SENTINEL COMMUNITIES INSIGHTS

Spotlight on COVID-19

Harris County, Texas

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As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, it 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 Harris County, Texas, exploring the impact of and the county’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Harris County, with Houston as its county seat, is the largest county in the state of Texas. Houston is the fourth largest city in the United States. About one-quarter of the county is foreign born (26%). The median income of Hispanic and Black residents is about 30 percent less than that of white residents, and Black residents are also more likely to be unemployed. Health care and social assistance are leading industries in Harris County, though the economy is fairly diverse with significant employment in education; professional, technical, and scientific services; and hospitality, among other sectors.

Texas has not adopted Medicaid expansion. About three-quarters of the population of Harris County is overweight or obese and about one-quarter rates its physical health as fair to poor. About 20 percent report poor mental health, and racial and ethnic disparities are evident across many health outcomes. Sixteen percent of residents experience food insecurity and lack of safe housing is a lingering issue.

In 2017, this community was hit by Hurricane Harvey, flooding 120,000 structures in the county and creating unsafe living conditions due to structural damage and lingering mold. Within Harris County, there are four Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) - designated high-needs primary care health professional shortage areas.

About Harris County

- Population: 4,713,325
- American Indian: 1.1%
- Asian: 7.4%
- Black: 19.9%
- Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0.1%
- Hispanic or Latino: 43.3%
- White, not Hispanic: 29.1%
- Two or more races: 1.9%
- High school graduate: 80.9%
- Median income: $60,146
- Age 65 and older: 10.5%
- Persons in poverty: 16.5%
- Uninsured: 22.6%

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.1
COVID-19’s Community Impact

Texas had over 80,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of the end of May. Close to 20 percent of the state’s cases have been within Harris County. The economic impacts have significantly affected residents, businesses, and nonprofits. Unemployment increased from 3.9 percent in February to 14.4 percent at the end of April. Rice University’s Kinder Institute calculated more granular estimates of job losses and noted that jobs in food industries, retail trades, health care, and social assistance industries have been hardest hit in the region.

Results of a survey of 69 nonprofits serving Harris County conducted by the Greater Houston Community Foundation indicated that 86 percent of responding organizations anticipated an increase in demand in the wake of COVID-19, with 55 percent of those organizations reporting being under-resourced to meet increased demand. The vast majority of the organizations surveyed assist residents with meeting basic needs, including through food assistance, and many also provide behavioral and public health services.

The Community Response to COVID-19

On March 19, a statewide public health disaster was declared and schools were closed. On March 21, restrictions were placed on mass gatherings and initial business closures went into effect. A local emergency was declared in Harris County on March 24, and a stay-at-home order was put in place for the county. Compliance with these orders has varied, however.

COVID-19 in Harris 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=TX
The Harris County Fire Marshal’s Office has received over 9,000 complaints to its hotline of people reporting violations for state-issued stay-home orders, work-safe orders, and mandatory closures.\textsuperscript{19}

The county’s enforcement efforts have drawn criticism from the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps reflecting existing differences in health mindsets across the county and state, the governor closed businesses via executive order and the Houston police force enforced those orders. The governor then criticized the police for their actions.\textsuperscript{21}

On April 17, Gov. Abbott authorized the reopening of retail businesses effective April 24 and created the Open Texas Strike Force, consisting of medical, public, and private leaders to advise the government on how to reopen the state.\textsuperscript{22} To prepare for reopening:

- Harris County developed a three-step plan—test, trace, treat—to avoid a second wave of infections.\textsuperscript{23}

- County agencies also made financial support available, including $15 million approved for underserved families in the county.\textsuperscript{24}

- A tool was established for essential workers to find child care in the Houston area,\textsuperscript{25} and other support services, such as the Care Connection Aging and Disability Resource Center call center, remained open.\textsuperscript{26}

- The mayor of Houston has also set up a coronavirus testing hotline that serves those experiencing homelessness in the city.\textsuperscript{27}

Outside of state and local government, health agencies have partnered with academia and nonprofits building on collaborations established prior to the pandemic. For example:

- Houston health officials and Rice University scientists have begun testing wastewater samples for COVID-19 as a way to reveal the true spread of the disease.\textsuperscript{28}

- A partnership led by Harvey Home Connect, a coalition formed in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, launched a COVID-19 community impact survey.\textsuperscript{29}

- The Harris Center is operating a statewide COVID-19 mental health support line, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was launched by Texas Health and Human Services. The support line offers trauma-informed support and psychological first aid to those experiencing stress and anxiety related to COVID-19.\textsuperscript{30}

- There are also several efforts to support access to food that list free meal distribution locations from many community-based organizations.\textsuperscript{31}

- Other community organizations are working to connect with volunteers. The county’s homeland security and emergency management departments’ virtual Volunteer Reception Center connects volunteers with agencies in need during COVID-19.\textsuperscript{32}
The Role of Health Equity

Since 2017, Harris County Public Health has been developing a health equity framework for their work to better serve its diverse community. Health equity work prior to COVID-19 has led to prioritizing the collection of information disaggregated by demographic characteristics.

As of late May, the Hispanic community had experienced the highest number of COVID-19 cases of any ethnic/racial group, roughly double that of Black and white residents. Despite an effort to collect demographic information, individuals’ race or ethnicity is unknown for the majority of confirmed cases. Other indicators of vulnerability are correlated with COVID-19 prevalence:

- Cases are two-to-three times more prevalent in some of Houston’s poorest ZIP codes, compared with Harris County overall.

- Of the 10 ZIP codes with the highest rates, seven were majority Black and low-income.

Community-focused, multisectoral partnerships in Harris County that predated the pandemic were also leveraged to address the needs of underserved populations:

- On March 10, Harris County Public Health, in partnership with Harris Health, announced a call center resource for residents in unincorporated Harris County who do not have a healthcare provider and who need access to COVID-19-related care.

- Harris County Public Health’s strike team tests for COVID-19 at nursing homes and other congregate facilities. A Houston hospital also offers drive-through options for pregnant patients.

- BakerRipley neighborhood centers, which have a long history of serving the community, offer programs that focus on education, wellness, senior services, financial well-being, immigration, workforce, and community engagement. BakerRipley has offered rental assistance to about 8,000 residents that have experienced financial hardship due to COVID-19.

What’s Next

Going forward, it will be important to understand the overall impact of strong local collaborations on the response to COVID-19 and to explore potentially differing views about the pandemic between Harris County stakeholders and leaders in the surrounding region.

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References


