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World

How a South Korean church helped fuel the spread of the coronavirus

By Youjin Shin, Bonnie Berkowitz and Min Joo Kim   March 25, 2020

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From the movements and contacts of the first
people with confirmed cases of covid-19 in
South Korea, we get a real-life picture of how
a disease spread through a vulnerable
population.

Jan. 20   1 known case

The country's **first known case** was a 35-year-old Chinese woman who arrived at Incheon Airport from Wuhan. She tested positive for the novel coronavirus on Jan 20.

Jan. 27   4 known cases

Within a week, there were three more known cases, **all travelers from Wuhan** and all in their 50s. Two were detected and isolated at airports, so it is very unlikely they passed the disease to anyone else.

Jan. 30   7 known cases

Three additional people were confirmed to have the virus. Two were from Wuhan, and one was a man who had eaten a meal at a restaurant with Patient 3. He would become Patient 6, the **first known case of local transmission** (→) in South Korea.

Jan. 31   11 known cases

The next day, Patient 6's wife and son were confirmed positive, as well. Eleven days after the first case was diagnosed, there were just 10 other known cases. Local transmission had occurred **only among family members or within close social circles**.

Feb. 2   15 known cases

The first case of **transmission between strangers** was documented when an airline passenger tested positive after sitting near an infected person on a flight.

Feb. 16   30 known cases

Nearly all local transmission was still among families and friends.

Feb. 18   39 known cases

Patient 31, a 61-year-old woman, became the first congregant at Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu to test positive. It was unclear where she contracted the virus.
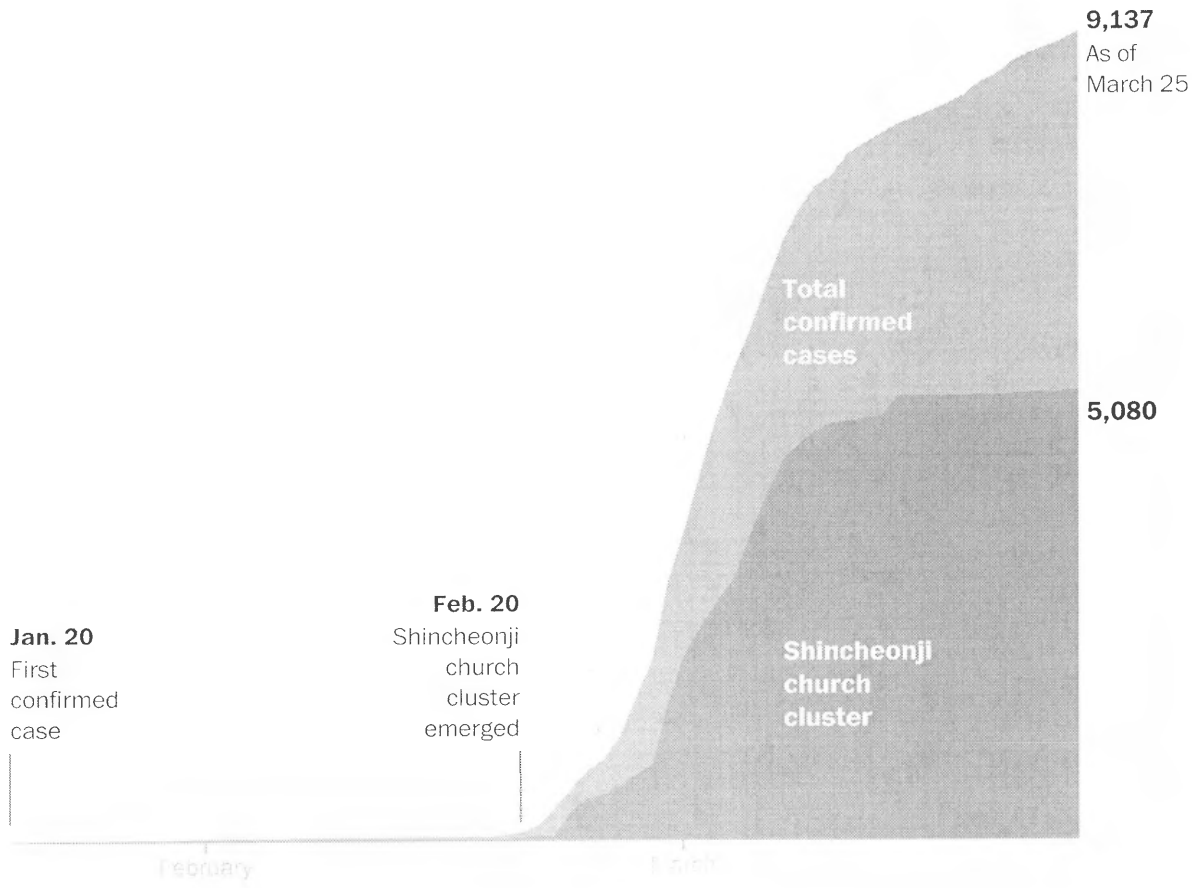
Feb. 20 104 known cases

Within two days after Patient 31 tested positive, 15 more people connected to the Shincheonji church were confirmed to have the virus, as well. A month later, thousands of people with connections to the church would test positive for the virus.

While the virus ravaged the church, more than 100 new cases had been confirmed in surrounding Daegu, as well. The disease appeared in hospitals, housing for the elderly and other churches. Most of these additional clusters were near the Shincheonji church.

March 25   9,137 known cases

A little over one month later, the cluster at the Shincheonji church accounted for 5,080 confirmed cases of covid-19, more than half of South Korea's total.

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9,137
As of
March 25

Total
confirmed
cases

5,080

Feb. 20
Shincheonji
church
cluster
emerged

Jan. 20
First
confirmed
case

**Shincheonji
church
cluster**

February   March

[Sign up for our Coronavirus Updates newsletter to track the outbreak.
All stories linked within the newsletter are free to access.]

After the country's biggest cluster of infections emerged among the Daegu
congregation, the South Korean government ordered testing on more than
200,000 members of the Shincheonji church across the country.

Thousands tested positive for the virus, including some who showed no symptoms.

Officials mandated rigorous inspections at gathering places deemed to be high risk, such as hospitals, gyms, karaoke bars, nursing homes, call centers and computer cafes.

The government reacted quickly with other policies, as well, hoping to isolate the virus from the uninfected population. Officials closed schools and public places, shut down sporting events and banned large gatherings.

The tactics appear to have worked. The rate of new known infections in South Korea has markedly slowed from a peak of 909 new cases on Feb. 29 to 100 or fewer new cases on most days since mid-March.

But the country is remaining vigilant and has continued thorough testing to track the spread of the virus.

[Mapping the spread of the coronavirus in the U.S. and worldwide]

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