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Trump Rally Didn't Cause COVID-19 Spike: Study

Did President Donald Trump's Oklahoma campaign rally cause a spike in COVID-19 cases? While the media and local officials would like us to think so, a new study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) puts the kibosh on any such notions.

According to the [NBER report](#), Trump's June 20 rally in Tulsa, "the largest indoor event in the United States since March 2020," drew an estimated 6,000 to 12,000 attendees to the Bank of Oklahoma Arena.



As new COVID-19 cases in the Tulsa area increased over the ensuing weeks, news reports suggested the rally was to blame. Dr. Bruce Dart, executive director of the Tulsa Health Department, [told](#) reporters that "several large events" in the city, including Trump's rally, had likely precipitated the spike. "I guess we just connect the dots," he [said](#).

Using anonymized smartphone location data from Safegraph, Inc., and coronavirus data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) — which warns that "large in-person gatherings" with many out-of-town attendees pose the "highest risk" for COVID-19 transmission — NBER tried to connect the dots but discovered there was no connection.

"The rally was largely an Oklahoma event and, more precisely, a Tulsa County event," notes NBER. Nearly half of the smartphone pings from the rally came from Tulsa County residents, and 38 percent came from Oklahomans residing outside of Tulsa County. Thus, the researchers concentrated their efforts on Tulsa County and then on broader regions within the Sooner State.

NBER found that the population inflow into the Tulsa area on June 20 was 25.7 percent higher than the average for recent Saturdays. At the same time, the inflow was likely depressed by other factors. Media reports suggested the possibility of violent conflict between Trump's supporters and opponents. The National Guard was deployed, and many businesses and roads were closed. "These factors may have plausibly generated avoidance behavior in the non-attending population, which could have important offsetting effects on population level growth of COVID-19 cases," says the report. NBER states that such probable avoidance behavior makes its study of limited use for policymakers because the Trump rally was "a potentially poor bellwether for gauging the dangers of indoor events and reopening policies" since, e.g., a noncontroversial sporting event would probably not induce non-attendees to stay home.

On the other hand, because rally attendees did not, for the most part, engage in social distancing and mask-wearing, "the transmission probability for an individual attending this campaign rally would be larger than for a typical sporting event or concert" where such measures were required, writes NBER. "The rally is thus a plausible upper bound on expected new infections from a similar event."

Researchers examined COVID-19 case data in Tulsa County, surrounding counties, and the entire state over the three weeks following the rally. "During the 21 days of our post-treatment period," they penned, "we do not find any significant or substantial changes in the trajectory of COVID-19 cases in



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Tulsa County, which was home to the Trump rally, or from counties that drew attendees to the event.” Moreover, further estimates “provide no evidence that COVID-19 case rates grew faster in counties that drew relatively larger shares of residents to the event.”

In short, like most of the supposed bad news about COVID-19 — especially when it can be used to bash Trump — the claims that his Tulsa rally caused a spike in cases are indeed something to sneeze at.

Image: screenshot from [YouTube video](#)

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