

Good afternoon, everyone and welcome to our first Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Hearing of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. I would like to congratulate Ranking Member Kathy Castor on her appointment.

This afternoon's subcommittee hearing will explore the importance of pandemic origin investigations as a means of bolstering our country's pandemic preparedness and biodefense capabilities.

To date, over 1 million Americans have died from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic brought our country to a standstill. It cost our economy around \$15 trillion dollars in economic damage.<sup>2</sup>

Businesses were shut down, schools were closed. The nation is still recovering from the pandemic's impact and the damage it caused.

It has been a little over three years since COVID-19 emerged and questions on its origins remain. Given the toll the virus has taken, that is unacceptable.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bruns & Nikki Teran, *Weighing the Cost of the Pandemic*, Institute for Progress (Apr. 21, 2022), <https://progress.institute/weighing-the-cost-of-the-pandemic/>.

I believe the substantial circumstantial evidence favors COVID-19 emerging due to a research-related incident.

But, this committee will continue to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic since we have jurisdiction over public health and federal biomedical research.

Today, though, we will look beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and understand what structures, technologies, and capacities are needed to more clearly investigate the origins of disease outbreaks in the future.

Being able to quickly identify the root cause of a disease outbreak or biological incident has important benefits ranging from countermeasure development to differentiating between whether an outbreak was due to a deliberate release, an accidental release or a natural event.

By all accounts, the risk of catastrophic biological incidents and infectious disease pandemics is increasing.

As the world becomes more connected, barriers that once helped limit disease from spreading across the globe are removed. Further, human-animal interactions are increasing as well.

The last two decades have seen a global proliferation of laboratories conducting research on potential pandemic pathogens, increasing the possibility that future pandemics may have a research-related origin.

Of the approximately 60 bio-safety level 4 labs, which are designed to work on the most dangerous of pathogens, around the globe, at least 20 have been built in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> More than 75 percent of these labs are located in urban centers where a virus, if it escaped, could spread with ease.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://schar.gmu.edu/news/2021-07/new-interactive-map-reveals-where-deadliest-germs-are-studied>

<sup>4</sup> Id.

As an aside, the Wuhan Institute of Virology appears to have conducted at least some high-risk coronavirus research at a biosafety level 2 lab.

In the United States, we have recently seen high-risk research done to intentionally modify pathogens, such as NIH's experiments to enhance monkeypox's virulence, as well as conflicting reports as to what coronavirus research Pfizer is conducting to anticipate future variants.

Although there's little we can do to predict the timing of the next outbreak, there's a lot we can do now to prepare for the next outbreak.

Currently, there is no coordinated whole of government plan for investigating the origins of a disease outbreak or a biological incident. However, as our witnesses will testify today, a coordinated approach across the government, academia, and the private sector is needed.

The focus of today's hearing will be a Government Accountability Office technical assessment on technologies and challenges for investigating the origins of pandemics.

This study was conducted at the request of all 26 Republican members on the Committee in June 2021, and is based on insights GAO gained by working with the National Academies of Science and the leading pandemic experts in the U.S.

This GAO report is significant because it is believed to be the first stand-alone, detailed document that specifically identifies what technologies and areas of scientific expertise are needed to conduct rigorous pandemic origin investigations.

Existing pandemic preparedness plans have mentioned the need for investigating the origins of pandemics but have neither spelled out the challenges nor the specifics for how to conduct an effective probe.

One of the challenges laid out in the report is the need for investigators to have more access to samples from early cases in order to be effective in determining the pandemic's origin. We must address this issue since some government organizations, including the Government of the Chinese Communist Party, have a history of withholding this type of information.

This report and upcoming hearing can provide the basis for a bipartisan effort to improve our biodefense strategies by incorporating details on investigative approaches and taking the recommended actions.

Speaking for the Republicans on this subcommittee, we look forward to working with our Democrat colleagues constructively to deliver solutions and pave a path forward for America to work in common purpose for the greater good.

I eagerly await today's discussion and learning more about how best to address these complex issues. I thank the witnesses for being here today and being part of this important discussion.