



Cities Are Still The Place to Be

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I teach masters students in Urban and Regional Planning, and one of the tenets of our field is to promote well-designed, compact cities. We like places that have density, where houses and stores are close together, where people can walk, bike, or use transit. We encourage these trends because we know the alternative – sprawling suburbs linked by highways -- comes with high environmental and social costs.

Yet today, in the midst of a pandemic and public health officials instructing us to stay safe at home, urban density isn't looking very appealing. It seems that places where people are in frequent contact – places associated with urban living - can be fertile ground for viral transmission.

But please, don't give up on cities! Urban density is still an essential precondition for sustainable, diverse and equitable cities. The alternative is not a long run solution. A deeper dive into the COVID-19 infection numbers makes clear that cities aren't as problematic as they first seemed. Our takeaway from the COVID-19 pandemic should not be "how can we disperse population away from cities" but "how can we design cities to be safe and healthy places."

Why cities were seen as the problem

Although the first COVID-19 cases in the US were identified near Seattle, it was New York City that withstood the worst of the first infection wave, with dramatic spikes in cases and deaths. Terribly prepared for this catastrophe, the city's health systems reached the breaking point. We saw horrific press reports of the suffering born by sick and isolated New Yorkers as well as the medical professionals who struggled to help them.

So, New York City, our densest city, was the very visible ground zero for the virus. Then, those with an interest in promoting an anti-density narrative got to work. We find pundits like author Joel Kotkin, who has been championing the demise of the city for decades, claiming COVID-19 will bring on the "coming age of dispersion" as people flee large cities for less dense places.ⁱ Then, California NIMBY groups who have been fighting efforts to increase zoning densities that would promote more affordable housing, gleefully latched onto the claim that higher density housing would lead to more infections – conveniently for them, since they are fighting to keep their single-family home neighborhoods.ⁱⁱ And finally, we find those ubiquitous stories where a journalist interviews a few realtors – who have an interest in drumming up more excitement

about their suburban communities - who say “everyone” is selling their city apartments in favor of suburban homes.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are several good reasons to challenge that first-blush connection between COVID-19 spread and city living. And there are even better reasons to continue pressing for appropriate densities when we plan and develop our communities.

Controlling for population, cities may not be hotspots

First, let’s dispel the notion that Coronavirus is uniquely an urban problem. Yes, New York City had a dramatic struggle with COVID-19. But there are international examples of very dense cities that have managed the pandemic with great success including Hong Kong and Seoul. In the US we see San Francisco, our second densest city, which as of mid-October 2020 reported 11,549 cases and lost 115 residents to the virus. If density made things worse, we should assume the state of South Dakota – which has the same number of residents as San Francisco but spread over hundreds of miles – would be just where you’d want to go to avoid infection. But in fact, South Dakota, as of mid-October, had more than double the cases (25,906) and deaths (238) of San Francisco.

Indeed, when we look nationally at counties with high per capita infection rates,^{iv} we find rural counties and some of our least dense states heavily impacted by the disease. Sadly, native American communities have disproportionately suffered from coronavirus, and there have been disturbing outbreaks in meat packing plants and in labor intensive agricultural areas where workers labor and live in close quarters. There are clusters traced to family events like weddings and funerals, many held well outside dense urban areas.

Here in Florida, while we have seen consistently high per capita cases in very urbanized Dade County, you might be surprised to find that as of mid-October, the other top five Florida counties for per capita infections are Lafayette, Union, Gulf and Gadsden.

Those living outside cities, lacking access to testing facilities and medical treatment, could face worse outcomes than city dwellers if the infection spreads in their area.

Looking at this evidence it is clear that cities, or even urban density, do not create COVID-19 infection vectors. Even public transit can be safe, according to a recent study of the New York City transit system, if people where masks and there is proper ventilation.^v Places with crowded quarters, work sites that don’t allow for social distancing, and no doubt precarious employment that might prompt someone to go to work despite feeling sick are thought to feed infections. Eliminating these breeding grounds wherever they are will help us get a handle on the pandemic.

Why greater decentralization is not a solution

So, there is strong evidence that living in a city does not, by itself, make you more likely to be exposed to the coronavirus.



Now let’s remember why it is that planners advocate for density, and why we must not let pandemic-fueled scare tactics change our focus. Florida’s population continues to grow; if we build for growth only at the edge of urban areas, we create a host of problems. Since this population is too spread out to support a transit system, they are likely to drive many miles to buy groceries, attend school or go to work. We see the loss of agricultural land and of wilderness, with impacts on animal habitat and

on water quality. And aren’t zoonotic viruses, such as this novel Coronavirus, thought to be more prevalent today because of encroachments on animal habitats?

Dispersal of population and automobile commutes create even more health and safety problems. Auto commutes account for some one-quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions, hastening the climate change trends that are particularly problematic for Floridians. Finally, each added vehicle mile travelled adds to the toll of traffic fatalities. The US reported 38,800 such deaths in 2019.

Those concerned with housing affordability should be wary of a narrative that discourages urban living. Building affordably so often means building more densely. Often, density bonuses are a key tool of affordable housing promotion, and any flight from density will cut into the ability to increase the housing stock. Housing advocates have learned to consider housing and transportation costs in tandem, recognizing that a home built miles from work opportunities, even if costs are low, is not truly affordable. Politically, communities outside the urban core have simply been less amenable to supporting affordable housing options. A hollowing out of cities in favor of greater dispersal and longer commutes will not be friendly to families in need of low-cost housing.

The death knell for cities has sounded many times. New technologies like cars, telephones, fax machines and finally computers and the internet were all predicted to lead to the end of cities. Large cities were going to lose population after the September 11 attacks as people scattered from potential terrorist targets. To be sure, there are neighborhoods and entire cities that have been on a downward trajectory for decades, but many cities have gained population and become more economically and culturally vibrant over these decades. Why? Because it's obvious to many residents and businesses, and proven through research, that urban agglomerations are epicenters of economic, scientific and cultural innovation.^{vi}

That doesn't mean that the long tail of a post COVID-19 recovery will not bring many changes to our cities. We may see some dramatic



restructuring of downtown office markets as companies reconsider their need for centralized office space. We may see some movement out of very expensive cities as virtual workers decide leave places like San Francisco or New York, but we can't assume these footloose workers prefer the suburbs over, say, mid-sized cities. They will still need access to an airport; they will want to be able to visit a café or meet friends for a concert. I wouldn't be surprised if Florida cities like Tampa or Orlando turned out to be beneficiaries of some of these relocations.

What we can take from the response to COVID is a reminder that our cities need to provide a decent quality of life for residents. Anyone who has been stuck at home can tell you the value of apartments with good natural light and access to fresh air. The importance of greenery and open space that allow city dwellers to enjoy a distanced stroll has become clear as well. In other words, the pandemic has reminded us of something planners and housing advocates have been saying all along: good urban design and planning should be the norm in every community. Let's refocus on creating high quality of life in our cities; those efforts will create public health benefits as well.



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ⁱ Kotkin, Joel. 2020. "The Coming Age of Dispersion." *Quillette* March 25. <https://quillette.com/2020/03/25/the-coming-age-of-dispersion/>

ⁱⁱ Dillon, Liam. 2020 "Building dense cities was California's cure for the housing crisis. Then came coronavirus." April 26. <https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2020-04-26/coronavirus-density-cities-urbanization-housing-climate-change>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hughes, CJ. 2020. "Coronavirus Escape: to the Suburbs." May 8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/realestate/coronavirus-escape-city-to-suburbs.html>

^{iv} The New York Times has created an excellent Coronavirus tracker. You can access it here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>

^v Hallum, Mark. 2020. "Transit expert's new study finds no link between COVID-19 spread and public transit" September 30, AMNY. <https://www.amny.com/news/transit-news/new-study-by-sam-schwartz-finds-no-link-between-covid-19-and-public-transportation/>

^{vi} Abel, Jaison; Ishita Dey and Todd M. Gabe. 2010. "Innovation and the Density of Human Capital." New York Federal Reserve Staff report no. 440. https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/staff_reports/sr440.pdf.