

Improving Health and Equity in America's Small and Midsize Cities



August 2020

Analysis using new health-focused typology reveals wide variations in health across America's small and midsize cities

America's small and midsize cities wrestle with many of the same health disparities that larger cities do. Their challenges don't get the same attention or resources, yet these cities—more than 700 of them—are home to far more people.

Now, a new health-focused framework for small and midsize U.S. cities provides a new way of viewing cities to gain a broader perspective on how health is driven by social and economic factors like poverty, housing and income inequality. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, City Health Dashboard researchers at NYU created the City Types framework, which groups 719 small and midsize cities with populations of 50,000 to 500,000 into 10 unique Types based on changes in population, poverty rate, manufacturing sector employment, and other traits. (See *Summary of City Types*.)

The goal is to help small and midsize cities get a clearer picture of what influences health and well-being in their communities. With City Types, city leaders and policymakers can compare across cities and Types to identify health trends and learn about potential solutions for expanding opportunities to improve health for all.

What We Learned

By analyzing the social drivers of health in City Types using data from year 2000 to 2017, we uncovered sizable changes in indicators of health, equity, and well-being, including homicide rates, life expectancy, household poverty, and rent burden. The findings clearly show that race and poverty affect the opportunities for health for residents in small and midsize cities. As racial and economic disparities widened over time, so have health disparities. Here are the highlights:

Across cities, economic growth and recovery have been uneven. A handful of large cities have captured the majority of wealth and job creation, while many smaller cities have not grown as swiftly. Smaller suburban cities located near larger cities tended to have higher population growth and greater overall wealth.

EXPLORE YOUR CITY TYPE ON THE CITY HEALTH DASHBOARD

The City Health Dashboard now includes cities with populations 50,000 and above. Users can explore city-specific metrics of health and its drivers as well as a new City Type filter in its 'Compare Cities' feature. This allows you to find cities that are similar to yours in a number of important ways, beyond City Type, including population size, geographic location, and others. This tool can help cities identify peer cities and begin to build peer networks.

Explore: www.cityhealthdashboard.com/CityTypes.

Wealth and better health outcomes are concentrated in City Types that are predominantly White.

- Life expectancy gaps between neighborhoods within cities were much smaller—6 years, on average—in wealthier City Types and largest—10 years, on average—in cities with the highest rates of income inequality and poverty.
- The two City Types with large low-income and large Black populations (Regional Hubs and Small Industrial-Legacy Cities) consistently had, on average, the highest burdens of disease and mortality. On average, these more impoverished City Types also had the greatest income inequality and life expectancy gaps between neighborhoods within cities.

Poverty, rent burden, and income inequality grew across all City Types.

- City Types with relatively high poverty rates (Regional Hubs and Small Industrial-Legacy Cities) also had, on average, higher homicide rates, lower life expectancy, and higher cardiovascular disease mortality.
- The proportion of rent-burdened households increased for nearly all cities, from an overall average of 41% of renters in 2000 to 52% of renters in 2017.
- Racial income inequality not only persisted but grew, on average, over the 18-year study period. Reflecting other national trends, Black and Hispanic residents earned less than their White neighbors. The median income for non-Hispanic Black households in 2000 was 13% lower than that of non-Hispanic White households; by 2017 that gap grew to 28%. But some City Types, including Working Towns and Regional Hubs, had significantly larger Black-White income gaps. In those City Types, Black households earned 41% and 46% less than their White counterparts, respectively.

City Types with high local risk for COVID tend to also have higher rates of child poverty and shorter life expectancies.

A new COVID Local Risk Index shows significant variation among City Types in the average scores of cities within each City Type, ranging from 2.6 (lowest risk) among Small Stable-Size Cities to 9.7 (highest risk) among Small Industrial-Legacy Cities. The average rate of children in poverty in Small Industrial-Legacy Cities is almost three times that of Small Stable-Size Cities. And the two City Types with the shortest average city life expectancies (Small Industrial-Legacy Cities and Regional Hubs) also have the two highest average city COVID Local Risk Index scores.

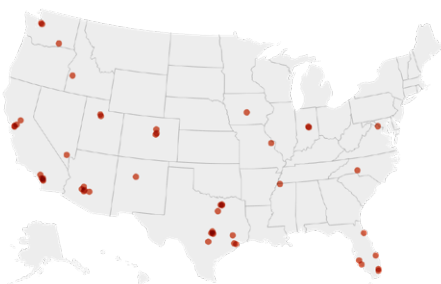
TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Small and midsize cities share similar challenges—and they have an opportunity to learn from each other. For example, although rent burden has increased across nearly all cities, it has fallen in some. City leaders can learn from and collaborate with peers to improve health equity across their City Type.
- We know that poverty drives health outcomes, and, more often than not, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other people of color are disproportionately impacted by structural racism that reinforces intergenerational poverty. This is an important health equity challenge—cities cannot make progress if it is not felt equitably by all. As cities rebuild their economic and health infrastructure, pursuing strategies aimed at reducing racial and economic disparities will be fundamental to this progress.
- Cities are well-positioned to reduce racial inequality through zoning, affordable housing, and other policies and programs. However, too often city leaders are limited by state pre-emption laws that undermine their power to create local solutions to local problems. For example, although research has shown that increasing minimum wage improves health, 25 states prohibit cities from raising their minimum wage. Local governance and authority must be respected and strengthened.

The COVID Local Risk Index, available on the City Health Dashboard, identifies cities and neighborhoods with populations at higher risk of COVID-19 infection and more severe COVID-19 illness. The Index incorporates key risk factors of race and ethnicity, age, household crowding, low income, and underlying health conditions like diabetes, and assigns a score from 1 (low risk) to 10 (high risk).

Summary of City Types

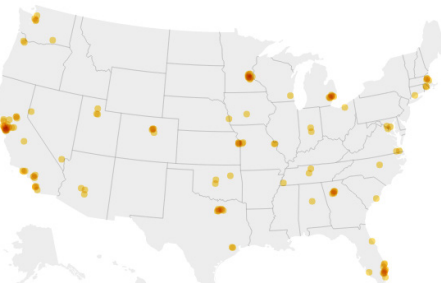
The City Types framework creates a foundation for exploring cities in new ways. Community leaders, public health professionals and others can dig deeper into the report as well as data available on the City Health Dashboard. As an example of the usefulness of the data, Dashboard researchers developed the following takeaways for each City Type using data used in the analysis and report, as well as data shown in the interactive tool found at www.cityhealthdashboard.com/CityTypes.



Emerging Cities

Small but fast-growing suburban cities where residents tend to be wealthier than surrounding metro area and commute outside the city.

- Experienced largest population increase of all City Types.
- Less than 8.2% of residents living below the federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 80.4 years at birth.
- Between 2000 and 2017, rent burden increased by an average of 9%. Proportion of rent-burdened residents ranged from 29%-65%, or an average of 47%. Most variation in change in rent burden, with some cities experiencing a decrease in the percentage of the population considered rent-burdened (e.g., Leesburg, Va., Parker, Colo.), and other cities seeing an increase of 25%-30% (e.g., Cape Coral and Port St. Lucie, Fla.).



Small Stable-Size Cities

Small, wealthy suburban cities with stable populations located within commuting distance of other major cities.

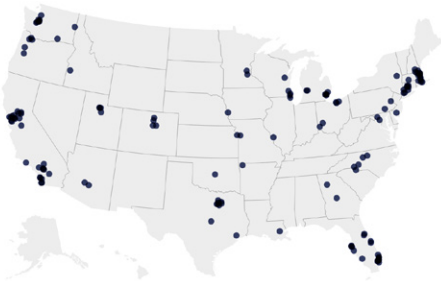
- 7.7% of residents live below the poverty line; lowest average poverty rate among all Types.
- Average life expectancy of 80.9 years at birth.
- Rent burden increased by an average of 9.5%, with an average of 46.3% of renters experiencing rent burden, although some cities (e.g., Edina, Minn., and Redmond and Bellevue, Wash.) saw a decrease.



Big Metro Exurbs

Small, wealthy suburbs of the Big 3 metro areas (NYC, LA, Chicago).

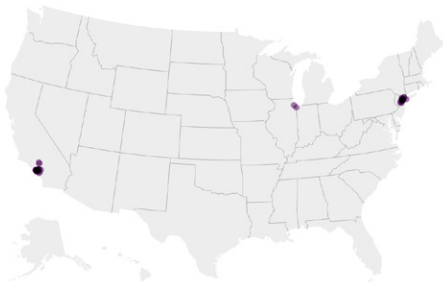
- Fewer than 10% of residents live below the federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 81.4 years at birth; longest across Types.
- Rent burden increased by an average of 13%, with an average of 53% of renters rent-burdened.
- Bolingbrook, Ill., had the largest increase in rent burden of all small and midsize cities, an increase of 30%.



Smaller Commuter Suburbs

Middle-income, smaller-population cities, where most residents commute to jobs within the larger metro area.

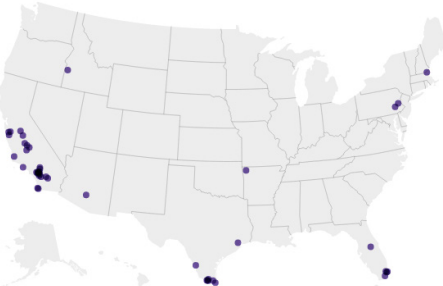
- Average of 15.5% of residents live below the poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 78.6 years at birth.
- Rent burden averages 53%; increased on average 12.8% from 2000 to 2017.



Diverse Ring Cities

Large minority populations, particularly Latinos, and high-poverty cities around the Big 3 metro areas (NYC, LA, Chicago).

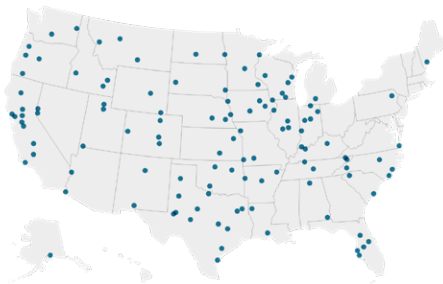
- Average of 20% of residents live below federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 79.4 years at birth.
- Average rent burden of 60%, with an average increase of 14.8%.



Latino-Predominant Enclaves

Lower-income cities in smaller metro areas with large and growing Latino populations.

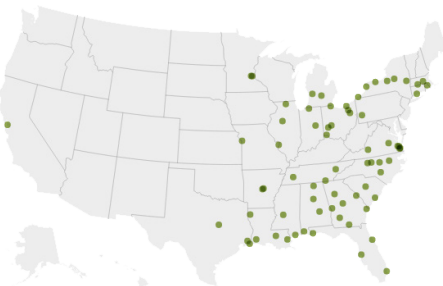
- Average 22% of residents living below the federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 78.9 years at birth
- Rent burden increased by an average of 13%, with an average of 58.5% of renters experiencing rent burden. In Hialeah, Fla., 73.3% of renters experienced rent burden, the highest of all small and midsize cities.



Working Towns

Middle-income communities in small metro areas where most residents work locally.

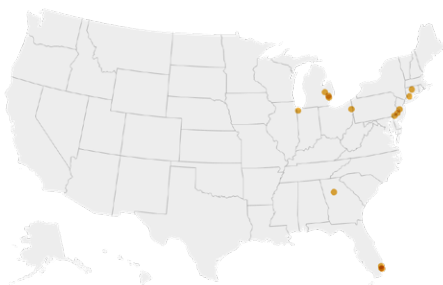
- Largest Black-White income gaps. On average, Black households earned 41% less than their White counterparts.
- 18% of residents on average live below federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 77.9 years at birth.
- Average rent burden is 49.5%. Between 2000 and 2017, rent burden increased by an average of 9.3%.



Regional Hubs

Midsize “micropolitan” cities that serve as hubs within smaller metro areas, with high inequality and large Black populations, where most residents work locally, and populations are decreasing.

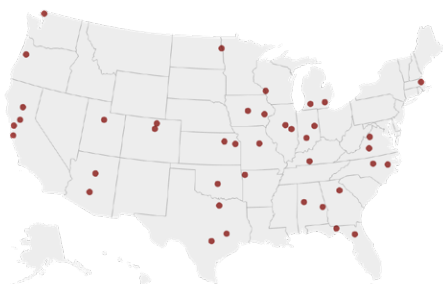
- Greatest income inequality in this Type; Black households earned 46% less than their White counterparts and this wage gap has been increasing.
- Average of 25% residents live below federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 76 years at birth.
- Average rent burden of 54%, with an increase of 11.8% between 2000 and 2017 across cities.



Small Industrial-Legacy Cities

Small post-industrial cities in medium-size population metro areas, with high poverty and large Black populations.

- Average of 27.8% live below the federal poverty line; highest poverty of all City Types. 41% of residents in Flint, Mich., and 37% in Camden, N.J. and Youngstown, Ohio residents live in poverty.
- Average life expectancy of 75 years at birth.
- An average of 61% of renters were rent burdened, the highest of all City Types; percent rent burdened increased an average of 14.3% between 2000 and 2017.



College Cities

Towns with large college populations, featuring all the benefits of productive anchor institutions and accompanying wealth disparities.

- Average of 25.4% of residents live below the federal poverty line.
- Average life expectancy of 79.6 years at birth.
- Rent burden averages 57.2%, with average increase of 6.4%.