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Even as Floridians begin getting out, GPS data reveals we’re still staying close to home

BY DAVID FLESHLER and ALONSO ALCOCER
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What is social distancing?
It’s a fancy way of saying you’re avoiding close contact with others. That means no mass gatherings or any other meet-ups in places where people may congregate. If you absolutely must be out in public, maintain a 6-foot radius of personal space. (Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times/TNS)

The virus that shut down much of the world has achieved an almost impossible task: Reducing Florida traffic.

The evidence comes from GPS data that shows the total number of miles people travel. It reveals that people in South Florida are driving more than they did at the low point in early April but most are still staying close to home.

The information is collected by a company called Street Light Data, which uses smartphone and vehicle-navigation devices to measure movement. The data shows that all of Florida’s five largest counties have a long way to go to return to normal levels. Street Light used January 2019 as the benchmark “normal” month.
Change in distance traveled compared to January 2019

(If you can’t view the charts in this story, click here.)

After traffic hit bottom in April, it increased slightly, with a peak a few days before Memorial Day. But the slight increase suggests that even as people ventured out again after the state began reopening on May 4, they aren’t going far.

It’s a lot busier now than at the depths of the shutdown. Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach, a ghost town in early April, buzzed with activity Friday night, with crowded restaurants, busy sidewalks and slow-moving traffic. Over the weekend, State Road A1A was also busy, as many people hit the beaches.

But even as government restrictions are lifted, there remain fewer reasons to leave home. Schools are closed, universities are only offering online classes and many businesses still require employees to work from home. That eliminates a lot of driving.

And many people are concerned that the crisis is not yet over, whatever decisions authorities make about reopening, says Dr. Leslie Beitsch, chairman of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine at
Florida State University.

“People are remaining skeptical and cautious,” Beitsch said. “People already made decisions about their own personal conduct, and that has governed how people behave, not the government.”

But the data isn’t telling the whole story: Florida has no shortage of potentially virus-spreading activities that don’t require much driving.

**Change in distance traveled compared to January 2019**

![Chart: Sun Sentinel • Embed • Created with Datawrapper](chart-url)

“If you’re talking to your neighbor or kids are meeting with one another, it wouldn’t show up,” said Dr. Mary Jo Trepka, chairwoman of the Epidemiology Department at Florida International University. “So I think there’s probably a lack of social distancing that’s not captured by the cellphones.”

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Everyone has witnessed in person or on television the contagion-spreading antics of people crowding beaches, boats or restaurants. But a comparison to the other largest states shows Florida as a whole is not being any less careful than the rest of the country.

The Sunshine State is staying closer to home than the other largest states including New York, the hardest hit by coronavirus.
The disease continues to spread, Trepka noted, even though steps to control it have been effective.

“Clearly people social-distanced, and clearly the cases came down as a result of that,” she said. “But we still have community-wide spread so we have to be cautious.”

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*David Fleshler can be reached at dfleshler@sunsentinel.com or 954-356-4535*