

## ISSUE BRIEF

# City Resilience Snapshot: Miami-Dade County

## *Lessons in community- driven action and response to COVID-19*

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JORGE GASTELUMENDI, BRIAN MCGEE

CITY RESILIENCE SNAPSHOTS examine a particular city through interviews of city officials, influencers, and other local actors. They capture actions that are taking place to address the underlying economic, social and financial challenges in response to the pandemic—and beyond.

THE ADRIENNE ARSHT-ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION RESILIENCE CENTER (AARFRC) aims to reach One Billion People with resilience solutions to climate change, migration, and human security challenges by 2030. AARFRC will focus its efforts on individuals, communities, and a broad spectrum of governments and institutions to help them, and their constituencies and stakeholders, better prepare for, navigate, and recover from shocks and stressors

Living with water, and the challenges it brings is not unfamiliar for the nearly three million residents of Miami-Dade County. In the past several decades, there has been a clear increase in encroachment of water on the county—through rising sea levels, storm surges, hurricanes, and more. With a warming planet, these obstacles are only expected to worsen over time. In addition to the urgent need to address climate and coastal resilience in Miami-Dade County, compounding crises, to include the novel coronavirus, have physically and financially crippled the county—leaving many without jobs and pushing the most vulnerable further into extreme poverty.

In the face of coastal vulnerabilities, a global pandemic, and economic hardship, resilience strategies have informed the response of city officials to the amalgamation of these shocks and stressors.

### COVID-19 FUELS DISPARITIES

Miami-Dade County has grown dependent on its tourism industry which brings in an annual average of sixteen million visitors and \$18 billion in revenue.<sup>1</sup> The travel restrictions and safety guidelines implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19 have virtually terminated all travel during peak season, which will surely have

1 "Record Tourism Industry Performance in 2018," Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, April 30, 2019, <https://www.miaminandbeaches.com/press-room/miami-press-releases/record-tourism-industry-performance-in-2018>.

lasting repercussions on the county and its residents—many of whom depend on the tourism industry for their livelihoods. Almost 17 percent of the population lives in poverty, higher than the national average. Many of the industry’s workers live from paycheck to paycheck, with limited opportunity to prepare financially for shocks and stressors—especially more severe, consequential, or life-threatening events.

“In Miami-Dade County we have incredibly high-income gaps,” said Dr. Robin Bachin, assistant provost for civic and community engagement at the University of Miami, who has been part of several groups working to promote equity in urban development.

About 60 percent of those who rent their homes in the county spend more than half of their income on rent, Bachin explained in an interview. A family of two adults and two children pay an average monthly rent of \$1,351 in Miami-Dade County, according to the family budget calculator of the Economic Policy Institute.<sup>2</sup>

Improved partnership on affordable housing is among the objectives of the twenty-year Resilience Strategy that Miami-Dade County launched in May 2019 after three years of consultation and development. The strategy aims to address

issues from financial instability to public health and energy efficiency, as well as climate change and rising sea levels.

During the time that the Resilience Strategy took shape, the problem of “income inequity existed and was only getting worse,” explained Miami-Dade County Chief Resilience Officer Jim Murley.

## IMMEDIATE RESPONSES: WILL THEY STICK?

The pandemic has allowed social issues to be pushed up the county’s agenda and exposed others in need of immediate attention. For instance, the issue of paid sick leave for contractors, which would provide pay to workers and eliminate the burden of deciding between health and personal finances, has been raised to local legislation. “Although the vote recently failed, COVID-19 has given the issue more prominence,” explained Zelalem Adefris, vice president of policy and advocacy at Catalyst Miami, which works with low-wealth communities to help residents become financially secure and civically engaged.

In addition to reprioritizing the county’s needs, there is also an opportunity to build back and forward—better and stronger. “The conversation around access to parks and wider sidewalks has started as part of the work around sea-level rise,” said Bachin. Resilience strategies have become part of the groundwork efforts to address the combined crises of today.

COVID-19 has fielded a new wave of advocacy in Miami-Dade County and across the nation. It has also amplified the concern people have regarding their surrounding urban environment. Some cities such as New York and Oakland have extended sidewalks to allow pedestrians to follow social distancing guidelines, however, these temporary measures might remain for the longer term. These changes will bring about unexpected benefits such as less carbon-emitting commute options and personal health benefits.

Some of the actions taken to provide equitable access to resources among Miami-Dade County residents amid the pandemic have adduced evidence for more long-term social support. These include free public transit and laptops for students from underserved communities. “There are definitely opportunities...things that are happening on a temporary basis that it would be great to see happen all year,” said Adefris.



A homeless woman reacts as a worker uses a swab to collect a sample during a Miami-Dade County testing operation for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in downtown Miami, Florida, U.S. REUTERS / Marco Bello

2 Family Budget Calculator, Economic Policy Institute, March 2018, <https://www.epi.org/resources/budget/>.



Another key part of the pandemic communications effort is to reduce linguistic isolation by providing all public-facing information materials in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole to ensure that residents get the information they need to stay safe during the COVID-19 outbreak, Murley added.

“Communicating in a way that’s accessible helps people to have a bigger voice,” said Bachin. “It can also make them realize that they can be part of coalitions and they don’t have to do it all on their own.”

Preparedness might mean different things to different people, but the outcome is that each individual is made more resilient to their individual and collective risks and threats. “Preparedness means we are more reliant on ourselves and are not as destabilized by shocks and stressors that occur around us,” said Olivia Collins, director of programs at the CLEO Institute.

She added: “The work we do in general helps to not only create an awareness around these issues that previously were not on people’s radars, but it helps people understand how to be even more resilient as we prepare for more shocks and stressors in the future.”

The CLEO institute is a non-profit organization that works on climate change education, engagement, and advocacy in Florida. CLEO’s community projects include how to prepare personal budgets and put money aside for emergencies.

“Understanding the importance of being prepared in general, and taking small steps toward [that], can help in any crisis,” whether that is a few weeks of disruption to daily life that usually follow a hurricane or the much longer-term impact of an event such as coronavirus, said Collins.



[Photo shows man getting temp taken]: Coronavirus—more than 250 Peruvians were repatriated from the United States.  
Source: REUTERS / Vidal Targui / ANDINA/ Latin America News Agency



Source: Charles Trainor Jr.

## HISTORIC CONDITIONS... LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the Black community raises questions about the need for a combined approach at the city and county level. The economic impact of the pandemic on underserved communities has also exposed existing racial disparities.

Black Americans represent 12.4 percent of the US population but they have suffered 22.6 percent of known COVID-19 deaths, according to a study by APM Research Lab.<sup>4</sup> For every dollar of liquid assets held by White families, the median Black family has just 32 cents, and the median Hispanic family just 47 cents, suggests a study published by Catalyst Miami with research by the JPMorgan Chase Institute.<sup>5</sup> “It definitely highlights, as any disaster has, the gaps in our society,” said Adefris. The study, “shows how many people are vulnerable to a crisis.”

Among those gaps are access to the internet, both via broadband access and computer ownership, as well as digital skills. With no means to get online, accessing everything from learning to e-consultations with medical services, as well as keeping in touch via social media platforms such as Facebook, becomes problematic, particularly during lockdown when residents are confined to their homes.

AT&T and Comcast stepped in to open up access to the internet during the pandemic, while the local school board distributed laptops to students.

“That was a very ambitious program,” said Karina Castillo, resilience coordinator at Miami-Dade’s Office of Resilience, referring to AT&T and Comcast. While the Resilience Office is accustomed to teaming up with the private sector on community initiatives, the pace of decision-making during the coronavirus outbreak has been much faster, she said.

## FUTURE POLICY: AGENCY, COMMUNITY-BUILDING

There is an infrastructure of non-profit organizations, including Catalyst Miami, Miami Homes for All, SMASH, Neighborhood Housing Services of South Florida, Community Justice Project, and others, that residents have come to trust.

“These organizations have quickly pivoted to address community needs around COVID-19 and are exploring how the impacts of the pandemic can be factored into longer-term planning related to equity, housing affordability, and climate change,” Bachin said.

Catalyst Miami seeks to increase that awareness and the impact of its work by encouraging the community it serves to invite others—friends and neighbors—to participate in and contribute to community projects.

The CLEO Institute shows how increased awareness has the potential to feed into future policy. In the case of increased rent costs and risk of flooding to coastal homes, Miami-Dade County is uniquely positioned to prioritize and pioneer this effort.

About sixty-four thousand homes in Florida are at risk of chronic flooding in the next thirty years, according to a Union of Concerned Scientists study.<sup>6</sup> Miami Beach alone, with its iconic high rises located within steps of the beach, accounts for more than twelve thousand of those homes.

Collins explained there is a movement against gentrification in the neighborhood of Little Haiti, located about five miles

4 “The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the United States,” APM Research Lab, August 18, 2020, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

5 “How COVID-19 could widen racial gaps in financial outcomes,” JPMorgan Chase Institute, April 2020, <https://institute.jpmorganchase.com/institute/research/household-income-spending/how-covid-19-could-widen-racial-gaps-in-financial-outcomes>.

6 “New Study Finds 1 Million Florida Homes Worth \$351 Billion Will be at Risk from Tidal Flooding,” Union of Concerned Scientists, June 18, 2018, <https://www.ucsusa.org/about/news/1-million-florida-homes-risk-tidal-flooding>.

north of Downtown Miami. While the beach is only a mile away, the area has become more attractive to developers partially because it is less prone to flooding. However, this will certainly drive out families who have lived in Little Haiti and contributed to building up the community and local culture there for generations.

After Hurricane Irma struck in September 2017, local resident Lidia Toussaint noticed that the neighborhood was relatively dry compared to other parts of Miami, where roads became rivers, Public Radio International reported<sup>7</sup> later that year. Toussaint grew up in the area and her parents, residents for almost forty years, were looking to move away because of rising rent payments, she said.

The City of Miami's Sea-level Rise Committee, now called the Climate Resilience Committee, passed a resolution<sup>8</sup> in November 2018 to conduct research on the issue of climate gentrification and its impact on local communities.

## COMPOUND RISKS

With Atlantic hurricane season beginning in June and going through November, preparedness is vital, as has been seen during the coronavirus pandemic. Preparedness includes both building the capacity of urban communities to communicate and collaborate among them, but also clearly identifying and addressing the vulnerabilities and risks posed by potential future events beyond COVID-19.

"Whether or not we're impacted by hurricanes, we can only be on alert," Murley said. "You can never really feel fully confident, but you can feel that you've done a lot to prepare."

Arditi-Rocha, executive director of the CLEO Institute, wonders how local communities, still contending with the impact of coronavirus, will fare when the high winds arrive again. "As hurricane season approaches, are we ready to face a perfect storm with COVID-19, too?" she asked.

## CONCLUSION

This pandemic has brought deep-seeded social and economic vulnerabilities to the surface across Miami-Dade County's urban communities, making it harder to overcome the immediate impacts generated by this public health crisis.



Student seated in front of a computer at home for the first day of virtual school on August 19, 2020 in Miramar, Florida.  
Source: REUTERS / Johnny Louis / Sipa USA

However, there is hope that some immediate responses could change those underlying conditions for the better. At the same time, Miami-Dade County's response to address COVID-19 has benefited from lessons learned from previous crises, particularly around effective communication and preparedness, as well as a strong supportive network of civil society organizations strengthening the agency and community building of their citizens. If anything, the measures Miami-Dade County has implemented thus far could solve some of the historical inequities in the long run, which in turn would increase the resilience of its urban communities to better withstand and quickly recover from inevitable future shocks and stresses, whatever their nature.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jorge Gastelumendi** is Global Policy Director for the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center. A recognized climate and environmental policy and finance leader, lawyer and passionate, public-spirited professional, Jorge most previously served as Managing Director, External Affairs at global environmental organization, The Nature Conservancy (TNC). During his tenure at TNC, he also served as Chief Advisor and negotiator to the Government of Peru, leading to the adoption of the Paris Agreement in the government's dual role as UNFCCC COP20 Presidency and co-chair of the Green Climate Fund's board.

7 Carolyn Beeler, "Miami residents fear 'climate gentrification' as investors seek higher ground," *The World*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-12-19/miami-residents-fear-climate-gentrification-investors-seek-higher-ground>.

8 "Research: Gentrification in Areas of Low Median Income," City of Miami Sea Level Rise Committee, November 11, 2018, <https://www.miamigov.com/files/assets/public/climate-gentrification-reso.pdf/>.

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