

Pandemic partying: Some students party, others turn them in

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College students across Florida are packing bars off campus and private parties while breaking rules about wearing masks and maintaining social distance during the fall semester – and other students themselves are

often reporting violations to authorities.

At Florida State in Tallahassee, concerned students recorded videos of dozens of classmates in bikinis and board shorts partying around the pool at the Catalyst apartments just blocks from campus. The complex said in a statement someone vandalized the pool entrance and security broke up the party.

Other videos sent to authorities at Florida State showed large groups of students dancing, grinding and drinking outside fraternity houses ahead of the Georgia Tech football game last month. No one is wearing a mask.

At the University of Central Florida, authorities responded to complaints on the school's Memory Mall that Kappa Delta sorority sisters were crowded together and without masks. Some women recorded videos that falsely claimed the [coronavirus](#) does not exist, witnesses said, but later deleted them. The sorority declined to comment on the incident.

In another incident on the campus, a bus passenger threatened to beat the driver who asked him to put on a face mask.

In Gainesville, the University of Florida provisionally suspended three fraternities and sanctioned one sorority for violating bans on parties during the pandemic. Earlier this month, the city briefly shut down a packed bar near campus, Lit at Midtown, for violating what officials said were fire codes. The bar and restaurant had posted promotional videos on Instagram of students without masks smiling, dancing and embracing while dancing and shoulder-to-shoulder drinking at crowded outdoor tables after the football home opener.

Welcome to Partying During Pandemics 101.

Students who returned to campuses for the fall semester are balancing their desires for full college experiences, including parties with friends and drinking, against warnings to keep themselves and others as safe as possible during the pandemic. Both Florida and Florida State have already canceled the upcoming spring break. For young adults who can feel invincible, the scales can tip toward celebrating, with students policing each other.

Across Florida, universities have received scores of formal complaints from students about their own classmates' behavior during the pandemic, according to a review of months' worth of such files turned over under the state's public records law. Videos from illicit, private parties sail across social media services, mostly Snapchat. The videos and complaint reports were obtained by Fresh Take Florida, a [news service](#) operated by the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications.

Students at Florida State have forwarded to school authorities screenshots showing off-campus party invitations, Snapchat-captioned photos of women dancing in bikinis, and group texts in which students discuss the best parties and debate the seriousness of the pandemic. One FSU student who was criticized for being too serious responded, "Is the alternative to being serious just ignoring the global crisis?"

A classmate answered, "I don't need to have this convo."

In Gainesville, city police sign up to work overtime patrolling neighborhoods near campus on Friday and Saturday evenings until 3:30 a.m. and responding to noise complaints. The number isn't concerning, said police spokesman Graham Glover. It has averaged around 20 to 25 complaints the past two weekends. Covert invitations and digital evidence of continued partying suggest students may be better at keeping low profiles.

Florida students are urged to report violations using the GatorSafe phone app, the same digital system that can alert students to violent crimes or fires on campus.

"Giant house parties most nights. There is a huge party right now with over 30 people visible going in and out of the house," said one report, citing an address northeast of campus. "A large group just got into a Toyota Camry with beer in the hands of the driver and passengers. No masks being worn. Dancing and drinking in close proximity."

"Big party full of UF students going on currently, mass text was sent out to many students," said another report the following night about an address east of campus.

"It's embarrassing watching UF students walk around with no masks and have the ability to throw extremely loud and noticeable parties without anyone noticing," an unidentified student reported in September, complaining about rules violations in a dorm on campus. "I wear my mask and do not leave my dorm for anything except necessities. I don't want to be sent home because nobody here is enforcing masks or the no guest policy."

"Party with a lot of people. Hosted by football players," said another report, referring to the Aero on 24th student apartments near campus. The manager said in a statement she had warned residents she would report violations of the university's health policies but did not acknowledge the incident.

At UF, positive cases are surging again, weeks after Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis reopened bars Sept. 25. The school has recorded more than 3,600 cases since mid-March, including a recent outbreak on its nationally ranked football team that has postponed two games and infected head coach Dan Mullen.

Days before he disclosed he was infected, Mullen urged administrators to reopen the football stadium to more than 90,000 cheering students for its next home game. The following day, UF President Kent Fuchs – without mentioning the coach – said health restrictions would remain in place "for every part of our campus from classrooms to athletic venues."

Francisco Duenas, 20, a UF junior from Miami, estimates only about half the students are complying with health rules. He described seeing packed crowds at area bars while driving through the downtown and Midtown areas of the city – crowds as big as last year before the pandemic.

"There was not even a single difference," he said. "As if I was living in last year, like 2019 or any semblance of danger from a disease. Everything would be a lot better if UF just stepped up their game just a little bit more."

The owner of the bar the city temporarily closed, Lawrence Clay, did not return phone calls but told the student newspaper, the Independent Florida Alligator, the shutdown was retaliation after the governor allowed bars to reopen.

Florida State, where President John Thrasher and his wife said this week they were cleared after being infected with the coronavirus, has reported more than 1,500 cases since August. Central Florida reported more than 1,500 cases since March.

Florida's colleges and universities are enforcing federal health guidelines requiring students, instructors and visitors to wear masks and remain at least six feet apart. Florida has threatened to suspend or expel violators, although it has not publicly disclosed the number of students or employees who have been punished.

Students' behavior – and their freedom to party – has even become central in the political debate ahead of next month's presidential election. The governor, eager to portray Florida as safely recovering, and deliver the state to President Donald Trump, vaguely said last month he supports a student bill of rights. DeSantis has made no public progress toward such a measure.

"I personally think it's incredibly draconian that a [student](#) would get potentially expelled for going to a party," DeSantis said at a September news conference. "That's what college kids do."

Back in Gainesville, sophomore Jeremy Rutenberg, 19, of Parkland, described a trip for ice cream in the Midtown neighborhood near campus and seeing dozens of people in line along the sidewalk waiting to get into bars, without masks. He said students didn't seem to care about others.

"I don't know what other mindset you can have to do something so stupid," he said. "It was really disturbing to see and if that's the general attitude of a lot of the students here, I think we're in for a very rough semester."

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