



SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Spotlight on COVID-19

Tampa, Florida

July 2020

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Photos: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara (Volunteers with Feeding Tampa Bay, cover); Phelan M. Ebenhack via AP (The Ybor City district in Tampa, p. 3); AP Photo/Chris O'Meara (Downtown Tampa street during COVID-19, 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 Tampa, Fla., exploring the impact of and the city's response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Tampa,^{2,3} the county seat of Hillsborough County, is a large metropolitan area surrounding Tampa Bay, a natural harbor connected to the Gulf of Mexico on the west coast of Florida.

Tampa has made significant efforts and progress over the last two decades to implement more mixed-income housing and rebuild public housing infrastructure.³ As a result, residential segregation based on race/ethnicity has steadily declined since 2000.⁴

However, racial disparities in income remain. The median annual income for Black residents (\$30,772) and Hispanic or Latino residents (\$38,010) is significantly lower than that of white residents (\$59,390).⁵ Access to employment and health care remain a challenge for some of Tampa's low-income residents due to lack of affordable housing around the city's center and inadequate transportation infrastructure.³

Florida has not expanded its Medicaid program. Uninsured, low-income individuals who are ineligible for Medicaid or the federal health insurance marketplace can apply for the Hillsborough County Health Care Plan.² While approximately 20 federally qualified health centers in Tampa provide a health care safety net, Tampa's high uninsured rate makes it difficult for lower-income residents to access health care, and to prevent and manage chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. Hillsborough County has one Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated medically underserved area and several medically underserved populations, including those in East Tampa, West Tampa, and Southwest Tampa.



About Tampa

Population: 399,700

American Indian:
0.3%*

Asian: 4.2%

Black: 24.2%

**Hawaiian, Pacific
Islander:** 0.1%

Hispanic or Latino:
25.7%

**White, not
Hispanic:** 44.6%

Two or more races:
3.8%

**High school
graduate:** 87.3%

Median income:
\$50,909

Age 65 and older:
12.3%

Persons in poverty:
19.5%

Uninsured: 13.7%

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

COVID-19's Community Impact

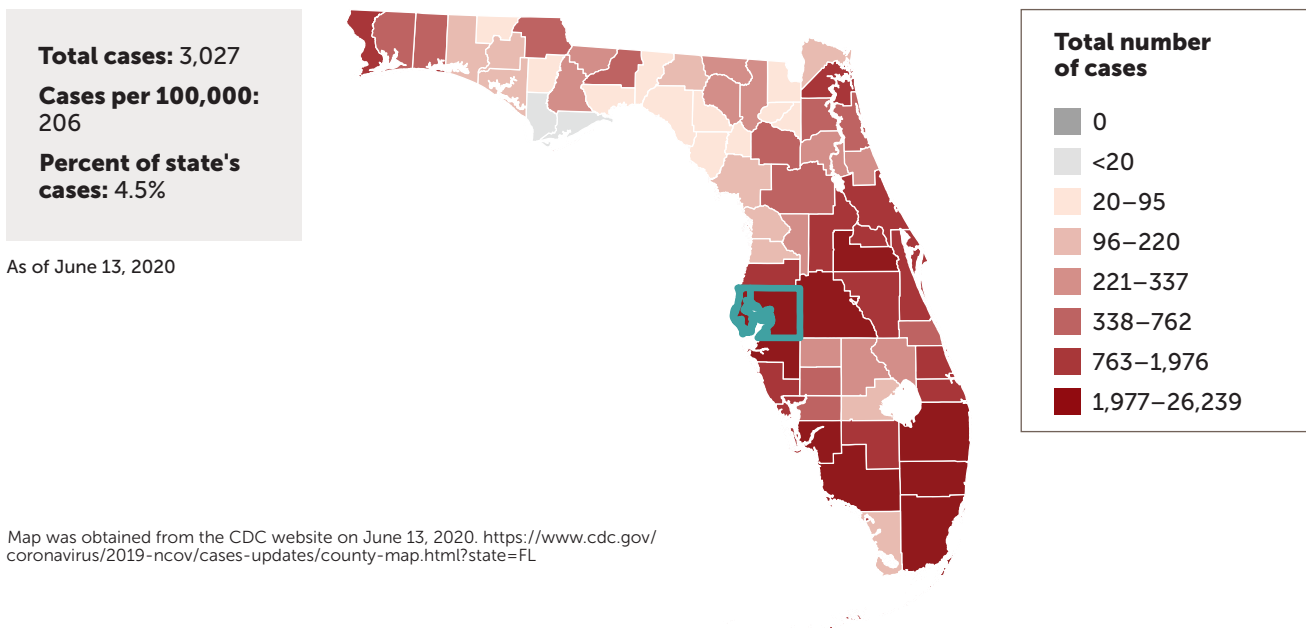
Florida had over 60,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the end of May.⁶ COVID-19 has not only had an impact on the physical health of Tampa's residents, but it has taken a toll on their economic and mental health as well.

The unemployment rate in Hillsborough County rose to 12.3 percent at the end of April, up from 2.9 percent in February.^{7,8} Just under one-third (29.3%) of the jobs in the Tampa Bay region have been affected by the pandemic, including jobs in industries such as mining, oil and gas, transportation, employment services, travel arrangements, leisure and hospitality, and retail.⁹

The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, which provides a range of support programs and services to community members, noted that many people initially sought help related to general stress and concerns for their friends and family, but over time topics have shifted more toward financial concerns.¹⁰ In April, the center was receiving 700 or 800 calls per week specifically related to COVID-19, a significant jump from about 14 calls related to the virus in late February.¹⁰ Ongoing monitoring will be important for understanding how these economic and mental health challenges are being tracked and addressed.

COVID-19 has not only had an impact on the physical health of Tampa's residents, but it has taken a toll on their economic and mental health as well.

COVID-19 in Hillsborough County



Map was obtained from the CDC website on June 13, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/county-map.html?state=FL>

The Community Response to COVID-19

On March 27, Hillsborough County enacted a safer-at-home order that encouraged residents to stay at home as much as possible, with nonessential businesses asked to close if they couldn't maintain social distancing.¹¹ Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a stay-at-home order that went into effect on April 3, closing essential activities and directing residents to remain indoors.¹² On April 18, schools were declared closed for the remainder of the school year.

A number of policies have been implemented at the state level to provide relief to individuals affected by the pandemic:

- For example, evictions for all residents affected by COVID-19 were blocked and mortgage payments were suspended.
- Florida's Department of Agriculture activated its Summer BreakSpot website to help families find locations to receive free meals for children.¹²
- In addition, the state distributed \$5 million to local governments through the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) program, which Tampa received in early March, to help people with housing assistance.¹³

On May 4, the state of Florida began reopening its nonessential services and activities. However, Hillsborough County deviated from state actions by remaining closed until May 15,¹⁴ likely driven by concerns around the continued spread of COVID-19 within one of the state's harder-hit areas.

The city of Tampa assembled an Economic Relief Task Force to proactively identify business relief efforts and alleviate the burden of COVID-19. In partnership with the Tampa Bay Chamber and the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, the mayor's office created a fund called One Tampa: Relief Now, Rise Together, that offers critical financial assistance to the community's most underserved residents and business owners.¹⁵

Tampa also devised multiple efforts to inform and engage residents, such as using TikTok videos to reach Generation Z¹⁶ and hosting informational webinars called "Real Talk on 'Rona" in collaboration with Tampa Family Health Centers.¹⁷

Within law enforcement, the Hillsborough County sheriff permitted 164 inmates convicted of low-level, nonviolent crimes to be released from the Hillsborough County jail to reduce the chance of the spread of the disease.¹⁸

March 27

Hillsborough County enacts a safer-at-home order that encourages residents to stay at home as much as possible. Nonessential businesses are asked to close if they can't maintain social distancing.

April 3

Gov. Ron DeSantis issues a stay-at-home order, closing essential activities and directing residents to remain indoors.

April 18

Schools are closed for the remainder of the school year.

May 4

Florida begins reopening its nonessential services and activities. However, Hillsborough County deviates from state actions by remaining closed until May 15.

According to a Tampa Bay Partnership survey fielded to gauge resident sentiment, half of Tampa Bay residents rated Tampa Mayor Jane Castor's response to COVID-19 as "excellent" or "very good."¹⁹

Further assistance was provided by nonprofit organizations, such as:

- The University Area Community Development Corporation and United Way Suncoast distributed funds to human services agencies from its \$1.3 million COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Fund.²⁰
- As part of the nationwide Hospitality for Hope Initiative, at least three hotels in the Tampa Bay area opened to allow people to quarantine while recovering from COVID-19.²¹
- The University of South Florida's College of Public Health launched the COVID-19 Associated Symptom Surveillance System to determine how the virus will progress in potential hot spots in Tampa.²²
- The Shimberg Center for Housing Studies at the University of Florida is collecting COVID-19 data, specifically tracking workforce and housing indicators.²³

Despite a lack of collaboration among various players within the community's health sector prior to the pandemic, a new collaborative of hospitals and health care systems, the COVID-19 Florida West Coast Regional Data Exchange, was formed to give health care leaders access to real-time data and to help assist patients in finding care.²⁴

While Tampa and Hillsborough County have leveraged many local resources and implemented important policies to quell the impact of COVID-19, the sustainability of these efforts as the county and state reopen are yet to be determined.

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The Role of Health Equity

Prior to COVID-19, the Hillsborough County Health Department had been working to address health inequities through its Office of Health Equity. Despite significant action by other health sector players, there has been no clear guidance or action from the Office of Health Equity during the pandemic.

As of May, the Tampa area had not experienced the same racial disparities in COVID-19 cases for Black residents that has been evident in other areas across the country.²⁵ In Hillsborough County, white residents have accounted for 49 percent of COVID-19 cases, while Black residents have made up 21 percent and Hispanic residents have made up 28 percent,²⁶ which roughly parallels the ethnic/racial breakdown of the region. Tampa's efforts to desegregate and improve housing quality for many low-income residents and communities of color may have helped to mitigate the spread.

Compared to other cities around the country, Tampa's physical layout, lack of high-rise apartment buildings, and lower population density has naturally facilitated social distancing for residents. **However, data from the Tampa Bay Partnership's resident sentiment survey showed that Black residents were:**

- More likely to be very concerned about COVID-19's impact on themselves or their households (76% compared to 51% overall)
- More likely to be concerned about getting sick with COVID-19 (83% compared to 69%)
- More likely to have been laid off (34% compared to 15% overall).¹⁹

While Tampa has created additional mixed-income housing in the city, many residents live outside of the city center and rely on public transportation. In a community with generally limited public transportation options before the pandemic and reduced service hours for public transportation as of April 1,²⁷ many individuals likely faced additional challenges going to essential jobs and accessing health care as a result of transportation barriers.

What's Next

As both the state and county reopen, it will be important to monitor the role of various actions taken by the city and county governments, as well as major players within the health sector, to ensure that the community's most vulnerable will not be disproportionately affected by the pandemic's effects for years to come.



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