Sorry, Mr. President, America's testing capacity isn't "unrivaled"

Enlarge / Donald Trump speaks at a Rose Garden press briefing on Monday, May 11.
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President Donald Trump believes that America is the world's champion when it comes to coronavirus testing.

"In the span of just a few short months, we've developed a testing capacity unmatched and unrivaled anywhere in the world, and it's not even close," Trump said in a Monday press conference. He noted that daily testing has risen from around 150,000 per day three weeks ago to around 300,000 per day this week and that the US was on track to surpass 10 million tests this week (we reached that milestone on Thursday).

Trump is correct in one respect: the US has performed more coronavirus tests than any other country with the possible exception of China. But by most other measures, the American testing effort is mediocre at best.

Let's start with per capita testing capacity. In his Monday briefing, Trump said that "we're testing more people per capita than South Korea, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Sweden, Finland, and many other countries." It's

true—barely—that the US is doing better than these countries.

Early in the coronavirus crisis, the US was a testing laggard. Regulatory problems slowed the development of tests in February, and as a result, we had a lot of ground to make up in late March and April. But in the last month, the US has surpassed a number of other countries in per-capita terms.

However, the US is far from being the world's leader in per capita testing. Denmark, Russia, Australia, and several other countries are conducting more tests per person than the US.

The larger problem, however, is that tests per capita isn't the best way to evaluate a country's testing performance. What ultimately matters isn't tests per person, it's tests per person *positive for COVID-19* because you need a high ratio in order to get a clear picture of the pandemic's progression. And on this score, the US is still way behind:

The US leads the world in the absolute number of coronavirus tests, with more than 10 million completed. But we also lead the world in confirmed coronavirus cases, at more than 1.4 million. If you divide 10 million by 1.4 million, you get around seven tests per coronavirus case. Other countries have had far more testing capacity over the course of their epidemics.

A lack of testing capacity particularly hampered our COVID-fighting efforts in March and early April. At that time, testing was focused on severe COVID-19 cases and health care workers because we didn't have enough tests for others. People with milder COVID-like symptoms were often sent home without being tested, and there was little to no spare capacity for testing friends, family, and coworkers who had come into contact with COVID-19 patients.

Fortunately, America's testing ratio has been improving over time. On Thursday, for example, there were 366,944 test results, producing 25,203 new confirmed cases. That's a ratio

of more than 14 tests per confirmed case. Or to put it another way, about 6.9 percent of coronavirus tests conducted yesterday were positive.

That’s a good sign because ample testing is helpful for getting the spread of the coronavirus under control—especially as some states begin to relax quarantine restrictions. But it’s not time to declare victory yet. The countries with the best track records fighting the coronavirus—countries like Taiwan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—have conducted dozens of tests for every infection. Moreover, with many states relaxing their lockdown rules, there’s a risk that infections will start to climb again. If that happens, we’ll want to be ready with plenty of spare testing capacity.

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