



SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

# Spotlight on COVID-19

White Plains, New York

July 2020

# Table of Contents

Community Overview	3
COVID-19's Community Impact	4
The Community Response to COVID-19	5
The Role of Health Equity	6
What's Next	7
References	8

Photos: AP Photo/Mary Altaffer (Westchester County Center in White Plains, cover); DenisTangneyJr, iStock (White Plains city skyline, p. 3); New York National Guard/Flickr (Volunteer with Feeding Westchester in Elmsford, p. 7)

As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, there is an opportunity to review how diverse communities across the United States are planning for, mitigating, and recovering from the pandemic's effects. Here, we take a deeper look at White Plains, N.Y., exploring the impact of and the city's response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

## Community Overview

The city of White Plains lies 25 miles northwest of New York City and is the county seat of Westchester County.<sup>2,3</sup> White Plains is somewhat unique in that the number of people within the city triples during the day as people come from surrounding areas into the city for work, shopping, or to receive services. White Plains is a diverse community and about 30 percent of residents are immigrants.<sup>1</sup> The community is plagued by a deep economic divide between the more affluent, mainly white population and communities of color and immigrant communities with lower incomes. About 29 percent of households are considered asset-limited, income-constrained, but employed.<sup>4</sup> In addition to economic disparities, health disparities persist among White Plains' racial and ethnic groups. For example, Black residents in Westchester County have higher mortality rates from heart disease and stroke compared to other racial and ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

While the state of New York expanded its Medicaid program in 2014, many undocumented residents are reluctant to seek health services due to citizenship status and fears of deportation.<sup>6</sup> However, much of the White Plains community is committed to ensuring that all residents, regardless of citizenship status, are provided with essential services. For example, Open Door Medical Centers, which are federally qualified health centers, and Greenburgh Health serve as safety-net providers that accept referrals from the Westchester Hispanic Coalition to care for many uninsured and undocumented residents.<sup>3</sup> White Plains Hospital also plays a large role in serving the immigrant population, and, along with the Westchester County Health Department, leads the charge to address the community's overall health needs.



## About White Plains

**Population:** 58,109

**American Indian:**  
0.7%\*

**Asian:** 7.9%

**Black:** 11.6%

**Hawaiian, Pacific  
Islander:** 0.0%

**Hispanic or Latino:**  
32.7%

**White, not  
Hispanic:** 46.5%

**Two or more races:**  
2.6%

**High school  
graduate:** 87.7%

**Median income:**  
\$84,415

**Age 65 and older:**  
16.8%

**Persons in poverty:**  
11.6%

**Uninsured:** 12.1%

\* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.<sup>2</sup>

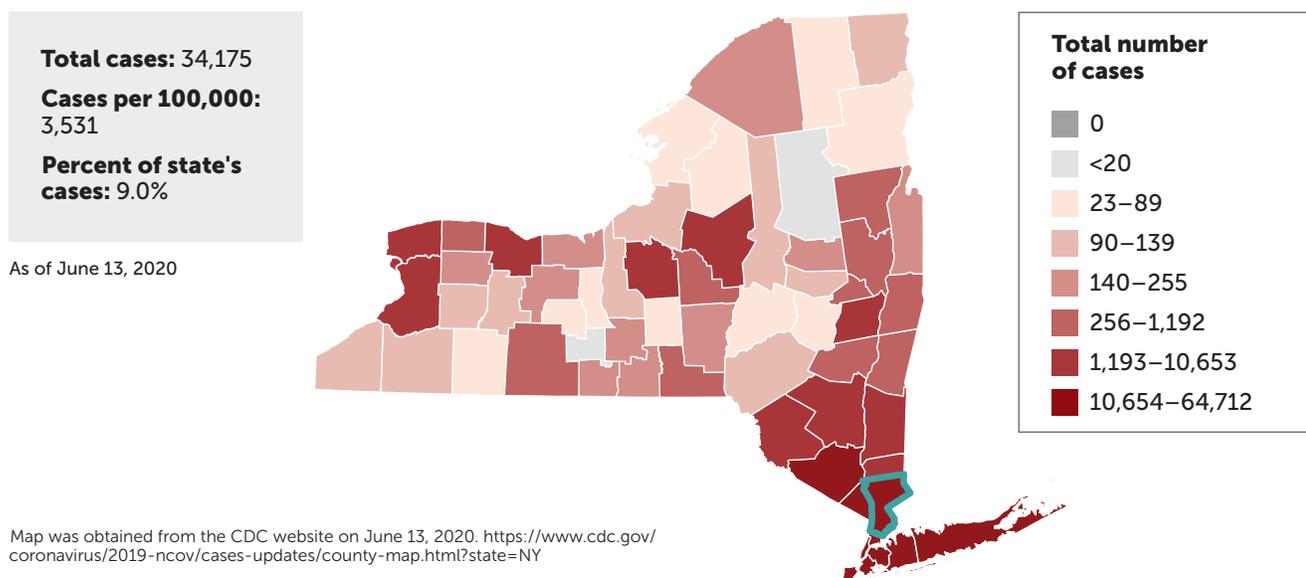
## COVID-19's Community Impact

New York has had more COVID-19 cases than any other state. As of the end of May, New York City reported over 200,000 cases alone, with another 170,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases elsewhere in the state.<sup>7</sup> White Plains is located roughly 20 miles from the city of New Rochelle, the epicenter of New York's COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>8</sup> Within New York, death rates due to COVID-19 vary by race/ethnicity, with the highest age-adjusted death rates per 100,000 population among Black residents (107.6) and Hispanic residents (96.4) compared to white residents (26.2).<sup>9</sup>

Because White Plains relies heavily on sales tax revenues, the economy has been particularly affected by the closure of local businesses.<sup>10</sup> **According to a survey by the county's Office of Economic Development, Westchester County businesses have also been hit hard by the lack of revenue:**<sup>11</sup>

- Of the business representatives responding to the survey, 58 percent reported that they would lose 75 percent to 100 percent of expected revenue due to the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>
- The survey also showed that 85 percent of respondents needed financial assistance and 60 percent were either solo entrepreneurs or businesses with fewer than five employees.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Intercos America Manufacturing Plant temporarily shut down and laid off most of its employees (204 people).<sup>12</sup> Within Westchester County, the unemployment rate rose from 3.9 percent in February 2020 to 14.1 percent in April.<sup>13</sup>

### COVID-19 in Westchester County



# The Community Response to COVID-19

Within New York state, social distancing measures were implemented over a 10-day period. Restrictions on mass gatherings went into effect on March 12, 2020, followed by initial business closures on March 16, and closures of educational facilities on March 18. All nonessential services were ordered closed on March 22, when an official stay-at-home order, *New York State on Pause*, went into effect.

## The city of White Plains leveraged state- and county-level resources in support of its residents:

- The White Plains website provides information on the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and paycheck protection programing, which provides loan forgiveness for retaining employees.<sup>14</sup>
- Westchester County is working with Volunteer New York! to connect small business owners with trained volunteers who can provide technical assistance in filling out Small Business Administration loan applications, which has been especially valuable for low-literacy, non-English speakers, and other underserved groups to facilitate access to COVID-19-related economic supports.<sup>15</sup>
- White Plains extended the deadline for filing county taxes and waived penalties for those who request an extension and provide proof of hardship.<sup>16</sup>

The mayor of White Plains and city councilmembers have been highly visible in the community, promoting these resources and celebrating collaboration in daily statements and on social media, encouraging residents to check on neighbors who may need food assistance, and leading clapping campaigns for health care workers.

## In addition to government-led resources and supports, a number of individual and collaborative efforts have been initiated by social service organizations and residents of White Plains in response to COVID-19, particularly among the Hispanic community. For example:

- El Centro Hispano teamed up with Feeding Westchester food bank for a food distribution event at a local school.
- Two recent White Plains High School graduates co-founded an activist group called White Plains DREAM Alumni to support undocumented workers who have lost work due to COVID-19 and who are not eligible for the same government assistance as U.S. citizens.<sup>17</sup>



Statewide collaboratives have also reached White Plains: Church groups are partnering with Northwell Health to increase testing in communities of color in Westchester County, Long Island, and New York City.<sup>18</sup>

The private sector has also responded to the pandemic. The global food company Danone, whose North American headquarters are based in White Plains, showed support for frontline hourly employees with enhanced benefits including a pay premium, paid quarantine leave, and childcare support. The company also donated \$1.5 million to support food banks and food rescue organizations, including Feeding Westchester in Westchester County.<sup>19</sup>

## The Role of Health Equity

Prior to COVID-19, White Plains's capacity to promote health, equity, and well-being was grounded in the efforts of the city to support its most underserved residents, mainly children and youth, immigrants, and those who are struggling economically. As a result of these efforts, the government as well as other organizations were able to quickly mobilize to provide further support to community members who may have had difficulties accessing economic relief provided by the government, given language and other barriers. Still others came together to provide support for residents not eligible for many of the benefits due to immigration status. However, fear of seeking health care and other services was common particularly among undocumented residents prior to COVID-19, and this reluctance to seek services may have been compounded by additional concerns around contracting the virus.

Despite supports, the health and financial impact of COVID-19 is affecting racial/ethnic groups within White Plains differently. The most significant impacts of COVID-19 are felt in higher-density neighborhoods, which are disproportionately occupied by people of color.<sup>20</sup> In response, city officials have provided masks and hand sanitizer to buildings with high numbers of residents who have lower incomes or are older and have also distributed information on COVID-19 in both English and Spanish.<sup>20</sup>

The mayor's office is also working closely with community organizations, which they view as vital "conduits in helping us distribute important information such as how and where to be tested, how to protect yourself, how to get food (and more)."<sup>20</sup> Because these relationships existed well before the pandemic, the mayor's office was able to quickly leverage partnerships to provide information to vulnerable populations in a timely manner and through trusted channels.

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## What's Next

The economic divide between more affluent white residents and more underserved residents of color is likely to grow through this pandemic. Unemployment rates more than tripled between February and March, with families with lower incomes more likely to lose their jobs or experience severe wage loss due to business and restaurant closures in the area. Given that residents of White Plains are experiencing varying challenges and barriers related to COVID-19, it will be important in future reports to assess patterns of recovery over time, including the impact of efforts specifically designed to support the community's residents most vulnerable to the pandemic and its effects.



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