RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Snapshot:

Tampa, Florida
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Introduction

The city of Tampa is a large metropolitan area surrounding Tampa Bay, a natural harbor connected to the Gulf of Mexico on the west coast of Florida. With a population of 347,645, Tampa is the largest city in Hillsborough County and the third largest city in Florida.¹

Tampa’s first inhabitants included the Tocobaga and Pohoy tribes, which were later absorbed into the Seminoles. Although Spanish explorers arrived in the early 1500s and claimed Florida as a Spanish possession, they were unable to successfully establish a settlement on its western coast until the mid-1500s. Early contact between European and native peoples, however, spread diseases and devastated local populations, leaving Tampa Bay largely uninhabited by the mid-1600s.²,³

RAPID GROWTH LEADS TO SOCIAL UNREST

In 1824, shortly after assuming possession of Florida from Spain, the United States established the Tampa Settlement. Tampa’s growth was slow until 1884, when local businessman, Henry B. Plant, extended the South Florida Railroad to Hillsborough River, linking Tampa to other parts of the region and boosting the trade of locally mined phosphates. Plant also developed port facilities and promoted tourism with the building of luxury hotels. In 1885, the founding of the neighborhood Ybor City around cigar production brought an influx of Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians. The city’s economy and population boomed during this time, increasing from fewer than 800 residents in 1880 to more than 15,000 in 1900.⁴,⁵ The region’s rapid growth, which continued throughout the 1920s, brought a number of social problems along with prosperity. In the first half of the 20th century, Tampa became notorious for organized crime activity and unpunished violence against blacks and the large immigrant population. After desegregation in the second half of the century, the city faced a period of racial unrest.
POVERTY AND SEGREGATION

Today, transportation, tourism, and the military remain drivers of Tampa’s economy. With the state’s largest deepwater port, an international airport, and a network of railroads and highways, Tampa is a center of regional trade and distribution. MacDill Air Force Base and the agriculture of citrus and other produce also play key roles in the city’s economy. However, many of the racial disparities from the city’s history persist.

Tampa has a diverse population, with 46 percent white, 25 percent black, 23 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent Asian residents. Black and Hispanic adults and children are disproportionately affected by poverty compared with whites and Asians. A significant gap is evident in which the median income of Tampa’s black residents is $26,933, compared to that of white residents ($60,736), Asian ($72,372) and Hispanic at $32,465. These populations were once concentrated in public housing, which was clustered in segregated neighborhoods of Tampa. The city began rebuilding its public housing in the late 1990s after a federal investigation revealed deplorable living conditions and new federal laws mandated a shift to mixed-income housing developments.

ADDRESSING EQUITY IN AN ETHNICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Increasing access to safe public housing and safe communities has been a major issue in Tampa. To address this need, cross-sector initiatives have concentrated on improving the built environment. Although many of Tampa’s built environment initiatives have not been fully implemented yet, the city’s planning efforts reflect an impressive amount of cross-sector collaboration and a commitment to creating a healthier, more equitable environment for the city’s racially/ethnically and economically diverse residents. Although these initiatives have the potential to improve health and well-being through safer living conditions and opportunities for physical activity, other structural barriers persist. The city’s high uninsured rate makes it difficult for lower-income residents to access health care to help prevent and manage chronic illnesses and disorders, such as diabetes and heart disease.

Improving the Built Environment and Access to Care

Tampa’s cross-sector partnerships have worked to improve environmental conditions and increase support for healthy living through continued revitalization of public housing, innovative community design to support wellness, community-driven efforts to create healthier environments for youth, policies to ensure smoke-free public housing, structural changes to improve neighborhood safety, and work to identify safe public spaces for breastfeeding.

LOCAL AND FEDERAL AWARDS HELP REVITALIZE PUBLIC HOUSING

Today, Tampa has one of the lowest levels of poverty segregation in Florida, resulting from the implementation of community development initiatives and the ongoing relocation of public housing residents. The city’s work in rebuilding and desegregating public housing, begun in 1998, has shown success, earning recognition by the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission for community design and a best practice award for a Comprehensive Modernization Program from the Florida Association of Housing and Redevelopment in 2004 and 2005. To jumpstart these efforts, Tampa received two Hope VI grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), totaling $52.4 million and one $30 million Choice Neighborhoods grant to create less dense, mixed-income, and mixed-use housing.

The Tampa Housing Authority currently owns and operates 18 public housing developments that provide more than 3,200 affordable housing units to more than 7,000 low-income residents. Since 1998, 5,000 residents have been relocated into new developments. Several projects continue, including the Encore Project and West River Redevelopment, which both include mixed-income and mixed-use housing.

Tampa’s nearly two decades of efforts to improve public housing have significantly improved the quality of life for many of its low-income households, demonstrating the city’s commitment to creating a healthier, more equitable community. These efforts continue as Tampa helps to ensure that public housing developments are located throughout the city, and not concentrated in low-income areas.

Despite these improvements in public housing and desegregation, poverty continues to disproportionately affect black and Hispanic families.
AECOM, a global engineering design firm, and articulates a shared vision for creating a healthier environment for all residents. This approach includes developing a downtown master plan that connects by walking and biking paths.

The city is the first district to apply the WELL Community Standard, an international building standard focused exclusively on human health and wellness being developed by the International WELL Building Institute. If Tampa meets these guidelines, it will earn “WELL Certified” designation, further boosting its commitment to creating safe, healthy communities for all residents. Two major real estate companies, Delos and Strategic Property Partners, are working with the city of Tampa to develop a model community design that supports public health by incorporating walkability, abundant green space, sound barriers, access to healthy foods, and daily monitoring of air quality. Once completed, the $2 billion, 40-acre, mixed-use development project has the potential to improve the quality of health and well-being of its residents and influence how Tampa and other communities prioritize and invest in environments that promote health and well-being.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN EFFORTS TO CREATE HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENTS FOR YOUTH

One neighborhood in Tampa provides an exemplar for tackling childhood obesity using a community-based approach. Sulphur Springs is a one-square-mile neighborhood with 53 percent of its residents identifying as black and 25 percent of its residents identifying as Hispanic. In Sulphur Springs, 15 percent of residents speak a language at home other than English, and more than half of families are below the Federal Poverty Level. Although reliable estimates of childhood obesity are not publicly available for the city of Tampa, childhood obesity is recognized as a nationwide problem and one that Sulphur Springs is taking a grassroots approach to combating.

COMBATING OBESITY

In 2010, with funding from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Foundation, the Tampa Metropolitan YMCA convened a coalition of community members; faith-based organizations; government organizations; the University of South Florida; and nonprofit organizations to explore and modify the structural factors related to childhood obesity. The Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids Coalition focuses on engaging the community in every facet of its work—from developing and administering a survey to examine perceptions and health habits of neighbors—to identifying priority areas that guide the coalition’s obesity prevention efforts. With community members as the driving force behind the coalition’s work, Sulphur Springs is nurturing its sense of community and coming together to develop a shared understanding of how the community can best address childhood obesity.

The coalition focuses on implementing programs, policy changes, and educational opportunities, such as “Get Your Fit On,” a free six-week program providing nutrition and physical activity education for youth attending the YMCA Summer Camp at Sulphur Springs Elementary School.

The city of Tampa is also one of 50 U.S. cities that will pilot First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move! Outside” initiative to encourage active play outdoors. The Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA is leading the effort to engage community members and public and private sectors in planning and implementing programs to get youth involved in outdoor recreation activities.

Tampa has also invested in initiatives to improve the physical safety of its residents, thereby enhancing individual well-being. In 2015, the city partnered with TECO, Tampa’s major electric company, on the Bright Lights, Safe Nights Initiative. This five-year program will fund the installation of more than 8,000 new street lights in community redevelopment areas, in specially designated areas for investment, and in zones with high crime or high crash rates.

EXPANDING SMOKE-FREE POLICY

In November 2015, HUD proposed a ban on smoking in the nation’s 3,100 public housing properties, including all living units, indoor common areas, and outdoor areas within 25 feet of buildings. After the rule becomes final, the Tampa Housing Authority would be required to make all of its housing smoke-free within 18 months. Currently, the Tampa Housing Authority has implemented smoke-free policies at two of its newer public housing developments: Cedar Pointe and Encore. Although rates of smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke are not publicly available for Tampa, extending the smoke-free policy to all properties will ensure that fewer low-income Tampa residents will be exposed to the effects of secondhand smoke in the future.

Over the past several years, the Hillsborough County Anti-Drug Alliance, Tobacco-Free Partnership of Hillsborough County, and Florida Department of Health in Hillsborough County have successfully advocated for smoke-free policies in other built environment settings in Tampa. These include: local hospitals, the University of South Florida, and Hillsborough Community College.

BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR BREASTFEEDING “ANYTIME, ANYWHERE”

Tampa’s commitment to fashioning a healthier environment for all is also evident in its work to identify safe public spaces for nursing moms. Maternal and child health are key considerations in Tampa, with higher rates of births to teen mothers and babies born at a low birthweight, compared with the state.

The Tampa Bay Breastfeeding Task Force—a multisector grassroots organization—with representatives from the Florida Health Department in Hillsborough County and health care and research sectors—implemented an “Anytime, Anywhere” social marketing campaign on the benefits of breastfeeding. As a result of this campaign, Tampa now has nearly 40 organizations, including: health care facilities; faith-based organizations;
hair and nail salons; restaurants; and daycares touting the “Anytime, Anywhere” logo, providing a supportive environment for nursing moms in Tampa.  

Breastfeeding rates are not publicly available for Tampa, and although breastfeeding initiation rates are on the rise in the United States, black women continue to have the lowest rates in the nation at 59 percent, compared with 75 percent for whites and 80 percent for Hispanics. Hillsborough County counselors include black women to better reach new black moms to begin mitigating this disparity. 

Although multiple community organizations are collaborating to improve the built environment in Tampa, systemic barriers make it difficult for residents to get the health they need to stay healthy and active. Tampa’s uninsured rate of 17 percent is slightly lower than Florida’s rate of 20 percent, but higher than the national average of 14 percent (Figure 3). Florida has not expanded Medicaid to low-income adults under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, although 1.7 million of the 2 million Floridians eligible to select an insurance plan through the federal insurance marketplace have done so. 

ASSISTING LOW-INCOME AND AGING RESIDENTS

For people who remain uninsured, Tampa provides a health care safety net through approximately 20 Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Tampa Family Health Centers (TFHC), an FQHC with 17 locations, is the largest FQHC in Florida. Low-income uninsured individuals ineligible for Medicaid or the federal insurance marketplace may be able to access one of Tampa’s FQHCs or apply for the Hillsborough County Health Care Plan. The county’s managed care program provides health care for a subset of low-income residents who have limited assets and do not qualify for other health care coverage, including Medicare and Medicaid. Improving equitable access to affordable health care for Tampa’s uninsured residents will remain a challenge in the coming years.

Florida has the highest proportion of residents aged 65 or older in the United States, and this aging population is growing rapidly. The uninsured rate among adults aged 65 or older is only 1 percent, presumably because adults are eligible for Medicare at age 65. However, the uninsured rate for adults aged 55 to 64 is 16 percent, which is on par with Tampa’s overall rate of 17 percent. The University of South Florida in Tampa recently received a three-year, $2.24 million grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration’s Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program. The university will partner with Tampa’s FQHCs and Senior Connection Centers to prepare a geriatric workforce to better meet the needs of Tampa’s aging population and is expected to provide primary care services to 6,000 underserved FQHC patients aged 60 or older.

Progress and Opportunities

Tampa has demonstrated a strong commitment to building an environment conducive to healthy living. The city has invested significant
resources to reduce economic segregation and improve safety in public housing and has developed a master plan to ensure that community design supports wellness. In addition, Tampa has engaged community members in local efforts to: tackle childhood obesity; expand smoke-free multi-unit housing policies; and collaborate with small businesses to create a supportive environment for nursing moms. Although these efforts have produced signs of strong cross-sector partnerships and early success—additional surveillance; data and information gathering; analysis; and reporting—will examine the extent to which these efforts and cross-sector partnerships can have a positive, long-term effect on health and well-being. The following questions provide opportunities for further exploration:

• What key facilitators and barriers have been identified by cross-sector partnerships that focus on improving the built environment and preventing chronic disease?

• How does the lack of publicly available chronic disease rates specific to Tampa affect city planning?

• To what extent do Tampa’s neighborhood enhancement initiatives benefit low-income households versus wealthy households?

• In what ways have improvements in public housing contributed to better access to transportation, grocery stores, retail, and other necessities?

• In light of limited data, how is Tampa measuring the impact of completed and ongoing initiatives to improve the built environment and prevent/manage chronic disease?

• Is there evidence that Tampa’s initiatives are improving the health and well-being of its residents? For instance, have tobacco use rates declined? How has local implementation of federal smoke-free regulations affected rates of exposure to secondhand smoke among public housing residents?

• How is Tampa sustaining or expanding health and wellness initiatives, particularly during budgetary shortfalls?
References


