

TRAVEL BANS ANDOMICRON

Since the identification of the Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) of SARS-CoV-2, the Canadian Government has banned travel from several African countries, even as the variant spreads in other countries globally.

The map on page 2 shows confirmed cases of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 on Dec 16, 2021, with darker shades of blue indicating higher numbers of cases. Countries outlined in red indicate [states whose nationals were banned](#) from Canada between Nov 26-Dec 18 in relation to the variant. Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and status First Nations could return from those countries during this period, subject to testing, screening, and quarantine measures. Except for South Africa, returning travellers were not allowed to use a negative COVID-19 test from a banned country, but had to obtain one from a different state. For example, a Canadian returning from Botswana could not use a negative test from Botswana but had to fly to an unbanned country like the UK to obtain a test there before going on to Canada.

While South Africa was first to identify Omicron, the variant's presence in several other countries, [including EU member states](#), makes both ascribing an origination point less clear, and undermines the logic behind the travel ban. That logic sought to stop the variant at its source, but the source was unclear, and confirmed case counts in other unbanned countries with large numbers of travellers to Canada were much higher. For example, the UK which remained unbanned throughout the most recent restrictions, frequently counted the highest Omicron cases in the world, and averaged 4.4 thousand visitors to Canada per month in the previous year. By contrast, Malawi, one of the banned states, counted 3 cases, and averaged 2 visitors per month.

While precautionary bans against states with lower testing capacity may be warranted, the uneven application of travel bans to countries with high confirmed case counts threatens to hamper the multilateral information sharing required to

uncover new variants of SARS-CoV-2. A country that discovers a new variant may be [less inclined to share data](#) if its leaders fear the imposition of travel bans or anticipate its spread to other countries regardless of its discovery in theirs.

Governments must balance risks to their citizens from arriving travellers with the benefits of information sharing and the protective measures in place to ensure safe travel. Travel bans that do not achieve an appropriate balance undercut global cooperation to identify and combat new variants and can provide false security at home.

Within Canada, the ability of travel bans to reduce infections is limited by entry exemptions for returning citizens and other residents. Unless Canada limits their entry or [imposes strict quarantine measures](#) its bans will not prevent the spread of the omicron variant. Bans [may delay](#) the onset of the variant and shift the curve in new infections, but they will [not replace domestic health measures](#). Local governments may use this time to prepare against community spread and should not place undue confidence in travel restrictions that do not adequately isolate returning Canadians.

The imposition and repeal of Omicron-related travel bans demonstrates the need for developing a consistent set of criteria in relation to travel restrictions. Doing so will help ensure foreign relations and information sharing are not harmed. Even more important will be Canada's efforts to help develop the public health infrastructure of countries with low vaccination rates. Omicron is a reminder that new variants will continue to impact both people and travel as disparities between nations in access and capacity to deliver vaccines persist.

Omicron Cases and Canadian Travel Bans by Country (2021-12-16)

Source: ECDC 2021; GISAID 2021; IRCC 2021; Various Government Health Ministries and Departments. Map by Robert Falconer.

