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## Using Data at the Census Tract Level to Promote Complete Streets Planning

As a [500 Cities Data Challenge](#) grantee, Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI) collaborated with [Bike Easy](#), the American Heart Association, and others to advocate for Complete Streets and contribute to the evidence base for municipal planning policies that **promote mobility and increased transportation access** for New Orleans, Kenner, and the larger region. Funded through a partnership between the Urban Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the 500 Cities Data Challenge project provided data capacity to nonprofit leaders and government officials, illustrating the benefits of incorporating community health data into urban planning discussions. By using census tract data, decision makers have the ability to explore issues and trends often masked at the parish level, and determine specific areas where services and resources are most needed.

### The benefits of Complete Streets

According to [Smart Growth America](#), Complete Streets are streets “built to share” and purposefully designed to enable safe access for all users, including “pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities.” Such streets connect citizens to key community destinations regardless of mode of transport. While there is no singular design that unilaterally makes a street “complete,” transportation planners who incorporate elements such as sidewalks, bike lanes, crosswalks, special bus lanes, medians, and curb extensions can create streets that will not only improve connectivity, but also stimulate the economy.

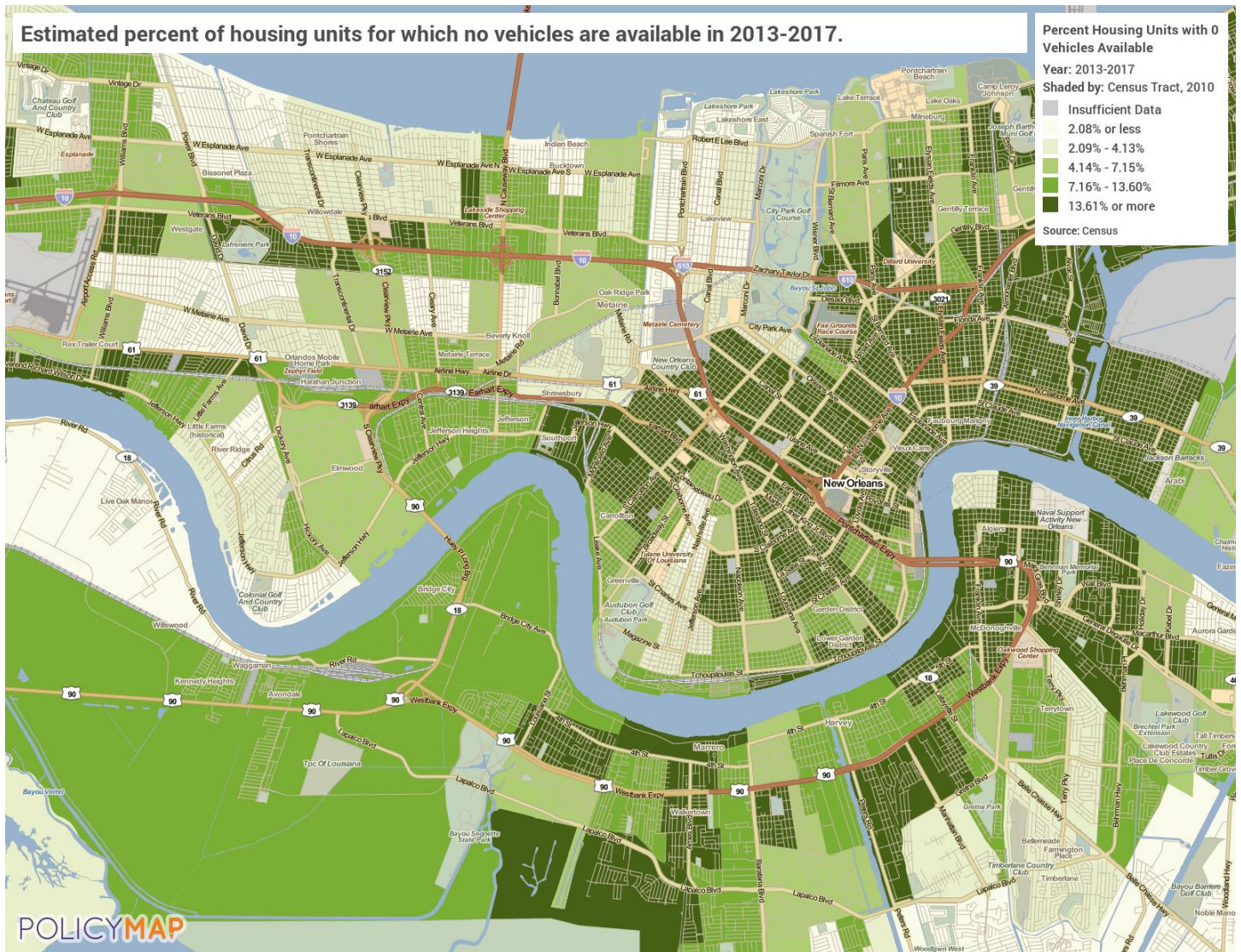
*In communities as varied as Jacksonville, FL and Stockholm, CA, a one-point increase in walkability on WalkScore.com increased home values by \$700 to \$3,000.*

Source: National Complete Streets Coalition. “Complete Streets Stimulate the Local Economy.” Fact sheet. Smart Growth America. Washington, D.C. n.d. Retrieved from <https://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/app/legacy/documents/cs/factsheets/cs-economic.pdf>

In 2017, the National Association of Realtors conducted a survey in the top fifty metropolitan areas inquiring about neighborhood amenity and transportation preferences. The survey was comprised of 3,000 weighted responses. According to the survey, residents who lived in a more walkable neighborhood also reported being more satisfied with their quality of life. The survey also marked the first time that those of retiree age, and not just Millennials, expressed a preference for walkable communities. Additionally, respondents earning under \$50,000 annually ranked access to public transportation and walkability as more important [neighborhood feature to have] than those in higher income brackets.

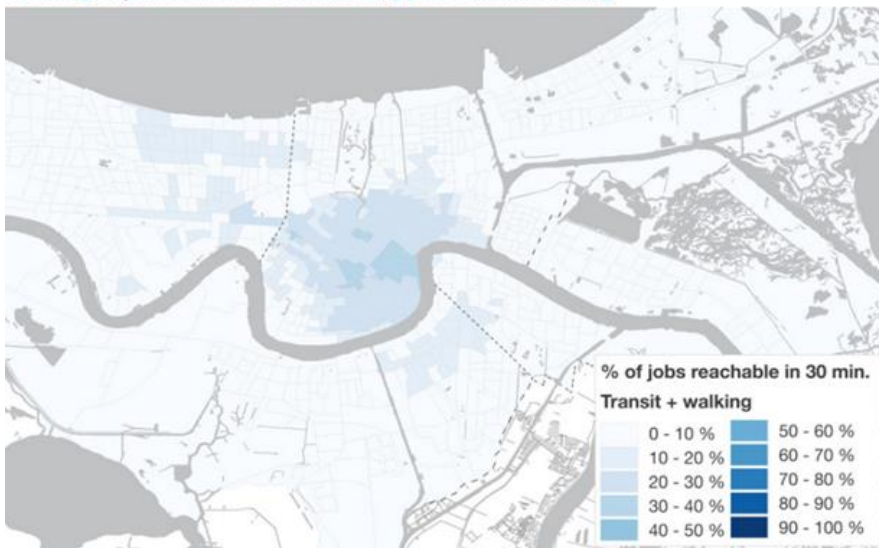
Similar preferences exist locally. The Jefferson Parish West Bank Revitalization Study, completed in 2014, found that over 70% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 64 agreed that neighborhood walkability, particularly the ability to walk to restaurants and shops from their home, would be desirable. Households earning below \$30,000 per year expressed an even greater interest in walkable environments, suggesting a need for transportation options less dependent on personal vehicle ownership, which can be costly. A map indicating which census tracts in the region have the largest percentage of households without access to a vehicle is on the following page. In some tracts, such as along the Claiborne Corridor on the East Bank of New Orleans and General DeGaulle Drive on the West Bank, the percentage of homes without a vehicle is well over 20%.

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Source: Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS). Estimated percent of occupied housing units for which no vehicles are available in 2013-2017. PolicyMap. <https://plcy.mp/TJvVPKk>. (8 June 2019).

**Percentage of jobs reachable in 30 minutes using public transit and walking**

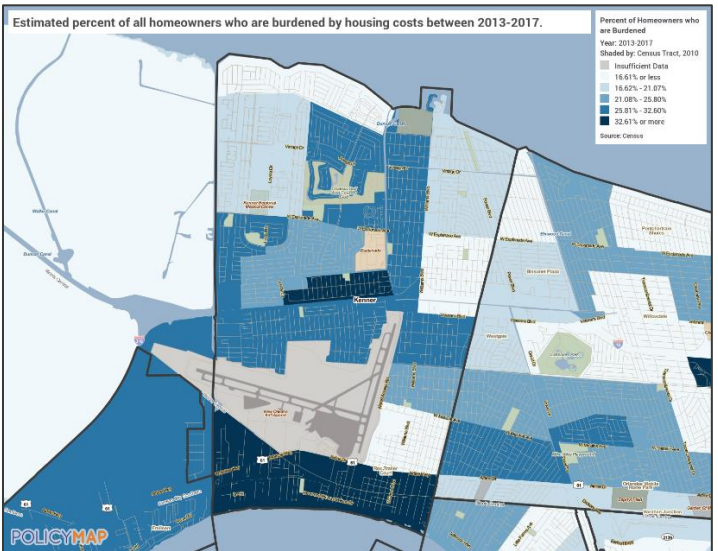
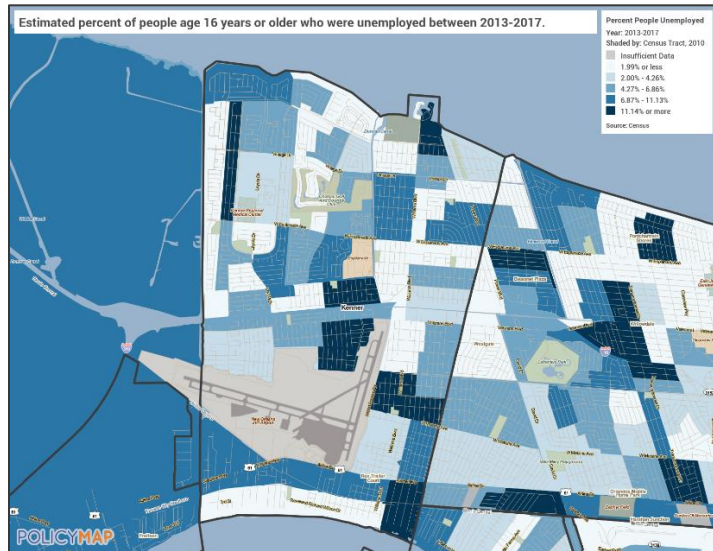
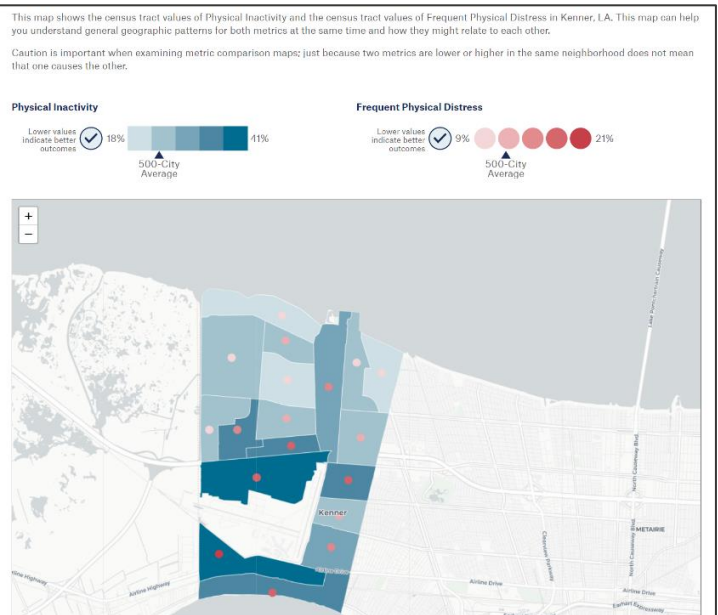
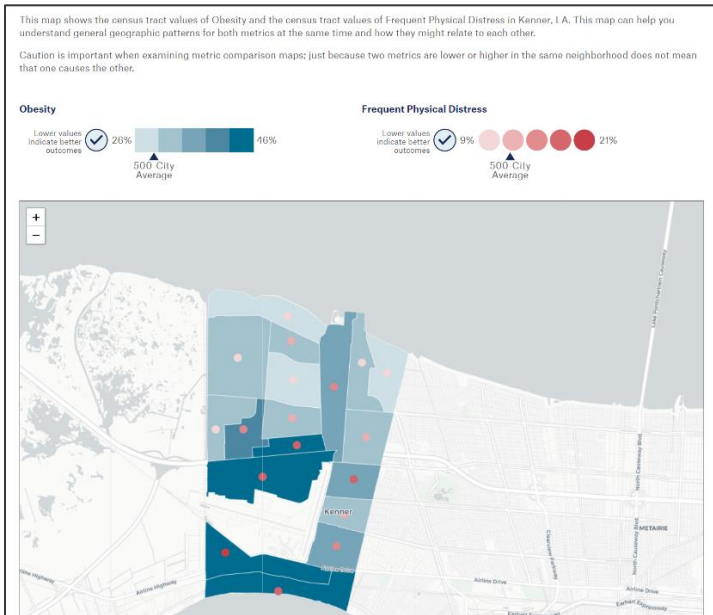


For these residents, there is an even greater need for roads and services that accommodate a variety of transport options. This is especially true when considering few jobs in the region are reachable within 30 minutes if traveling by foot, bus, or streetcar. As noted in a [Politico article dated November 2018](#), national discussions about economic opportunity cannot occur without addressing the need for affordable transportation. Limited infrastructure and reliable transit options significantly reduce the number of jobs available to those without a car.

Source: RIDE New Orleans. "From Plans to Action: State of Transit 2018." Report. New Orleans, LA. (August 2018). Retrieved from <https://rideneworleans.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Ride-New-Orleans-2018-State-of-Transit.pdf>

**Local Analysis**

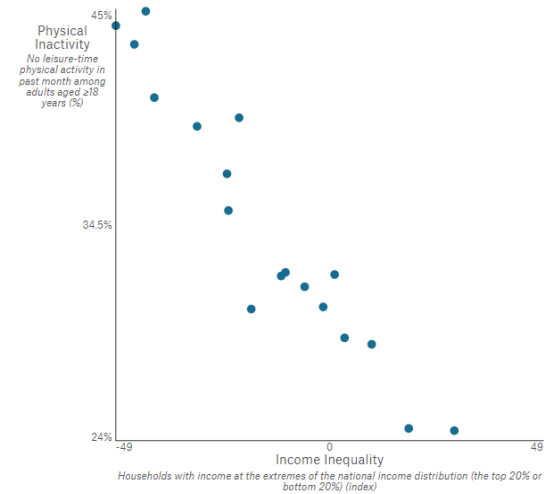
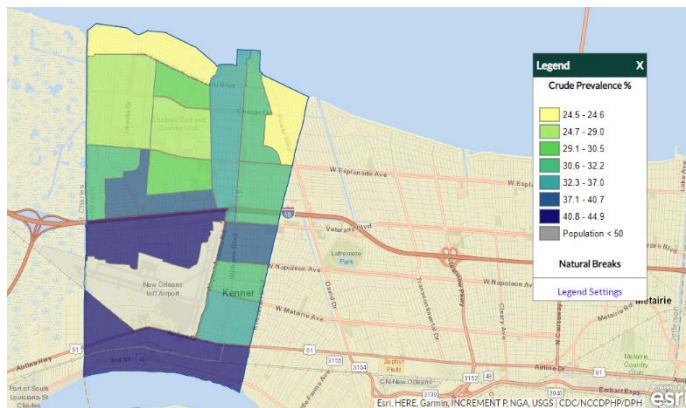
A population-based cross-sectional study looking at individual-level data from the 2009–12 United States Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Surveys published in The Lancet in 2016 supported the hypothesis that a [lack of economic opportunity has been linked to poorer health](#). For this project, using 500 Cities data, LPHI conducted a series of presentations and discussions with local leaders highlighting overlapping burdens seen in local census tracts. Namely, those areas experiencing greater burden of certain chronic diseases, such as obesity, or a higher prevalence of less desirable health behaviors (e.g. lack of physical activity) are the same areas that have a larger percentage of residents reporting poor physical health. In many of these census tracts, residents also experience poorer economic conditions that may also lead to less desirable health outcomes, such as higher levels of unemployment, a larger housing burden, and extreme levels of income inequality. Examples from Kenner, Louisiana are below.



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Sources, on previous page, top row: City Health Dashboard (2019). [Metric Comparison Maps using 500 Cities data Obesity and Frequent Physical Distress (L) and Physical Inactivity and Frequent Physical Distress (R) by census tract in Kenner, LA]. Retrieved from <https://www.cityhealthdashboard.com/la/kenner/compare-metrics>

Sources, on previous page, bottom row: Decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS). Estimated percent of people age 16 years or older who were unemployed (L) and Estimated percent of all homeowners who are burdened by housing costs (R) between 2013-2017. PolicyMap. (8 June 2019).



Sources: 500 Cities. (2018). [Map illustration No leisure-time activity for adults aged 18+ in Kenner, LA 2015]. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/500Cities/> & City Health Dashboard (2018). [Scatterplot illustration Physical Inactivity and Income Inequality by census tract in Kenner, LA]. Retrieved from <https://www.cityhealthdashboard.com/la/kenner/compare-metrics>

In all of the maps on the previous page and above, the darker the color, the greater the percentage of individuals in each census tract have experienced the health or economic condition described, while lighter colors indicate less burden. The scatterplot illustration above shows a possible relationship between a lack of leisure-time physical activity and the concentration of households in the bottom 20 percent of national income distribution index as compared to the top 20 percent. In other words, the census tracts in Kenner with the largest percentage of no leisure-time physical activity among adults aged 18 years and older were census tracts with a larger concentration of households with an income of \$24,999 or less. While a household income that falls within the bottom 20 percent of national income distribution index is not a cause of infrequent physical activity, it is possible that low-income individuals may not have the time or economic or physical means to engage in recreational physical activity as frequently as either they or public health officials would like. Land use and urban planning policies that prioritize increasing safe access to amenities like green space, walking trails, and bike paths or lanes in lower income neighborhoods could serve as an effective public health intervention, while also enhancing other quality of life aspects business leaders and others may find attractive for marketing, recruiting, and development purposes.

## Policy Implications

While the passage of a Complete Streets policy in Jefferson Parish or more robust, legislatively mandated implementation measures for the existing Complete Streets ordinance in New Orleans will not solve all of the region's health issues, Complete Streets can make active living the "easy choice". The addition of amenities and infrastructure to improve walkability and ease of travel via a variety of transport options can facilitate increased recreation and a more efficient and cost-effective means of getting around regardless of one's age, ability, or income. Additionally, many Complete Streets projects can incorporate other design elements that improve air quality & provide noise abatement (e.g. roadside vegetation barriers).

Passing policy to codify the steps local governments should take to provide these amenities will ensure that implementation is consistent regardless of who is in office or whether or not it is an election year. Complete Streets policies with a deliberate focus on improving health and transportation equity can provide an opportunity for lower income



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and racial and ethnic minority neighborhoods to receive the resources required for residents to travel to employment, retail, education, health care, and community building destinations with ease. According to a 2016 study exploring how equity is being implemented and prioritized through Complete Streets policies, the most successful examples do more than simply mention the need for transportation access and mobility to be more equitable. These policies often include [specific procedures, standards, or measures to address how resources are distributed and how community input informs decision-making](#).

While many of the economic inequalities seen in the United States are a long-term byproduct of racist and segregationist decisions tied to land use planning and financial lending, planning can also serve as a tool to address these inequalities. Additionally, there is a growing body of research to suggest that [increases in income inequality are correlated with a lower gross domestic product \(GDP\) per capita](#). Through the freedom offered by true transportation equity, all populations, particularly low income and people of color, have the opportunity to access more job centers and better jobs—ultimately contributing to rising standards of living, increased ownership, and social capital.

### The future of Complete Streets

As of July 2019, residents of Jefferson Parish and the City of Kenner are still without a Complete Streets ordinance. All seven council seats for the parish are up for election late 2019, with only two incumbents seeking reelection. The Parish President's seat is also up for grabs. The Jefferson Parish Complete Streets Coalition will use this election cycle to inquire about candidates' intention to promote and legislate a Complete Streets ordinance for the parish, continuing to share the 500 Cities and other census tract metrics provided by LPHI over the course of the 500 Cities Data Challenge.

For New Orleans, a Complete Streets ordinance was passed in 2011. In July 2018, the New Orleans City Council unanimously passed a [resolution](#) delineating actions the City should take to enhance the existing Complete Streets program. Recommended activities include “maintaining a comprehensive inventory” of all “walking and biking infrastructure throughout New Orleans”, prioritizing gaps, “creating and adopting a Complete Streets Design Manual”, and “actively seeking sources of appropriate funding to implement Complete Streets”. Since that time, the [New Orleans Complete Streets Coalition](#) has ramped up its Complete Streets Campaign, urging the Cantrell Administration and the City's Office of Transportation to move forward on the steps outlined in the resolution. While Mayor Cantrell released her [official transportation action plan](#) May 2019, the document simply states that the City will “ensure implementation of a Complete Streets program...in all road reconstructions” within the next year. The plan does not provide detailed information as to how implementation will occur, nor does it reference all the activities outlined in the approved 2018 resolution.

Meanwhile, the City is embarking on a citywide bike planning effort to create an additional 70+ miles of connected, protected, and low-stress bikeways over a 3-year period. As part of this effort, the New Orleans Department of Public Works and Toole Design Group are developing a technical memo looking at a variety of metrics to determine priority neighborhoods and/or areas of the city where rapid bikeway expansion should occur. Based on discussions with the project team, LPHI will provide a list of 500 Cities indicators that can be incorporated into a Bicycle Equity Index, which will help identify areas of the city where: 1) transportation is a particular concern and 2) historic and current social and

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health inequities exist. Once completed, the memo will be shared as an example of another 500 Cities Data Challenge tool late 2019.

## Concluding Thoughts

Other than the passage of the 2018 resolution to “support a data-driven and equity-focused” Complete Streets policy in the City of New Orleans, no substantial legislation around Complete Streets was passed in the Greater New Orleans region within the timeframe of the 500 Cities Data Challenge. However, the information and presentations created as part of the project effort and provided to advocacy groups and policy makers have sparked meaningful discussions around the need to examine existing data sources to identify which areas of the region have been historically ignored or marginalized, so that more equitable decision-making may occur. The 500 Cities Data Challenge products continue to be shared among New Orleans and Jefferson Parish Complete Streets Coalitions’ members, as well as inform presentations made as part of the Prosper Jefferson Seminar Series hosted by the Jefferson Parish Economic Development Commission (JEDCO) and to the Envision Jefferson 2040 Steering Committee. Envision Jefferson 2040 is an ongoing process to update Envision Jefferson 2020, the parish’s current comprehensive plan that guides policy decisions regarding land use growth and development.

Additionally, the maps and visualization tools depicting an unmistakable overlap of adverse health and socioeconomic outcomes in certain neighborhoods startled many partners, but opened the door for conversations about how health outcomes can be an important business recruitment and economic development tool. It is no secret that [health and educational attainment are connected](#), and [education is tied to economic growth](#). Given the compounded disadvantages revealed by 500 Cities and other data, political leaders and other municipal decision makers would be wise to include health data when developing equity indices or similar criteria for determining when and where complete streets or economic development projects will occur. Resources like [500 Cities](#) and [City Health Dashboard](#) can assist with these efforts.

## About LPHI

The Louisiana Public Health Institute (LPHI), founded in 1997, is a statewide 501(c)(3) nonprofit and public health institute that translates evidence into strategy to optimize health ecosystems. Our work focuses on uncovering complementary connections across sectors to combine the social, economic, and human capital needed to align action for health. We champion health for people, within systems, and throughout communities because we envision a world where everyone has the opportunity to be healthy. For more information, visit [www.lphi.org](http://www.lphi.org).

This research is based upon work supported by the Urban Institute through funds provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Urban Institute or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.