Spotlight on COVID-19
Tacoma, Washington
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Photos: Tom Collins/Flickr (empty street in downtown Tacoma, cover); thyegn, iStock (Mount Rainier over Tacoma, p. 3); AP Photo/Ted S. Warren (Downtown Tacoma Partnership volunteers help distribute meals to essential workers, 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 Tacoma, Wash., exploring the impact of and the city’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

Lying directly south of Seattle in Pierce County, Tacoma is the third largest city in the state of Washington. Tacoma is a port city characterized by its environmental beauty and racial diversity. The military Joint Base Lewis-McChord is the community’s main employer. A leading industry in the city includes advanced manufacturing—for instance, Boeing is a large source of middle-skills employment. Many Tacoma residents also commute to Seattle for work.

Washington adopted and implemented expansion of Medicaid in 2014. Residents of Tacoma struggle with chronic disease. Roughly 9 percent of all residents live with diabetes, though health disparities based on ethnicity/race are prevalent—roughly 19 percent of Black residents and 16 percent of American Indian residents have diabetes, compared to 9 percent of white residents. Disparities are even more dramatic for self-reported depression among adults. While only 24 percent of white adults report having depression, 38 percent of American Indian adults report experiencing the illness.

Pierce County is a Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-designated health provider shortage area for community mental health care delivery. As a result, access and supply of mental health providers is a priority for the Tacoma-Pierce County Public Health Department.

About Tacoma

| Population: 217,827 |
| American Indian: 1.6%* |
| Asian: 9.2% |
| Black: 10.0% |
| Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 1.2% |
| Hispanic or Latino: 11.9% |
| White, not Hispanic: 58.7% |
| Two or more races: 9.2% |
| High school graduate: 88.1% |
| Median income: $58,617 |
| Age 65 and older: 12.9% |
| Persons in poverty: 15.9% |
| Uninsured: 9.5% |

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

The first U.S. case of COVID-19 was reported in Snohomish County, about 100 miles north of Pierce County. As of the end of May, the state of Washington had over 23,000 cases.

Some residents are experiencing challenges meeting basic needs as a result of COVID-19. The United Way’s 211 assistance line has experienced a roughly 50 percent increase in calls for assistance with food and shelter.

Though military, health care, and advanced manufacturing are the top sectors in Tacoma, many jobs are also in the service and retail sectors, most of which were not deemed essential and subject to closures. The economic impact of COVID-19 on Tacoma is also tied to the broader region, as many residents work in Seattle and the surrounding areas:

- Boeing shut down its Puget Sound production indefinitely as a result of COVID-19, while several Boeing suppliers located in Tacoma have announced layoffs.
- The unemployment rate in Tacoma increased from 5 percent in February to 18.2 percent in April.
- As a result of closures and job losses in the community, in late April the city of Tacoma projected a budget shortfall of about $40 million and elected to cancel a number of scheduled community improvement projects due to the loss.

COVID-19 in Pierce County, Washington

As of June 13, 2020

The Community Response to COVID-19

Social distancing measures and a state-level response were implemented gradually in Washington, beginning with restrictions on mass gatherings on March 11. Educational facilities were ordered to close on March 13, followed by some businesses on March 16 and nonessential services on March 25. A statewide stay-at-home order went into effect on March 23. On May 4, Gov. Jay Inslee announced a four-phase Safe Start reopening plan, which was updated on May 29 to focus on a county-by-county approach.

In early March, the state began offering enhanced unemployment insurance, expanded paid sick leave for those who could not work due to illness from COVID-19, and other supports. To further support businesses and residents affected by COVID-19:

- Pierce County created the Pierce County COVID-19 Emergency Small Business Relief Loan Program. The county also created a $1.85 million pandemic response plan for those experiencing homelessness, which was an important response activity given the challenge the city faced with homelessness pre-pandemic.

- The city of Tacoma launched an aid program to help renters who lost their jobs during the pandemic.

- Pierce County Connected, forged from partnerships between local government and a strong philanthropic network, including the Russell Family Foundation, the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, and the Puyallup Watershed Initiative, has enabled a significant financial response to the pandemic.

Social service organizations within Tacoma also took steps to ensure the safety and well-being of their clients. For example:

- Catholic Community Services, a key caregiver agency in Pierce County, continued to provide essential services while adding safety precautions such as limiting close contact. The agency serves nearly 700 people in the county, about two-thirds of whom are over the age of 60. The remaining third is younger and lives with disabilities.

- After several confirmed COVID-19 cases, one homeless shelter moved its oldest and most vulnerable residents to individual rooms in a hotel.

- In response to growing mental health needs, Elevate Health, a health equity nonprofit, organized 12 providers across the county to provide a single “entry point” through the existing 211 line for residents in need of behavioral, mental health, or substance abuse services.
Citing heightened risk of COVID-19, the ACLU filed a temporary order calling for the immediate release of ICE detainees in the Northwest Detention Center. Evidence of community activism to support those most affected by COVID-19 is also reflected in numerous Change.org petitions calling for housing security in the form of rent freezes, housing for those experiencing homelessness at hotels, and more.

As Tacoma and Pierce County responded to the pandemic with a broad range of relief efforts, the community has also turned to researchers to find ways to conduct disease surveillance. In mid-April, UW Medicine launched antibody testing, and researchers at a nonprofit biotech startup in Tacoma began to monitor sewage for the presence of coronavirus as an “early warning system.”

Strong leadership from the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, a wealth of nonprofit, philanthropic, and academic partners, and a tradition of community engagement among residents in the area have contributed to the robust pandemic response in this midsize city.

The Role of Health Equity

Tacoma has a history of equity-based policymaking and encouraging community engagement, including engagement around public health and well-being. In early March, Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodwards launched the Compassionate Tacoma initiative, which was intended to “make Tacoma a more welcoming, connected, resilient, and vibrant community by listening and serving others with love.”

Tacoma has shown a commitment to addressing equity in policies and decisions, as evidenced by the establishment of the Office of Equity and Human Rights in the city, and the Health Equity Team at the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. These priorities translated to a strong, culturally competent COVID-19 response from the Health Department, with frequent communications targeted at specific groups and data collection that disaggregated COVID-19 data by ethnicity/race.

As of May 2020, confirmed cases in Pierce County are disproportionately high for residents ages 40 and older, and for Asian, Hispanic, Black, and multiracial residents. Given that those with pre-existing conditions may be at higher risk for medical complications related to COVID-19 infection, pre-existing disparities have the potential to compound negative effects for these populations through poorer health and economic outcomes.
Despite recent commitments to enhancing equity, prevailing conditions within Tacoma may have contributed to such inequities:

- Historical factors such as redlining and similar agreements prevented Black residents from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, contributing to segregation and inequities related to educational attainment and economic opportunity, particularly in East Tacoma.\(^3\)

- Economic challenges, such as high housing costs and a significant low-income population, may also play a role. As is true across much of the country, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities, as Tacoma students in resource-poor neighborhoods have inconsistent or no internet access, and many families face financial challenges due to economic disruptions.\(^25\) However, Tacoma’s commitment to investing to address the social needs of its residents is evident in the establishment of an additional COVID-19 relief fund for rental assistance.\(^15\)

What’s Next

A potential upcoming challenge may be access to mental and behavioral health services. Tacoma and Pierce County were already concerned with the lack of qualified providers and the need for such services is likely to increase over time. Equitable access to those services will be important to watch over the course of Tacoma’s recovery.
References


