

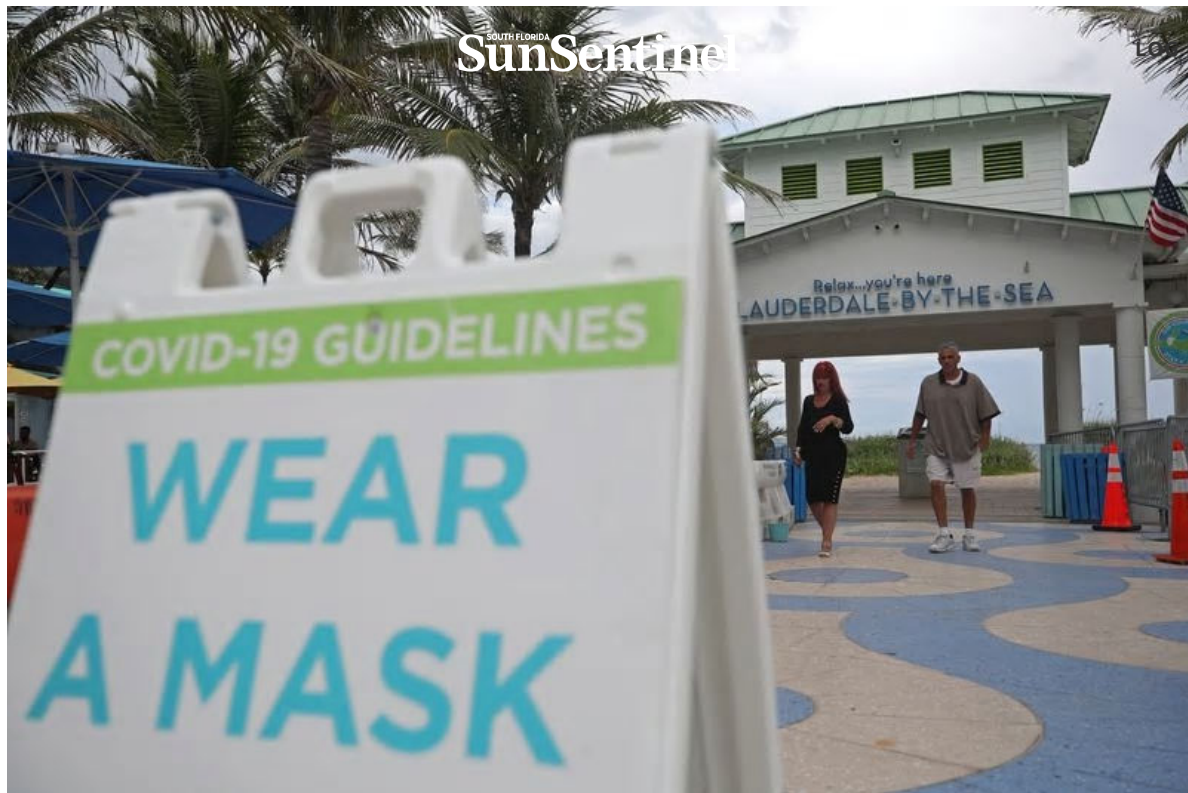
CORONAVIRUS

# The surge in Florida coronavirus cases wasn't caused just by an increase in testing

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By **DAVID FLEHLER** and **ARIC CHOKEY**  
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A sign alerts beachgoers to wear a mask near Anglin's Pier in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea on Wednesday, June 17, 2020. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

As Florida posted one record-breaking **coronavirus total** after another, many suggested the huge counts simply reflected increased testing.

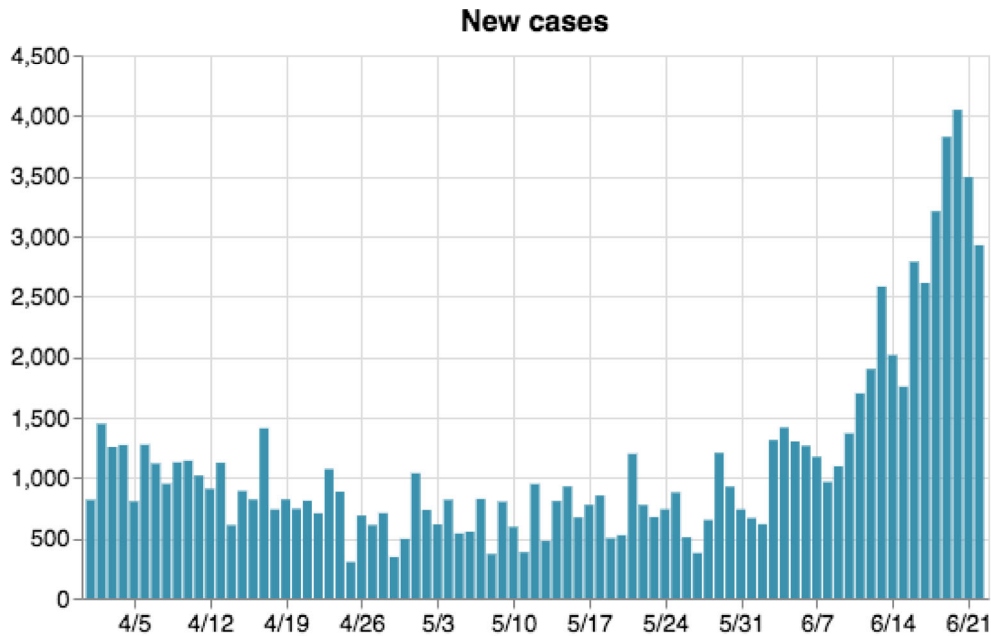
Gov. Ron DeSantis **blamed more widespread testing** for much of the jump last week, as test kits became more widely available and restrictions on who could be tested were loosened. Many commenters on social media invoked the higher test counts to dismiss media reports of record-breaking COVID-19 numbers.

“TESTING has gone through the roof, so DUH yeah there are more positives,” wrote one commenter on Facebook. “But daily DEATHS continue to DROP throughout the United States!”

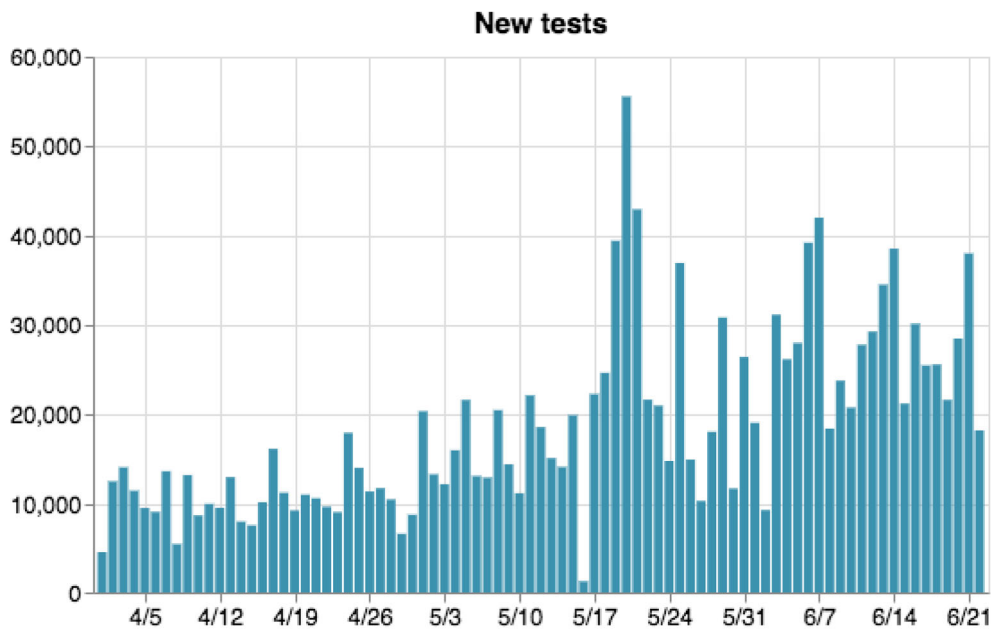
But while deaths have dropped, experts say it’s highly misleading to invoke the increased number of tests to explain the higher number of cases.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Dr. Leslie Beitsch, chairman of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine at Florida State University’s College of Medicine. “Look, your test numbers are going up, but the number of people testing positive are going up faster. You’re getting a

much higher positivity rate. That means more widespread infection and not just more testing.”



Source: Florida Department of Health



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The number of tests administered every day has risen substantially from 10,000 or so in mid-April. Although testing peaked in mid-May, with one day exceeded 50,000, it still remains higher than April, with daily testing running in the 20,000 or 30,000 range over the past week, and occasionally more.

But the number of positives has risen more steeply, from an April 25 low of 306 to the record 4,049 posted Saturday, a figure that did not represent an isolated spike but the top of a steady increase that's been taking place since the beginning of June.

At a news conference last Tuesday, after the state posted 2,783 new cases, a daily record at the time, DeSantis said such increases were to be expected as testing expanded beyond people who appeared to already be sick, largely the elderly. Now, he said, testing routinely extends to younger people without any signs of disease who would have otherwise gone undetected.

"There's people that have no symptoms at all that get tested by the thousands every day," he said. "As you test more, you will see more cases."

He also attributed the increase to hot spots in agricultural communities and other areas.

On Saturday, however, after another record count, he acknowledged that the high numbers appeared to indicate infections becoming more widespread.

"Even with the testing increasing or being flat, the number of people testing positive is accelerating faster than that," DeSantis said. "You know that's evidence that there's transmission within those communities."

**Another 2,926 cases** announced Monday pushed the state's total past 100,000. Meanwhile, the average age of victims has declined, as has the death rate. No deaths were reported Monday for Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties, which have been the hardest-hit part of the state.

Zoran Bursac, chairman of the Department of Biostatistics at Florida International University's College of Public Health & Social Work, said claims that increased testing account for the growth in cases are not completely wrong. But he said they don't give the full picture.

“It’s both true and false,” he said. “It’s natural that as the number of tests increase, so will the number of detected positives. But the two lines are not parallel, which means that the positive line is a little bit steeper than the tests, so we really need to look at the percent positive. It could be community transmission, it could be spikes in nursing homes or some specific locations like prisons, but it means more increase, it means more spread.”

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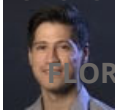


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David Fleshler covers the environment for the Sun Sentinel, writing about coral reefs, the Everglades, sea level rise, endangered species and many other topics. A native of Buffalo, N.Y., he holds a BA in philosophy from NYU and a master’s in journalism from Columbia. He previously worked at the York (Pa.) Daily Record. He lives in Boca Raton.

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Aric Chokey is a data journalist for the South Florida Sun Sentinel where he uses data, web programming and graphics to report stories. He joined the staff in 2017 and was part of the team that won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. A native of South Bend, Indiana, Aric attended Ball State University, where he studied journalism.

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