



*Sign advertising Coronavirus rules in Munich, Germany.*

*Photo by [Kritzolina on Wikimedia Commons](#). Original photo cropped.*

## Making the System Work: Germany Coordinates a Response to COVID-19

When the first case of COVID-19 reached Germany in January 2020, the country's world-class medical and scientific institutions snapped into action to contain—and learn from—an outbreak in Bavaria. As the pandemic escalated, Chancellor Angela Merkel, a scientist by training, based the government's response on epidemiological models and expert advice. But Germany's federal political system gave responsibility for health care to the 16 states, not the central government. To coordinate the kind of nationwide response needed to curb the spread of the virus, Merkel's government developed new coordination structures and systems to harmonize policies in the opening weeks. After a nationwide lockdown slowed the initial spread, the response model shifted. Federal government guidance and support coupled with decentralized, local implementation enabled Germany to quickly ramp up both testing and contact-tracing capacities. As a result, from January through October 2020, Germany contained the virus more effectively than any large country in Europe or North America. At year's end, however, political consensus about how to respond to the virus broke down. With a vaccine on the horizon and the public tired of lockdowns, states hesitated to reimpose restrictions, and new infections surged.

*This case is part of a series about COVID response coordination. This short case focuses on an industrial country with a federal system of government, Germany.*

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