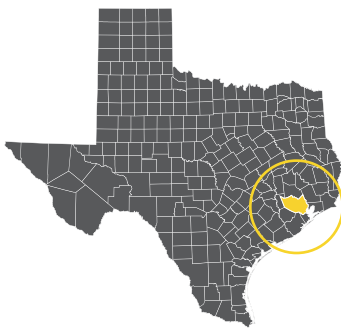


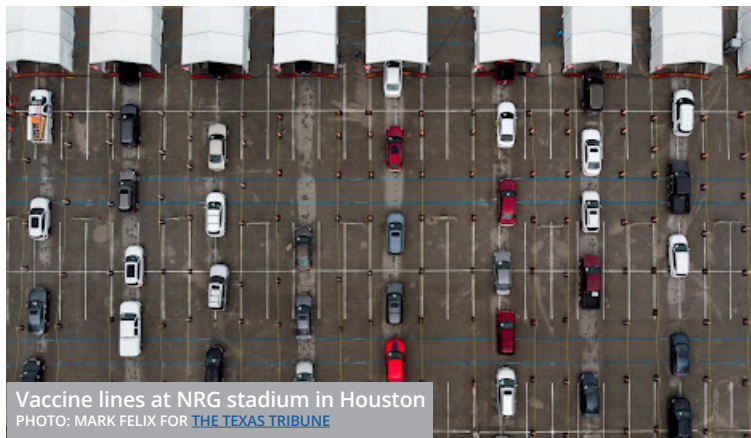
A POOR PEOPLE'S PANDEMIC REPORT:

MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS OF POVERTY, RACE AND COVID-19

County Snapshot



Harris County, Texas



Before the pandemic, there were approximately [12.6 million people](#) who were poor or low-income in Texas, accounting for 44% of the population (SPM). This included 55% (4 million) of children, 55% (1.8 million) of

Black people, 61% (6.4 million) of Hispanic or Latino people and 31% (3.7 million) of white people. It is also a state that has still not expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act or American Rescue Plan Act.

In fact, going into the pandemic, Texas had the highest rate and numbers of uninsured people in the nation - approximately [5.2 million or 18.4%](#) of the state population - and 20% of all [uninsured children](#) in the US were living in Texas. In the early months of the pandemic, another [659,000](#) people lost their coverage. According to a [2021 report](#), 57% of COVID-19 deaths and 66% of cases in Texas were associated with health insurance gaps. An [earlier study](#) had found that Medicaid expansion would have provided much needed health coverage to more than 1.8 million low-income adults, 57% of whom were Hispanic. This lack of access to healthcare insurance - for both uninsured and underinsured people - made the situation even worse for people seeking care during the pandemic and for hospital systems that were struggling to absorb increases in their charitable care.

With over 4.7 million people, Harris County is the most populous county in Texas. It is approximately 43% Hispanic or Latino, 29% white and 18% Black. Houston, the county seat, is the largest city in the state, the largest city among the southern states, and the fourth largest city in the country. It is home to Texas Medical Center, the largest concentration of healthcare and research institutions in the world, however over 20% of the county is uninsured.

Although median household income is relatively high (over \$61,000), poverty is widespread in Harris County: one-third of its residents live under 200% of the poverty line (OPM) and nearly half of the population are rent-burdened. During the pandemic, the county's health infrastructure was put to the test. Indeed, due to its population, its death rate (223 out of 100,000) concealed a high number of deaths for one single county (10,499).

Drawing on the experience of organizing disaster response systems around superstorms, hurricanes and other crises, the city's medical community implemented protocol to share information quickly and efficiently. The mayor held weekly briefings with the large religious community, which was ready to scale up its food distribution, water distribution and other programs to meet congregational needs. He also reached out to mayors in other large cities, including New York, to learn from their experiences, especially as Houston's number began to rise.

When Governor Greg Abbot began reopening the state in late April 2020, mayors across Texas, including in Houston, pushed back. According to Rev. Angela Ravin-Anderson, "If we had been able to stay shutdown another couple of months, our numbers would have been dramatically different. And our poor communities were hit especially hard by these decisions. These households worked in all the service jobs, which forced them to be on the frontlines, during the worst times of the pandemic. They just couldn't work from home or they would lose their jobs, so they were exposed to the worst of it, including all of the economic impacts. Rent became such an important piece of the puzzle for us and just making sure people weren't being kicked out of their homes."

Rev. Angela describes Houston as a "large small town," with close-knit communities that have few degrees of separation between them. When vaccines became available, health professionals worked with large religious congregations and community-based organizations to make sure residents had accurate information. "We were able to get the shots in people's arms really easily and coordinate our efforts," says Rev. Angela, "however, the trauma has been overwhelming. My church just had our first baptism in two years. Our community is still reeling from all of this."