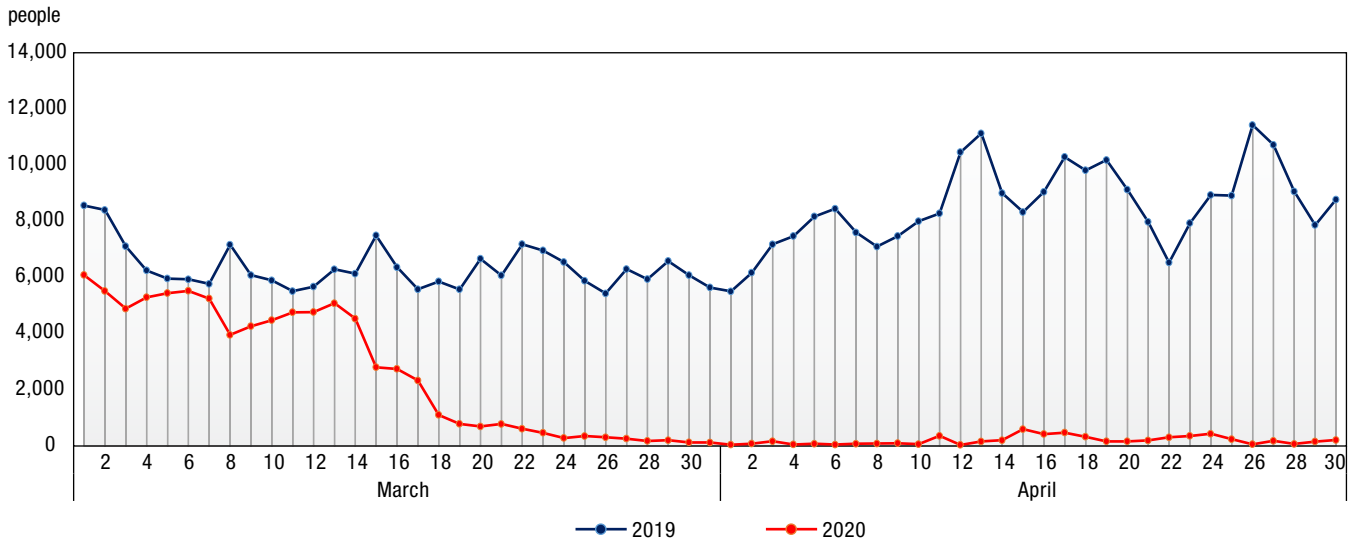


Chart 1
Air travellers from overseas countries arriving in Canada, March and April 2019 and 2020

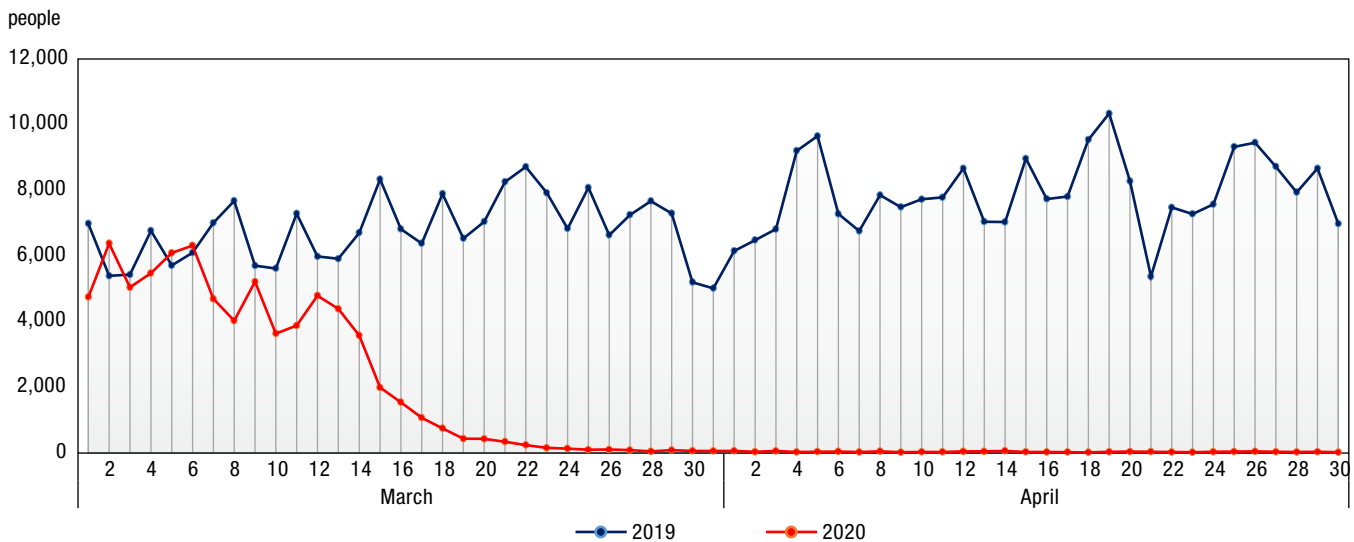


Sources: Statistics Canada- Reports of entries and re-entries from offices of the Canada Border Services Agency, Primary Inspection Kiosks.

Air arrivals from the United States virtually cease

The number of US residents entering Canada by air started a steep decline even before the March 16th announcement and was almost at a standstill through to the end of April. In April 2020, the number of US residents entering Canada by air was down 99.5% compared with 2019.

Chart 2
Air travellers from the United States arriving in Canada, March and April 2019 and 2020



Sources: Statistics Canada- Reports of entries and re-entries from offices of the Canada Border Services Agency, Primary Inspection Kiosks.

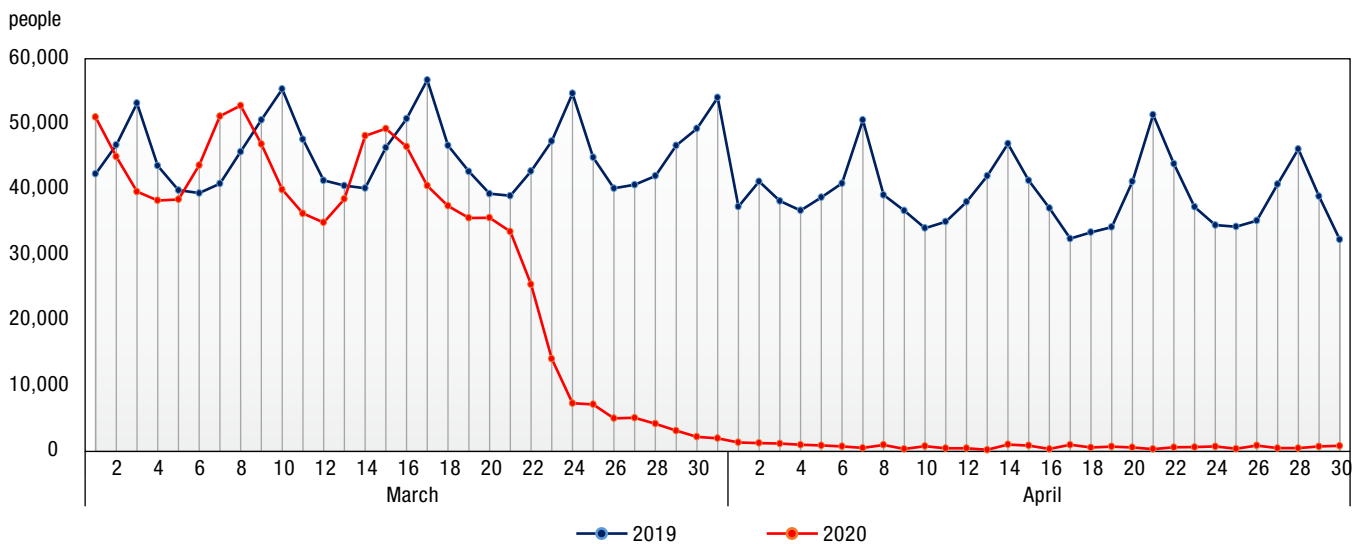


Canadian residents returning from abroad falls to a trickle

The number of Canadian residents returning from abroad – both from the United States and overseas countries – began a steep decline on March 21 that coincided with the closure of the Canada-US border. For the month of April 2020, 98.1% fewer Canadians crossed the border compared with the same month in 2019.

Chart 3

Canadian residents returning by air from abroad, March and April 2019 and 2020



Sources: Statistics Canada- Reports of entries and re-entries from offices of the Canada Border Services Agency, Primary Inspection Kiosks.

Methodology

Statistics Canada’s [Frontier Counts](#) program is produced using administrative data received from the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA). One source on travellers entering the country by air is the Primary Inspection Kiosk (PIK) system. The electronic PIK system replaces the paper E311 Declaration Cards that are completed by international travellers and submitted to CBSA officers upon arrival in Canada. Note that the data used in this analysis exclude Toronto Terminal 1 (where PIK has not been fully deployed) and Calgary International Airport (where PIK was not deployed until the second quarter of 2019). The indicator also excludes air travellers who enter Canada using a NEXUS card, as they are not required to complete PIK or E311, and travellers arriving by private aircraft.