RWJF Culture of Health
Sentinel Community Snapshot:

White Plains, New York
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About This Report

The Sentinel Communities project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with The RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project will monitor activities in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least five years. This Snapshot is the first in a series of planned reports about this Sentinel Community. Using data compiled in early 2016, it provides an initial overview of the community’s history, challenges, and approaches to building a Culture of Health. Visit cultureofhealth.org to see the full list of communities, links to other reports, and information about the project.
Introduction

White Plains, N.Y., is a mid-Atlantic city of 57,500 residents that is approximately 25 miles from New York City.\(^1\)\(^2\) Founded in 1683, White Plains has been the seat of Westchester County since 1757.\(^3\) Although its residents make up only 6 percent of Westchester County’s population of nearly 962,000 people, White Plains’ population nearly quadruples during weekdays because of commuters, who come into the city for work.\(^1\)\(^4\)

Over the past 50 years, White Plains has undergone several urban renewal efforts to increase commercial activity and attract new residents.\(^5\) Prior cycles of redevelopment have produced a downtown that includes shopping, dining, and luxury apartments and hotels.\(^4\)\(^5\) Recently, White Plains has worked to attract young professionals with new amenity-filled apartment complexes and urban enhancements, such as bike lanes and electric car charging stations.\(^6\) Efforts to increase the vibrancy of White Plains’ downtown—and provide an alternative to high rents in New York City—have helped attract new residents to the city.\(^6\) Demand for apartments in White Plains has resulted in few vacancies.\(^6\)

FACING DISPARITIES WITH INFLUX OF HISPANIC POPULATION

Urban renewal projects have shaped the built environment of White Plains, but an increase in the Hispanic population has changed the city’s racial and ethnic mix. In recent decades, White Plains has experienced an influx of Hispanic individuals in search of economic opportunities.
or suburban living. In fact, the growth of the Hispanic population has made this ethnicity the majority of the city’s inhabitants. The changing demographics have revealed stark gaps in income, educational attainment, and average age at death between white residents and the city’s black and Hispanic populations. In response, local nonprofit organizations have provided tailored social services to White Plains’ Hispanic residents, while city government has focused on urban revitalization projects, notably the rebuilding of affordable housing developments, including set-asides for affordable housing in downtown residential developments.

Over the past three decades, White Plains’ population has become proportionately more Hispanic and more foreign-born. The socioeconomic characteristics of the city’s Hispanic community reflect the arrival of immigrants to the area for low-paying manual labor or service industry jobs. The growth of the Hispanic population in White Plains mirrors the growth of the Hispanic population across Westchester County. Most of Westchester County’s Hispanic residents live in a small number of communities, including White Plains.

In 1990, the population of White Plains was nearly two-thirds white, and black residents were its largest racial minority (Figure 1). Hispanics made up 14 percent of the city’s population. Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population grew to 24 percent of White Plains’ population. Much of this growth was fueled by immigration: almost two-thirds of White Plains’ growing foreign-born population came from Latin America. These immigrants settled in communities such as White Plains, not only to escape violence in their home countries but also because of the availability of low-skilled manual labor jobs in construction and landscaping, and service jobs in businesses like restaurants. More recently, Hispanics have moved into suburban areas from New York City in search of affordable housing, well-regarded public schools, and social services tailored to Hispanics.

The percentage of White Plains’ Hispanic population has continued to grow. Today, more than one-third of the city’s residents are Hispanic (Figure 1), and more than half of these residents (58%) are foreign-born. Nearly all Hispanic immigrants residing in White Plains (95%) are adults. In contrast, children make up 59 percent of the White Plains’ U.S.-born Hispanic population. As a result of these population shifts, White Plains is now a city in which Hispanics form the second largest group after white residents, consisting of a striking mix of immigrant adults and native-born children.

In addition, Hispanic children make up the largest percentage of public school students in White Plains (54%). In comparison, Hispanic residents represent 31 percent of Westchester County public school students and 25 percent of New York State public school students. Approximately twice as many public school students in White Plains are English as a Second Language learners (14%) as in Westchester County (7%) or in New York (8%).

**GAPS IN EDUCATION AND INCOME**

White Plains, like Westchester County, is a relatively prosperous community. The median household income is almost $82,000—approximately $23,000 higher than that of New York State—but slightly lower than the median income for Westchester County (approximately $83,400). The percentage of the population in White Plains that lives in poverty (10%) is about the same as it is for Westchester County (slightly lower than 10%) but significantly less than in New York State (16%). The unemployment rate, at nearly 7 percent, is lower than the rate in Westchester County (8%) and New York State (nearly 9%).

Residents of White Plains are highly educated. Almost half of all residents ages 25 or older have a four-year college degree, and almost one-quarter have graduate or professional degrees. This level of educational attainment closely resembles educational attainment in Westchester County. However, this level is significantly higher than that for all New York State adults in which one-third have four-year college degrees, and 15 percent have graduate or professional degrees.

The positive overall indicators of socioeconomic status in White Plains mask stark differences among the white, black, Asian, and Hispanic populations (Figures 2 and 3). Almost 80 percent of the city’s Asian population has at least a four-year college degree, and the median household income for this population is more than $113,000—
In 2014, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment built before 2000 was more than $2,100 per month. Even low-income individuals who receive vouchers to defray the costs of rent have difficulty finding affordable housing in White Plains. Residents can encounter years-long waiting lists for affordable housing, although the city requires that developers of new downtown residential projects earmark 10 percent of units for those earning 80 percent of the average median income. Individuals who qualify for housing assistance can face other barriers to obtaining affordable housing, such as a low credit score or status as an unauthorized immigrant.

A scarcity of affordable housing negatively affects the health and well-being of White Plains residents. Approximately 42 percent of White Plains residents pay more than 30 percent of their incomes for rent, an indicator that housing puts a significant strain on household budgets. In four low-income neighborhoods in White Plains, more than half of residents pay more than 50 percent of their incomes toward rent. Many lower-income Hispanic families in White Plains live in overcrowded housing units because they cannot afford rents for larger apartments.

HEALTH OUTCOMES VARY

The limited availability of city-level data offers only a glimpse into the health of White Plains’ residents. Infant mortality in White Plains is higher than infant mortality in Westchester County and in New York State (both at 5 per 1,000 live births). Children enrolled in White Plains public schools have higher obesity rates (19%) than children enrolled in Westchester County public schools (14%) or all public school children from New York State (17%).

Average age at death—collected from death certificates—for White Plains residents is 77 years, but is lower for blacks (73 years) and for Hispanics (61 years) than for whites (79 years) (Figure 4). Reducing death before age 65 from heart disease among blacks and Hispanics has been identified by the Westchester County Department of Health as a key public health priority for all of Westchester County.

SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

White Plains currently has a shortage of affordable housing, and most recent housing development has catered to young professionals and higher-income individuals. In 2014, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment built before 2000 was more than $2,100 per month. Even low-income individuals who receive vouchers to defray the costs of rent have difficulty finding affordable housing in White Plains. Residents can encounter years-long waiting lists for affordable housing, although the city requires that developers of new downtown residential projects earmark 10 percent of units for those earning 80 percent of the average median income. Individuals who qualify for housing assistance can face other barriers to obtaining affordable housing, such as a low credit score or status as an unauthorized immigrant.

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Serving Needs of Hispanic Population

INCREASING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The White Plains city government indicates that the city’s affordable housing shortage cannot be resolved without additional federal and state government funding. In addition to increasing the number of affordable housing units, a key priority for White Plains has been rebuilding a 450-unit public housing complex, which contains more than 60 percent of the city’s 712 total public housing units. The complex, built in 1949, is “distressed and in urgent need of capital repairs” (p. 70). It is being replaced in a phased construction approach to avoid displacing current residents; the first new building opened in March 2016. Replacing the dilapidated complex with up-to-date housing provides a way to serve the health and well-being needs of low-income residents of affordable housing. In a recent newspaper article, the executive director of White Plains’ Housing Authority explained, “Our residents are working people who contribute to our community. They...
deserve to live in nice, safe, affordable apartments, and that’s what we’re trying to provide" (para. 3).33

White Plains’ new affordable housing is designed to enhance resident health and well-being in several ways. First, the rebuilt housing complex is designed to fit into the surrounding neighborhood, enhancing a sense of community and reducing the stigma associated with living in public housing.32 Second, all apartments are smoke-free.33,34 Smoke-free housing reduces the risk of fires and improves the health of nonsmoking residents of affordable housing.35 Third, the complex includes a new, conveniently located White Plains Education and Training Center, opened in spring 2016, which serves not only affordable housing residents of the complex, but all local job-seekers.37 The center—which has received funding from public and private sources—is the result of a cross-sector partnership between the White Plains Housing Authority; White Plains Hospital; and the nonprofit group, Friends of the White Plains Youth Bureau.34 The city of White Plains describes the center’s goal as “promot[ing] economic empowerment, self-sufficiency, and financial independence” (para. 2).37 The center provides job training in industries like health care and hospitality, workplace skills development, and courses on topics like workplace English for non-native English speakers, home-buying, and money management.38

NONPROFIT LEGAL AND SOCIAL SERVICES
Several local nonprofit organizations respond to inequities in health and well-being faced by White Plains’ Hispanic population by providing legal representation, education, social services, and food aid to White Plains’ Hispanic community.39 Two of the oldest local organizations are El Centro Hispano and the Westchester Hispanic Coalition. In addition, the Westchester County government convenes a Hispanic Advisory Board.39

El Centro Hispano, founded in 1974, helps individuals find jobs and housing, offers document translation, provides legal assistance to victims of domestic violence, and distributes food.39 El Centro Hispano has offered several educational programs for children and adults—such as English language classes; GED preparation in Spanish; literacy programs for children; and mentoring for middle school students.39 The organization also offers computer skills classes due to a lack of access to computers.39 In 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, El Centro Hispano provided approximately 16,000 services to nearly 2,100 clients.39 Approximately 85 percent of these services were related to finding jobs or housing.39

The Westchester Hispanic Coalition, located in White Plains, was founded in 1975. It provides English language classes; sexual assault/domestic violence counseling (that it describes as “grounded in local Hispanic community mores and implemented through established social networks”) (p. 1); and legal services.39 The coalition’s legal staff assist clients with immigration-related matters and domestic violence victims with family law cases, such as divorce or child custody.39,35

Other nonprofit organizations that serve White Plains residents also see many Hispanic and immigrant clients. For example, local food banks have reported that most of their clients are Hispanic. Growing numbers of food bank clients are not proficient English speakers, and many are also unauthorized immigrants.37 In addition, more than half of the individuals who use the services of My Sister’s Place—a key local provider of shelter, counseling, and legal services to victims of intimate partner violence and human trafficking—are Hispanic.32

In addition, Westchester County government’s Hispanic Advisory Board identifies major issues facing the county’s Hispanic community
and counsels the county on policies that could affect Hispanic residents. The Board also serves as an intermediary between the county government and the Hispanic community, including residents of White Plains. Because Westchester County’s Hispanic population is projected to continue increasing, El Centro Hispano, the Westchester Hispanic Coalition, and other nonprofit organizations likely will continue to fill a key need in White Plains and other areas with a growing Hispanic population in Westchester County.7

Questions and Considerations

White Plains’ city government has focused on urban renewal efforts, and nonprofit organizations are working to address the health and well-being of the area’s growing Hispanic community. Additional surveillance, data and information gathering, analysis, and reporting will examine whether these priorities evolve—and how the county government, city government, and nonprofit organizations interact to serve the needs of White Plains residents. Answers to the following questions could provide insight into the degree to which new and ongoing initiatives are addressing the challenges of a racially and economically diverse community:

• What are the key challenges to improved health and well-being for White Plains’ Hispanic population—both native- and foreign-born?

• What initiatives has White Plains taken to improve the health and well-being of its residents? To what extent does White Plains’ city government work with the Westchester County Health Department or local nonprofit organizations on local public health challenges?

• How do White Plains’ government and the Westchester County Health Department set public health priorities?

• What are the health and well-being needs of the large number of native-born children in White Plains who have immigrant parents?

• What is the current status of White Plains’ efforts to revitalize its public housing and to improve the availability of affordable housing?

• What other health priorities have emerged as significant in White Plains, and to what extent has the community been involved in identifying and addressing them? In addition, to what extent have cross-sector initiatives emerged to address issues related to housing, income, education, and substance abuse prevention?
References


33. Westchester County. (2013). Authority is requested for the County of Westchester to enter into an Agreement with the Westchester Hispanic Coalition, Inc. for the provision of culturally specific sexual assault and domestic violence case management services to Latinas, for the period January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2013 for an amount not to exceed $100,000 to be paid pursuant to an approved budget and subject to appropriation. Retrieved from http://aandc.westchestergov.com/data/Calendar/33491.pdf
