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## Florida: Desantis, Disease, Deaths, Schools

David R. Kotok

Tue Oct 27, 2020

The DeSantis administration's official COVID-19 track record in Florida shows more than 840,000 confirmed COVID-19 disease cases and 16,470 dead among Florida residents as of Thursday, October 22 (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/us-map>). We have only crude estimates of how many people may have caught the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Florida and taken it with them to someplace else.

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"The only tool that can drive effective strategy with regard to a pandemic is telling the truth & allowing people to have confidence in data. Then they can figure out how to manage risk & navigate their lives, their children's education, & their businesses. They can discern sensible, constructive policies from detrimental, even disastrous ones. When government hides the data & misleads, people lose trust; & economic recovery remains elusive as the virus spreads.



- David R. Kotok [www.cumber.com](http://www.cumber.com)

Ron DeSantis is the governor who stood up at a press conference in Bradenton at Blake Medical Center and invoked a comparison between Florida and Taiwan, since Florida and Taiwan have about the same population. He was bragging that day about how many more tests were done in Florida than had been done in Taiwan. (See <https://www.cumber.com/cumberland-advisors-market-commentary-florida-vs-taiwan/>.)

As of this writing Taiwan still has only 7 total dead and 543 cases (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>). Full mitigation. No lockdown. Full masking rules observed. Fully functioning economy.

What about Florida?

Canadians are not coming this year (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2020/10/15/justin-trudeau-canada-us-border-not-reopening-covid-19/3661758001/>). They don't trust the State of Florida data, and they recognize political deception when they see it. They don't want to come here and get sick. And they don't want to take the quarantine risk if they have to go home. We've personally heard that from some of our Canadian readers.

Businesses are closing in Florida. Come to Main Street in Sarasota and look for Edy's Ice Cream Shop. (It will soon be Yoder's instead.) Look for some kitchenware at Sur La Table; the store is empty, and the company is bankrupt.

Florida's COVID-19 cases are trending upward – not as steeply as in some other states, but they are up 29% over the last 14 days (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/florida-coronavirus-cases.html>), and COVID Exit Strategy deems the spread of the virus in this state, as in many others, to be "uncontrolled" (<https://www.covidexitstrategy.org>). The US map is daunting; take a look. For Thursday, October 22, the State of Florida saw 5557 new cases and 57 "newly verified deaths" ("Sarasota County and Florida report most new COVID-19 cases in more than two months, <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/local/2020/10/22/sarasota-county-and-florida-report-most-new-covid-19-cases-two-months/3727716001/>). Hospitalizations are up.

Given the state's ailing economy and in the absence of a second federal aid package, budgets for schools and other essential services are drying up. Eight hundred positions stand to be slashed in Hillsborough County Schools alone. (See "Anger mounts over school layoffs, masks and other coronavirus decisions,"

<https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/2020/10/20/anger-mounts-over-school-layoffs-masks-and-other-coronavirus-decisions/>.)

The only tool that can drive effective strategy with regard to a pandemic is telling the truth and allowing people to have confidence in data. Then they can figure out how to manage risk and navigate their lives, their children's education, and their businesses. They can discern sensible, constructive policies from detrimental, even disastrous ones. When government hides the data and misleads, people lose trust; and economic recovery remains elusive as the virus spreads.

Florida COVID cases rise; hospitalizations rise; and increased deaths may follow, though improvements in treatment are making a difference (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246629818.html>). What is the response from Governor DeSantis? He wants to reduce the frequency of data releases and lower the threshold of already inadequate information available to the public. Rather than affording the transparency that Floridians and tourists need, Governor DeSantis's administration is now considering scaling back daily case updates, perhaps to weekly ones, apparently because, gosh, it is a lot of work to provide daily updates. But it is necessary work. Dr. Sadiya Khan, an epidemiologist from Northwestern University affirms,

"It is really important for all of us to have a sense of what the numbers look like and what is happening. You don't want just your health officials or governor, or doctors to have that information. You want everyone to have access to that information."

(See "Florida considers not releasing daily COVID-19 case numbers to the public," <https://www.wfla.com/community/health/coronavirus/florida-considers-not-releasing-daily-covid-19-case-numbers-to-the-public/>.)

We know the plight of the Florida schools – 67 counties in Florida, all those school systems. The only source that is trusted is the website of the fiercely independent whistleblower Rebekah Jones, who has achieved many times the credibility of Ron DeSantis and his ilk. Rebekah has called Florida's school data a "holy hot mess of hell" and walked through the problems with that data's very first iteration back in a post on September 29. You can read her analysis here: "Snapshot of Florida data; in-depth analysis to come tomorrow," <https://floridacovidaction.com/2020/09/29/snapshot-of-florida-data-in-depth-analysis-to-come-tomorrow/>. She has created a site to track school cases across the nation at <https://www.thecovidmonitor.com>. As Rebekah notes, "The only national resource for case data in school is me and my team. NO ONE can understand how this virus impacts schools without data." <https://twitter.com/georebekah/status/1319449294928306177?s=11>

Rebekah is not the only person making this point. Many K-12 schools seem to be faring better than many feared they might; but, as Andrew Joseph of Stat News points out,

"Experts are also cautious about simply declaring in-person schooling safe. The data that do exist are generally voluntarily supplied by districts, so it's not clear what's missing. Because there's no national reporting, researchers can't parse which approaches – hybrid models, mask mandates, classroom size restrictions, limiting in-person instruction to just the youngest students while having middle and high schoolers learn virtually – are working best in terms of minimizing cases.

"It is encouraging, there's no doubt about that,' Wendy Armstrong, an infectious disease physician at Emory University, said about the K-12 school experience so far. But having such limited information available 'severely limits our ability to give additional guidance to schools that are based on very clear, evidence-based data. And with limited reporting, in my mind, it makes it impossible to interpret the available data to truly understand current risk.'"

("At a breaking point': New surge of Covid-19 cases has states, hospitals scrambling, yet again," <https://www.statnews.com/2020/10/20/at-a-breaking-point-new-surge-of-covid-19-cases-has-states-hospitals-scrambling-yet-again/>)

In our commentary published on Wednesday, October 21, "Qingdao, Canada, and Florida" (<https://www.cumber.com/cumberland-advisors-market-commentary-qingdao-canada-and-florida/>) we considered not only the accuracy of the school data in Florida but also its accessibility as we looked at the situation in one particular county: Hillsborough County Schools. It is apparently so hard to get a clear picture of what's happening in Florida's schools that when, on October 20, Governor DeSantis called for schools to remain open for on-site learning no matter what happens this fall and winter, he seems not to have been aware that schools have already had to close their doors for now because of the size of their COVID-19 outbreaks ("Gov. DeSantis says schools shouldn't close, unaware two Duval campuses shut down," <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/education/2020/10/20/live-updates-gov-desantis-hosts-education-briefing-jacksonville/5991268002/>).

Timber Creek High School in Orange County, meanwhile, joins six others that have had to revert to online learning in Central Florida ("Timber Creek High School joins growing list of schools closed due to COVID-19 cases," <https://www.wftv.com/news/local/orange-county/timber-creek-high-school-moves-virtual-learning-after-14-covid-19-cases-reported/TL3YX3KXJVFUXGU4YY6DQAKPRE/>).

Cases at schools in Miami-Dade, Broward, and the Keys are rising, too. Even a school system's own counts, however, can reflect a time lag. As the Miami Herald reports,

“Although the [Miami-Dade] district has been updating the dashboard daily, parents should not consider what’s on there an up-to-date count, but rather ‘a lagging indicator’ that is ‘not intended for use as an immediate notification system of cases,’ said Natalia Zea, the district’s director of communications.”

(“COVID cases up to almost 100 in Miami-Dade schools. Broward, Keys see rising cases too,”

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article246584893.html>)

We know that Ron DeSantis is now questioning the wisdom of having students who have been exposed to COVID-19 quarantine:

“DeSantis: Healthy students should not have to quarantine if classmates test positive for COVID-19,”

<https://www.wftv.com/news/health/desantis-healthy-students-should-not-have-quarantine-if-classmates-test-positive-covid-19/OX6F7SFWJBE47AORM6C27QQOAM/>.

If the Florida Department of Health’s quarantine policy is changed as DeSantis would like it to be, it would allow potentially COVID-positive students back to school. That is no formula for keeping schools open and case numbers and hospitalizations within manageable bounds.

On the plus side, the DeSantis administration is supplying rapid tests to schools, with results in 15 minutes. Timely testing and timely results are essential, both in schools and across the state. Those rapid tests are, however, to be administered to symptomatic students, and those students who do become symptomatic will have been contagious a day or two before symptoms develop (“60,000 rapid COVID-19 tests to be sent to Florida school districts this week, Gov. Ron DeSantis says,”

<https://www.wptv.com/news/state/60000-rapid-covid-19-tests-to-be-sent-to-florida-schools-this-week-gov-ron-desantis-says>).

Further, young people positive for COVID-19 may never become symptomatic at all. Those students will not land in the school nurse’s office for a test. Floridians have to hope that the Florida Department of Health will not change its quarantine guidance for students, despite DeSantis’s desire for schools to be able to carry on as if COVID-19 were not a problem in the communities they serve.

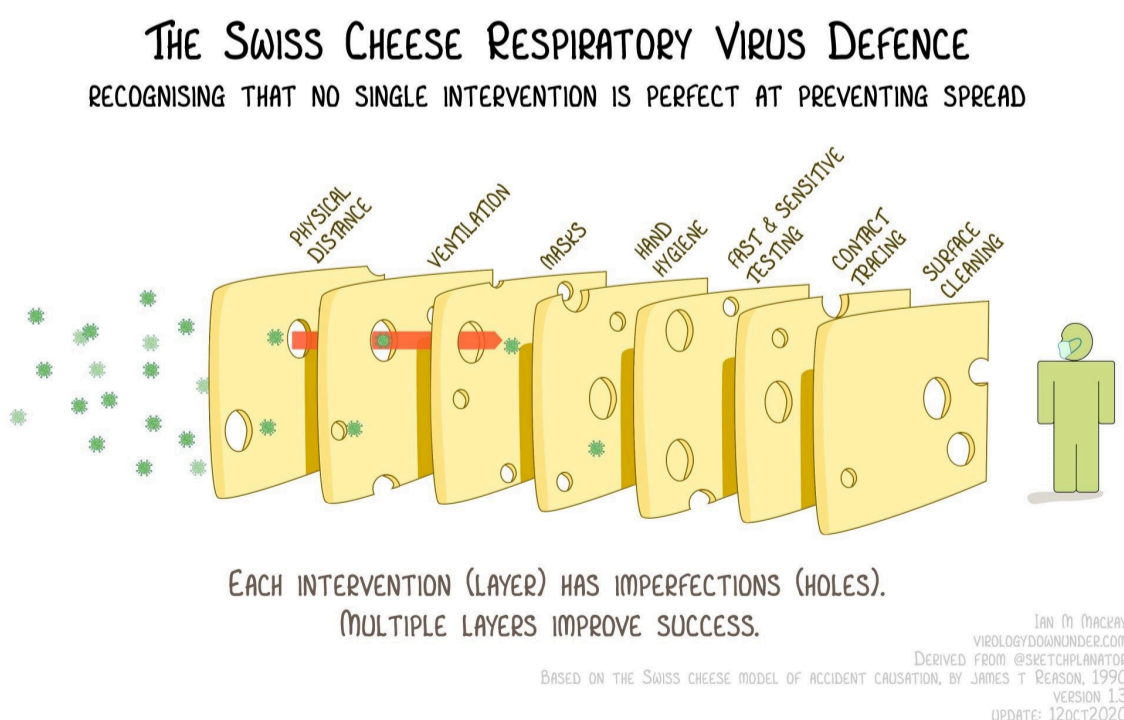
To complicate matters, as of this week, the CDC has redefined a close contact as “someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated.” (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/contact-tracing/contact-tracing-plan/appendix.html>). That’s regardless of whether the individuals involved were wearing face coverings.

The new guidance has significant implications for how schools do contact tracing and quarantining and for how students are moved around during the school day, as Sarah Sparks, notes, writing for Education Week:

“For example, if a student came into contact with a sick classmate three times during a school day, for five minutes each time, he would be asked to stay home and isolate himself for 14 days, while checking for fever, coughing, and other symptoms of COVID-19. Students and adults in schools would need to go into quarantine if they had close contact from two days before the infected person showed symptoms (or within two days of being tested, if the person had no symptoms) until the infected person started quarantine.”

(“CDC Clarifies ‘15-Minute Rule’ for Social Distancing,” [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2020/10/cdc\\_clarifies\\_15-minute\\_rule\\_for\\_COVID\\_social\\_distancing.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2020/10/cdc_clarifies_15-minute_rule_for_COVID_social_distancing.html))

Australian virologist Ian Mackay has updated an illustration depicting the Swiss cheese analogy for defense against viruses such as flu and SARS-CoV-2. No one layer of protection is enough, at least shy of a safe and effective vaccine. It’s a wonderful image that Dr. Mackay has developed and shared.



If I could add one more element to this pre-vaccine version of the illustration, that would be good data. It is data that tells us how to deploy and orient all the other layers of protection in order to conquer COVID-19. It is good data that reveals the path toward economic recovery. In every school, in every community, in every state and nation, reliable, timely, strategic data makes the

difference between failure and success in the fight against COVID-19 and the fight to reclaim our economy and once-again unhampered lives.

The price Florida is paying for a lack of good data and leadership continues to be high. How many Floridians are ready to join President Trump in threatening to fire Trump's protégé Ron DeSantis? ("Trump jokes he'll fire DeSantis if he loses Florida. 'I'll find a way,'" <https://www.tampabay.com/florida-politics/buzz/2020/10/16/trump-jokes-hell-fire-desantis-if-he-loses-florida-ill-find-a-way/>). Will DeSantis's performance here affect the election outcome in this key swing state? Trump might have been half joking, but Floridians who understand the gravity of the threat that COVID continues to pose to our health, our lives, our communities, and our businesses take the issues very seriously.

With that thought, I will leave you a short list of some additional reads for the week as you contemplate the weeks and months ahead.

"The Badger" at Florida COVID Action takes a hard look at how to not to be misled by reported COVID-19 data.

"Countering Some Myths About COVID-19 in Florida; October 19, 2020," <https://floridacovidaction.com/2020/10/19/covidmyths/>

It's not just Florida. The White House is being cagey with COVID data, too.

"Weekly COVID data from the White House isn't shared publicly," <https://www.kcentv.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/weekly-covid-data-from-the-white-house-isnt-shared-publicly/67-7fd8e1f9-83c8-4f91-a573-8f6728feb9b4>

Looking beyond Florida, the picture around the nation does not bode well for fall and winter.

"'At a breaking point': New surge of Covid-19 cases has states, hospitals scrambling, yet again," <https://www.statnews.com/2020/10/20/at-a-breaking-point-new-surge-of-covid-19-cases-has-states-hospitals-scrambling-yet-again/>, cited above, is worth reading in full. See also the COVID Tracking Project's blog update for the week: <https://covidtracking.com/blog/weekly-update-oct-22>. The report is an important read, though it lacks weekly data from Alabama, Georgia, and, you guessed it, Florida, as all three states had reporting issues this week. The COVID Tracking Project Team notes,

"Our team continues to compile weekly data on COVID-19's spread through the country's long-term care facilities. We're alarmed that Florida went nearly three weeks without releasing long-term care death data, despite saying they publish numbers weekly. The state finally released data on October 22, though it's dated October 16, reporting 599 new resident and staff deaths."

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In sum, things do not look good in Florida or across the South. On October 20, Bloomberg noted Florida's rise in deaths relative to other states: "New York leads in the total number of coronavirus deaths since the pandemic began with 33,366. Texas comes in second, with 17,481, and California third, with 16,982, according to Johns Hopkins University. Florida, with 16,021 deaths to date, may soon surpass New Jersey's death toll of 16,214 for the country's fourth-worst fatality count." ("Southern States Are the Seething Center of America's Pandemic,"

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-20/southern-states-are-the-seething-center-of-america-s-pandemic>)

Cases are also rising sharply in the Midwest (60% in the last two weeks), straining the limited capacities of rural hospitals ("COVID-19 Surges In Rural Communities, Overwhelming Some Local Hospitals," <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/10/22/926264615/covid-19-surges-in-rural-communities-overwhelming-some-local-hospitals>).

I will say of COVID what I have said of the 2020 election and what baseball great Yogi Berra scrawled on my baseball: "It aint over till its over."

Data-driven response is the key.

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