



NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

17 January 2025

(b)(3)

(U) Updated IC Assessments of COVID-19 Origins

(U) Key Takeaways

(U) *Scope Note:* This assessment responds to a tasking from the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs for an update on the IC's judgments on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. The IC last published its coordinated update on the assessments of the origin of COVID-19 in March 2023.

(b)(3) The IC continues to assess that the two leading hypotheses for the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic — natural origin or research-related incident—remain plausible. Since our last IC assessment in 2023, CIA has more precisely defined its position. It continues to maintain that both hypotheses are plausible explanations, but now assesses (b)(3) that a research-related hypothesis is more likely than a natural origin hypothesis.¹ The rest of the IC has not changed their assessments. They concluded the new data or reporting since 2023 either support both hypotheses, do not exclude one hypothesis over the other, or fail to provide credible information outlining a specific pathway. Two agencies, however, have changed their confidence levels in some of their judgments because of new reporting.

- (b)(3) Most of the IC continues to assess that SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19—was not genetically engineered. (b)(1),(b)(3),(b)(7)(E) , while (b)(1)
- (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3)

(b)(3) Since our last assessment in 2023, the IC has continued to evaluate new information from (b)(3) open sources, revisit previous reporting, and consult with diverse technical experts to increase our understanding of the cause of the pandemic.² These efforts have led the CIA to decide to more precisely define its position. Other IC agencies have not changed their assessments because the new data or reporting since the 2023 assessment either support both hypotheses, do not exclude one hypothesis over the other, or failed to provide credible information outlining a specific pathway. Two agencies, however, have changed their confidence levels in some of their assessments because of the new reporting. (b)(1)

(U) This assessment was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) (b)(3) . It was drafted by the National Intelligence Council (b)(3) . Questions may be directed to the

NIO (b)(3) .

(b)(3)



- (U) The natural origin hypothesis includes a multitude of scenarios in which humans could have been infected with SARS-CoV-2—the virus that causes COVID-19—or a close progenitor through exposure to wild or domestic animals.^a China is home to a diverse body of naturally occurring coronaviruses³⁴⁵⁶ found in a wide geographic area, and there is precedence for these viruses to emerge within human populations far from reservoir locations. For example, the coronavirus that is the closest known relative to SARS-CoV—the virus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)—probably originated in Yunnan Province, according to scientific studies,⁷ even though the first SARS outbreak detected in humans in 2003 occurred in Guangdong Province, hundreds of miles away.
- (U) The research-related^b incident hypothesis also considers a broad range of potential initial human-infection scenarios from events in research facilities, such as government or university laboratories to research-related activities in the field, such as collecting samples from wild animals. In previous assessments, we referred to research-related incidents as “laboratory-associated incidents”; we are using this new terminology to more precisely capture the full range of possible research-related scenarios considered.

(U) Research-Related Origins

(b)(3)) CIA now joins DOE and FBI in assessing the more likely cause of the first human COVID-19 infection was a research-related incident. (b)(1),(b)(3)

(b)(1),(b)(3)

[Redacted]

- (b)(3) CIA continues to assess that both research-related and natural origin scenarios of the COVID-19 pandemic are plausible,¹⁶ but most of its analysts now judge a research-related origin of the pandemic is more likely.¹⁷ (b)(1),(b)(3)
- (b)(1),(b)(3)⁸ CIA has low confidence in this judgment (b)(1),(b)(3)
- (b)(1),(b)(3)
- (b)(1),(b)(3) Given CIA’s (b)(3), credible new (b)(3) open-source information could prompt CIA to change its assessment.²¹

- (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3)
- (b)(1),(b)(3)
- [Redacted]

^a (U) Plausible pathways of human contact with an infected animal include in an agricultural or other captive setting; via hunting or harvesting; or through the market supply chain, via transportation, slaughtering, and handling at markets.

^b (b)(3) The FBI’s assessment continues to be that a laboratory-associated incident was the most likely cause of the COVID-19 pandemic. The change in language to “research-related incidents” was done for clarity and does not reflect a change in the FBI’s assessment.

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- (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3),(b)(7)(E)
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(U) Natural Origins

(b)(3) Four agencies and the National Intelligence Council (NIC) continue to assess that natural contact with an animal infected with SARS-CoV-2—or a closely related progenitor virus—was the most likely cause of the first human COVID-19 infection. These agencies base this assessment on the precedent of past novel infectious disease outbreaks arising from zoonotic origins, the large diversity of animals susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection, and the wide range of scenarios—to include animal trafficking, farming, and sale—in China that enable zoonotic transmission.

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- (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3)

The NIC's (b)(3) a scientific study published in September 2024 that found wildlife DNA in environmental samples taken from the Huanan Seafood Market by PRC scientists in early 2020 that also tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, suggesting that animals at the market could have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and been the sources of the first human infections.

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- (b)(3) (b)(7)(E)

- (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3),(b)(7)(E)

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[Redacted]

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(b)(1),(b)(3)

[Redacted]

• (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3) [Redacted]

• (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3) [Redacted]

• (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3) [Redacted]

• (b)(3) (b)(1),(b)(3) [Redacted]

(U) Ongoing Mission

(b)(3) Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the IC has been working collaboratively to advance our insights, (b)(3) [Redacted], conduct new analytic outreach, clarify divergent views on key information, engage outside experts, (b)(3) [Redacted]. The IC plans further engagements with outside experts to establish a new panel to conduct an independent study on the origins of COVID-19.

• (b)(3) During the IC's 90-day study in 2021 into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, ODNI organized three separate IC-wide sessions with (b)(3) [Redacted] members of the Biological Sciences Expert Group (BSEG) to discuss the IC's relevant technical questions. Analysts at individual agencies also conducted their own analytic outreach with experts beyond the BSEG. (b)(3) [Redacted]

(b)(3) [Redacted] We will look to expand and build upon our years of outreach as we advance (b)(3) [Redacted] analysis related to the origins of COVID-19.

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