Spotlight on COVID-19
Mobile, Alabama
July 2020
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Photos: AP Photo/Julio Cortez (highway in Mobile, cover); AP Photo/Julie Bennett, File (houses in Mobile, p. 3); Alabama Extension/Flickr (“Career Centers are closed” signs in Alabama, 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 Mobile, Ala., exploring the impact of and the city’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Mobile, the third largest city in Alabama, is nestled in Mobile Bay, an inlet of the Gulf of Mexico. As a seaport city, many jobs are provided by the shipbuilding, fishing, and tourism industries. Steel production, oil and gas drilling, and the manufacturing sector also provide significant employment opportunities.

Historic patterns of racial and economic segregation have plagued the city of Mobile for decades and have resulted in stark disparities in income, access to health care, and educational attainment between Mobile’s Black and white residents. Over the course of his tenure, Mayor Sandy Stimpson, who took office in 2013, and others have attempted to unite various factions throughout the city, with mixed results. Democratic lawmakers in Alabama have recently tried to expand Medicaid to the state’s most vulnerable populations. While Medicaid expansion has gained the support of various groups like the Alabama Hospital Association, efforts continue to face opposition from conservative state lawmakers and the governor. Responding to calls by Democratic legislators to consider Medicaid expansion, especially during the pandemic, Alabama’s governor stated that it would be “financially irresponsible” to expand Medicaid without spending more time determining how to fund the program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About Mobile</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population:</strong> 188,720</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>American Indian:</strong> 0.2%*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Asian:</strong> 1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black:</strong> 50.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hawaiian, Pacific Islander:</strong> 0.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic or Latino:</strong> 2.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>White, not Hispanic:</strong> 43.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Two or more races:</strong> 1.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High school graduate:</strong> 88.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Median income:</strong> $40,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age 65 and older:</strong> 16.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Persons in poverty:</strong> 22.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Uninsured:</strong> 13.6%</td>
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* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.
Life expectancy for residents of Mobile County is about 75 years, three years less than the U.S. average, and mortality rates for Mobile County are higher than the national average for preventable noncommunicable diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.

Mobile County has several Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated medically underserved areas that rely heavily on free clinics, hospitals that serve those who are uninsured, and federally qualified health centers.

COVID-19’s Community Impact

The state of Alabama had about 21,000 cases of COVID-19 at the end of May. During the months of March and April, the city of Mobile began to see significant economic and mental health impacts:

- The unemployment rate rose from 4.1 percent in February to 16.3 percent in April.
- The Mobile Police Department and AltaPointe Health, a psychiatric hospital system, reported that calls for attempted suicide spiked in March.
- Requests for assistance to meet basic needs also rose sharply due to the pandemic. Feeding the Gulf Coast, a food bank that serves older adults, families, and children in need, experienced an increase of over 700 percent in Find Help website traffic.

COVID-19 in Mobile County, Alabama

As of June 13, 2020
The Community Response to COVID-19

Alabama’s statewide stay-at-home order went into effect on April 4 and lasted until April 30, causing all nonessential businesses and beaches to close. All public schools were also closed for the remainder of the academic year. The state received approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to operate the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer, a program that provides a supplemental food purchasing benefit to families of children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals to offset the cost of meals that students would have consumed at school.

On April 30, the state transitioned to a safer-at-home order and allowed for a partial reopening of the economy. The order permitted retail businesses to reopen at 50 percent capacity if social distancing was maintained. Restaurants could not have dine-in service and barbershops, nail salons, hair salons, and tattoo parlors also remained closed. Hospitals, on the other hand, were able to resume elective procedures. This safer-at-home order expired May 15, allowing for further opening of the state’s economy and recreational activities.

Contrary to the actions of other cities in Alabama, Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson held off on implementing a shelter-in-place order and curfew because he had “concerns that a heavy-handed approach by government could cause irrevocable economic damage.”

Jefferson County, which is home to Birmingham, provides a helpful comparison of the impact of these policies in the region. Both Jefferson County and Mobile County were heavily influenced by the policies of their largest cities. Different policy actions were taken in each county, ultimately resulting in different disease trajectories:

- While Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin issued a shelter-in-place order on March 24 followed by a curfew instated by the city council, Mayor Stimpson did not issue a stay-at-home order and curfew until April 3.

- Although Jefferson County had a higher number of cases compared to Mobile County on March 18, by April 22 Mobile County had surpassed Jefferson County in number of cases, illustrating that the virus spread at a faster rate in Mobile County. Mayor Stimpson later noted that he wished he had acted sooner.

In addition to delayed policy action to curb the spread of COVID-19, Mayor Stimpson and the Mobile County Health Department offered differing messages to the public. Representatives of the Mobile County Health Department stood by their more conservative approach to addressing the pandemic—enforcing public health guidelines across the community and reassuring Mobile residents that they were on the right path. But the mayor focused on personal responsibility, stating: “Government cannot protect you. You have got to do certain things to make sure that you are protected.”
Various sectors within Mobile have rallied to provide support for people affected by COVID-19. For instance:

• The Community Foundation for South Alabama and the city of Mobile have partnered to activate the Mobile Area Disaster Relief Fund. The fund provides grants to community-based organizations serving disproportionately affected communities, including those that support families with young children or families with low-wage workers; organizations that help to address the immediate needs of economically vulnerable populations resulting from business closures; and organizations supporting community safety nets.25

• United Way of Southwestern Alabama has provided information, resources, and direct support to residents through 211, a hotline that provides information and connects individuals to essential services.26

• ALtogether is another resource for Alabamians to access help or lend a hand during the COVID-19 crisis. The organization created a website for businesses, policymakers, foundations, and the public to find ways to contribute and connect.27

In the private sector, actions have included:

• Auto insurers returned more than $100 million in premiums to 2 million policyholders across the state of Alabama.28

• Austal USA, a global defense ship designer and manufacturer, provided more than $100,000 in grants to help restart Mobile’s economy.29 The grants were given to community organizations that focused on reopening businesses, providing family food services, and home schooling. Grantees included the Downtown Mobile Alliance’s Downtown Strong program, the Boys & Girls Clubs of South Alabama, Mobile County Public School System, Feeding the Gulf Coast, and the Prodisee Pantry.29

• Austal USA also donated thousands of surgical masks to local health care workers, and printed reusable masks and tension relief straps for USA Health from its 3D print shop.29

• The Downtown Mobile Alliance offered a grant program for businesses and nonprofits located in downtown or those that were a Downtown Mobile Alliance member nonprofit.30

While many nonprofit and private sector organizations identified specific ways to assist individuals affected by the pandemic, there was little momentum for a large-scale, cross-sector response due to there being few collaborations already in place. The Mobile County Health Department is relatively siloed and disconnected from other sectors in the community. This may have hindered the city from mobilizing resources and preventing the spread of COVID-19 to the greatest extent possible.
The Role of Health Equity

Prior to the spread of COVID-19, residents of Mobile faced severe health challenges, including high risk for diseases such as hypertension and heart disease. Black residents have a higher mortality rate from heart disease and hypertension compared to white residents.\(^1\)

Despite longstanding disparities, neither the city of Mobile nor its health department had explicitly prioritized health equity prior to COVID-19. The prevalence of and disparities in health conditions may make some Mobile residents more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 and experiencing negative health outcomes as a result. Some of these inequities may be driven by the city’s history of segregation and economic disparities that have led to a lack of access to care, education, testing, and other essential resources that could prevent the spread of disease within predominantly Black areas of the community.

The current COVID-19 numbers show some of these differences. Mobile County, which has a smaller Black population than the city of Mobile, is only 36 percent Black, yet as many as half of those who contracted COVID-19 in the county were Black.\(^3\)

What’s Next

Going forward, it will be essential to monitor whether health equity becomes a greater focus for Mobile’s health sector as well as how other sectors may step up to assist in protecting and supporting the community’s most vulnerable residents.
References


27. Altogether. We are Altogether. https://altogetheralabama.org/about/


