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The Impact of COVID-19 Test Requirements on Cross-Border Travel: A Case Study of Blaine, WA

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BORDER POLICY

RESEARCH INSTITUTE
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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 TEST REQUIREMENTS ON CROSS-BORDER TRAVEL: A CASE STUDY OF BLAINE, WA

Canada's Testing Policy Timeline at Land Border¹

August 2021

Vaccinated Americans with negative PCR test can enter Canada

November 8, 2021

US lifts restrictions for vaccinated Canadians, no test required

November 30 to December 20, 2021

Canada exempts vaccinated Canadians from pre-arrival testing for trips less than 72 hours

December 21, 2021

Canada reinstates PCR test requirement regardless of trip duration

February 28, 2022

Canada allows antigen test for vaccinated travelers

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new and unprecedented requirements for cross-border travel. In Summer 2021, after more than a year of restrictions on 'non-essential' travel, Canada began allowing vaccinated travelers with a negative PCR test to enter and return for discretionary purposes and without quarantine. However, testing requirements for entry to Canada continue to fluctuate, with the latest change going into effect February 28th, 2022 (see sidebar). This Border Brief uses the case study of the land border between British Columbia and Washington State to explore how different testing regimes may impact cross-border travel.

BACKGROUND

Whatcom County, Washington, has long benefited from its location adjacent to the Canadian border. In pre-pandemic years, nearly 12 million trips were taken across the border from Canada, with roughly 7 million of those made by Canadians bound for Whatcom County. These short, frequent visits provided an economic advantage to many local businesses. The border restrictions reduced these flows by 80%, virtually erasing a key source of revenue for the County, which had devastating effects on some businesses and communities.²

HOW DID TESTING IMPACT TRAVEL?

On November 30th, 2021, the Canadian government exempted fully vaccinated Canadians who traveled to the US for less than 72 hours from the testing requirement.³ This exemption was in place until December 21st, 2021, when it was revoked in response to the rise of the Omicron variant. *The following week, US entries dropped by 54%.*⁴ Reinstating the PCR test requirement, which is costly and was difficult to schedule, heavily depressed cross-border trips.

Figure 1 (next page) shows the number of passengers entering the US at Blaine from July 21 to December 2021. In a typical pre-pandemic year, volumes increased by 13% from November to December. In 2021, they increased by 68%, bolstered largely by the temporary testing exemption. In a similar comparison, volumes typically dip in January by around 15%. In January 2022, when the PCR test requirement was reinstated, the number of people crossing dropped by a much larger percentage.⁵ These comparisons illustrate how changes to testing requirements may impact cross-border travel in the region.

HAVE SHOPPING PATTERNS CHANGED?

Over the last decade, BPRI has conducted ongoing license plate surveys to capture the distribution of Canadian cars at shopping locations along the Interstate 5 (I-5) corridor.⁶ This data has been used by local planning agencies, regional businesses, and chambers of commerce to gauge where Canadians are shopping, and their influence on the local economy and transportation routes. Our last license plate survey was conducted December 11th and 12th 2021 when the pre-arrival testing exemption for short trips was in effect. This exemption did not apply to Americans or third country nationals. Similar to pre-pandemic studies, the biggest draws for Canadians remain Costco, Ross, Silver Reef Casino, and Trader Joe's, followed by downtown Blaine. Overall, Canadian shoppers at survey locations dropped from an average of 13% of parking lot occupancy to roughly 7%. However, it is promising that some Canadians resumed cross-border shopping visits, after an extended period and ongoing restrictions.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to predict if and when the region will return to the cross-border travel volumes and patterns experienced prior to the pandemic. The fact that Canadian shoppers returned to previously popular locations when exempted from pre-arrival testing suggests that some locations will likely continue to benefit from Canadian consumers as border restrictions ease. However, the friction created during the border restrictions will have a lasting effect on cross-border travel, as many Canadians have re-oriented their

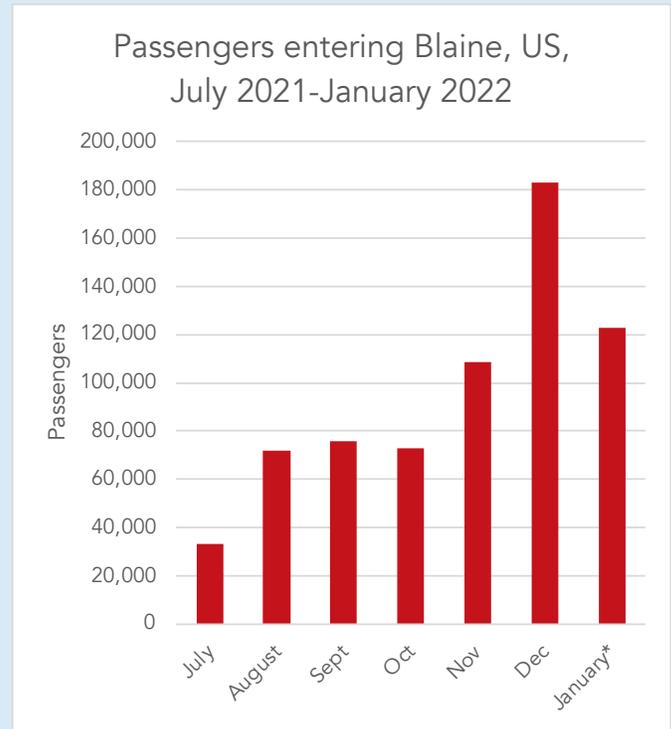


Figure 1. Passengers entering Blaine, WA, July 2021 to January 2022. *January data is based on preliminary estimates from data collected at the port.

consumer behavior away from the border over the last two years. The local economic dependence on cross-border consumers, which increased in the post-9/11 years, will undoubtedly be reconfigured by the restrictions. As Canada continues to loosen restrictions, travel volumes are likely to increase, but will continue to be influenced by the state of the pandemic, sub-national restrictions, and of course, border policy.

ENDNOTES

1. The US and Canadian testing and vaccination requirements varied by age, and Canada had additional requirements for unvaccinated minors. See BPRI, "Emerging from the Pandemic: Understanding the Canada-US land border requirements" (2021). https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_publications/129.
2. See previous BPRI studies, available at https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_covid19/.
3. Note that unvaccinated minors were still subject to quarantine upon return to Canada.
4. Based on data from the Cascade Gateway Data Warehouse, <https://www.cascadegatewaydata.com/>.
5. Based on data from the US Bureau of Transportation Statistics and the Cascade Gateway Data Warehouse.
6. See BPRI, "Passenger Flows through the Cascade Gateway: Changes from 2013 to 2018" (2019). Border Policy Research Institute Publications. https://cedar.wwu.edu/bpri_publications/114.

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