



2025 **COMMUNITY DISTRESS INDEX**

FIU | Steven J. Green
| School of International
| & Public Affairs

Jorge M. Pérez
Metropolitan Center

Measuring Distress

In May, 2016, the FIU Metropolitan Center released the [Miami-Dade County Prosperity Initiatives Feasibility Study](#). The study developed a Prosperity Initiatives Neighborhood Distress Index (PINDI), now referred to as the Community Distress index (CDI), to analyze the communities where the prosperity gap is widest. Community distress is a term used to demonstrate the social and economic conditions within a concentrated urban area.¹ Indices like the CDI allow for an expanded geographic, area-based level of community understanding through the measurement of social determinants that impact residents' economic well-being and quality of life.

Previous studies have shown that the link between socioeconomic status and regional well-being (or community distress levels) can have effects on community health², educational attainment³, and economic mobility.⁴ An extended effort to track distress measures throughout communities in South Florida is vital to ensuring real, sustainable economic and societal progress. Recalling the well-known idiom “that which goes unmeasured goes unnoticed” serves as a reminder of the significance of focused investigation into community well-being and distress patterns to ensure balanced development.⁵

Approach

The Community Distress Index (CDI) is calculated from twenty socioeconomic, housing, minority status, and transportation-related variables. Some of the variables include area median income (AMI), poverty rates, educational attainment, demographics, and cost burdened housing. Scores calculated using the CDI range from 0 to 1, with 0 being the highest prosperity level a block group can achieve and 1 being the most distressed. By conducting a comparison between previously tabulated CDI scores from 2019 and newly produced

scores based on the latest 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) data, the index facilitates the creation of a visual and quantitative representation of geographic patterns in economic opportunity and changes in conditions at the block group level over a five-year span.

Summary of Findings

The 2025 CDI results show that community distress has increased slightly across South Florida. The regional Community Distress Index map provides a concise visual overview of each block group's level of distress, classified into five categories based on their respective CDI scores. As depicted in the map, Palm Beach County possesses the largest number of “Prosperous” block groups, with a total of 64, accounting for 7% of the county's total. Conversely, Miami-Dade County has the lowest percentage of “Prosperous” block groups at 2%, closely followed by Broward County with 3%. On the other end of the scale, Broward County leads the region in the concentration of “Distressed” block groups, with approximately 11% falling into the most distressed category. Palm Beach County follows with 10%, while Miami-Dade County, despite having the highest number of distressed block groups (167), has a slightly lower percentage at 9%.

Beyond the two extremes, the map also displays South Florida's “Spine of Distress”, which is a nearly continuous corridor of highly distressed block groups (“At Risk” and “Distressed”) stretching from northern Palm Beach County to southern Miami-Dade County. This corridor generally aligns with the region's most densely urbanized areas, where higher poverty rates, lower educational attainment levels, and an older housing stock are most present.

Commented [MI2]: Replace with economic opportunity or economic mobility

Commented [DOI]: Urban?

¹ Jennings, James. (2012). “Measuring neighborhood distress: A tool for place-based urban revitalization strategies.” *Community Development*, 43(4), 464–475.

² Knighton, Andrew J., Savitz, Lucy, Belnap, T., Stephenson, B., & VanDerslice, J. (2016). Introduction of an Area Deprivation Index measuring patient socioeconomic status in an integrated health system: Implications for population health. *eGEMS (Washington, DC)*, 4(3), Article 1238.

³ Wei, Yehua Dennis, Weiye Xiao, Christopher A. Simon, Baodong Liu, and Yongmei Ni. (2017). “Neighborhood, Race and Educational Inequality.” *Cities* 73 (November): 1–13.

⁴ Sampson, Robert J. (2016). “Individual and community economic mobility in the Great Recession era: The spatial foundations of persistent inequality.” In *Economic mobility: Research and ideas on strengthening families, communities and the economy* (pp. 261–287). Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis & Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.

⁵ Turner, Alison, Greg Guibert, Amanda Savitt, Jocelyn Lewandowski, & Iain Hyde. (2023). “Identifying measures of distress for economic development (NERRC Quarterly Research Brief).” Argonne National Laboratory, National Economic Research and Resilience Center.



Palm Beach County

Prosperous	- 64 (7%)
Comfortable	- 308 (31%)
Mid-Tier	- 315 (32%)
At Risk	- 193 (20%)
Distressed	- 102 (10%)

Broward County

Prosperous	- 31 (3%)
Comfortable	- 285 (25%)
Mid-Tier	- 397 (35%)
At Risk	- 283 (25%)
Distressed	- 124 (11%)

Miami-Dade County

Prosperous	- 41 (2%)
Comfortable	- 448 (24%)
Mid-Tier	- 684 (37%)
At Risk	- 503 (27%)
Distressed	- 167 (9%)

South Florida Tri-County Area Community Distress Index

Spine of Distress

The most prominent finding across the observed region is the “Spine of Distress” that runs along the I-95 corridor through all three counties. Block groups located in the surrounding area of this major roadway have consistently shown higher levels of distress when compared to those around them. This concentration of distress was observed in previous iterations of the same study, as many of the same distressed block groups displayed in this study possessed similar, if not worse, scores in previous studies.⁶

This agglomeration of distressed communities is deeply rooted in the region’s built environment and historical development.⁷ Given South Florida’s historical urbanization patterns, many of the earliest settlements clustered along rail lines, and later the Interstate Highway System, to create dense communities to service the rapidly expanding urban population along its coastline. As time went on, and the region continued to grow, investment was drawn to the west due to increased suburban expansion. This lack of funding, as well as the use of “redlining” practices, caused these central, mostly minority, communities to be left with a deteriorating housing supply and aging infrastructure which were not conducive of positive economic development⁸ (See [Racial Equity and Inclusion: From Words to Action, 2021](#)).

Although many distressed block groups are in proximity to wealthier neighborhoods or newly redeveloped areas, the entrenched environment of low-wage employment and limited economic mobility in which these localities find themselves in remains.⁹ This can be seen through the lens of “path dependence” which is commonly understood as the process in which “random perturbations early in the history of selection, coupled with the self-reinforcing

nature of these selections, shape the subsequent outcomes,” in this case of local policy decisions.¹⁰

Most of the communities that make up the spine of distress are demographically similar, comprised of large shares of minority and immigrant households. These demographic patterns, along with the physical environment and the variables accounted for in the CDI, help to explain why these neighborhoods consistently register as the most distressed in the region.

The Spillover of Distress

Going beyond the spine of distress, the CDI results show that distress has shifted unevenly across the three counties. As seen in the provided maps, a number of block groups have seen slight improvements in CDI scores between 2019 and 2025. While some distressed communities saw rising well-being, often due to new development initiatives and rising property values, other block groups saw their scores get worse, in large part due to increased affordability pressures¹¹ and rising displacement.^{12,13} Using the CDI, the relationship between structural disparities and local dynamics, such as capital flight and demographic changes, are clearly shown to have perpetual effects on South Florida’s progress and local resilience.

Miami-Dade County

In Miami-Dade County, the average CDI score increased slightly from 2019 to 2023, with the countywide CDI moving from 0.42 to 0.43 (with 1 representing the highest level of distress). The driving force behind this distress is most visible in block groups along the I-95 corridor. Areas like Hialeah, Liberty City, and Allapattah continue to face overlapping challenges, such as lower household incomes, a concentration of cost-burdened renters, and high poverty rates among others, which limit the

Commented [M13]: How will the maps be presented? Will they be included at the end altogether or as you discuss each county?

Commented [HF4]: I think you need to tell readers what the range is, whether high is good or bad, etc.

Commented [M15R4]: [Alexandro Martinelli Vallarino](#) I saw the range mentioned earlier. Maybe footnote it again here.

⁶ Murray, N., Ph.D. & Kevin T. Greiner, MUP. (2016). “Miami-Dade County Prosperity Initiatives Feasibility Study.” Florida International University Metropolitan Center.

⁷ Aiello, Luca Maria, Anastassia Vybornova, Sándor Juhász, Michael Szell, and Eszter Bokányi. (2025). “Urban Highways Are Barriers to Social Ties.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122 (10).

⁸ Bachin, Robin. (2020). “Race, Housing, and Displacement in Miami.” *Richter Library, University of Miami*, August.

⁹ Allen, Treb and Donaldson, Dave. (2018). “The Geography of Path Dependence.” Working Paper, University of Boulder Colorado.

¹⁰ Woodlief, Anthony. 1998. “The Path-Dependent City.” *Urban Affairs Review* 33 (3): 405–37.

¹¹ United Way of Florida & United For ALICE. (2025). “The state of ALICE in Florida: 2025 update on financial hardship.”

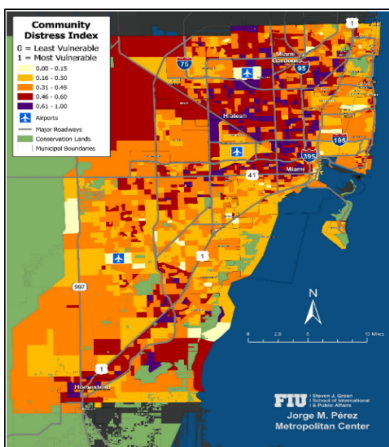
¹² Tardanico, Richard (2025). “MEGA—Real estate speculation and racialized dispossession: Miami’s Little Haiti.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 49(1), 21–38.

¹³ Green, Sharony. (2018). “Tracing Black racial and spatial politics in South Florida via memory.” *Journal of Urban History*, 45(2), 223–242.

potential improvements these communities have made in recent years. The county's southernmost city, Homestead, also revealed increased levels of distressed block groups, highlighting the spread of economic hardship throughout the county. Additionally, as the county's economy continues to expand with growth in areas like real estate, tech, and hospitality, places like Wynwood have seen massive redevelopment efforts which often price out long-term residents without addressing the underlying foundation of uneven development.¹⁴

In contrast, Miami-Dade's major suburban centers, such as Kendall and Coral Gables, continue to show relatively low distress levels. Supported by more affluent, well-educated populations along with stronger housing markets and favorable demographics, these suburban hubs remain among the most prosperous localities. The county's economic and urban center, Brickell, presents a dense concentration of prosperous block groups limited to its coastal areas, sharing this distinction with the numerous island communities along its coast. Taken together, Miami-Dade's results illustrate both the persistence of entrenched economic distress along I-95 and the emergence of new affordability challenges on the periphery.

Miami-Dade County Community Distress Index Map, 2025



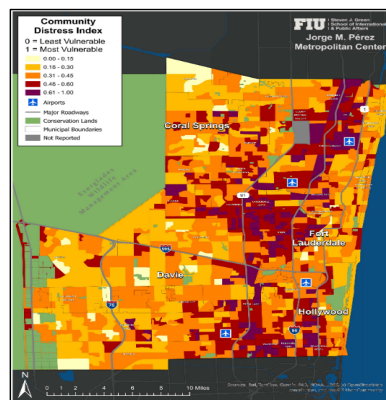
¹⁴ Bachin, Robin. (2020). "Race, Housing, and Displacement in Miami." Richter Library, University of Miami, August.

Broward County

Broward County shows a similar pattern, with countywide distress increasing from 0.41 in 2019 to 0.42 in 2025. The exaggerated concentration of distressed block groups along the I-95 corridor is still present, as the surrounding area contains many of the most distressed communities in the county, especially those in and around the Fort Lauderdale and Lauderdale municipalities. Similar to Miami-Dade's distressed communities, these block groups continue to face a deteriorating housing situation, increased levels of poverty, and a high concentration of minority and immigrant populations, who are often disproportionately affected by economic instability and lower educational attainment.¹⁵

Broward's suburban centers, situated in areas like Coral Springs, Davie, and Weston, remain widely prosperous. These areas are generally populated by residents possessing higher incomes and lower housing challenges which allow them to maintain lower CDI scores. Although Broward's suburban hubs remain relatively prosperous, its coastal urban areas, like Pompano Beach and Hollywood, have not been able to improve their distress scores since 2019. In contrast, Fort Lauderdale, the county's largest city, has been able to maintain its standing as Broward's economic center, resulting in lower levels of distress within its downtown/financial areas.

Broward County Community Distress Index Map, 2025



¹⁵ Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress. (2019). "Education and the racial wealth gap." https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/1d07cb0d-6ec2-4f49-9fa7-6ee5c771be3/education-and-racial-wealth-gap.pdf

Commented [MI8]: In and surrounding?

Commented [MI6]: A paragraph should not be comprised of only one sentence. Please review the whole paper for this issue and bring together floating sentences to form real paragraphs.

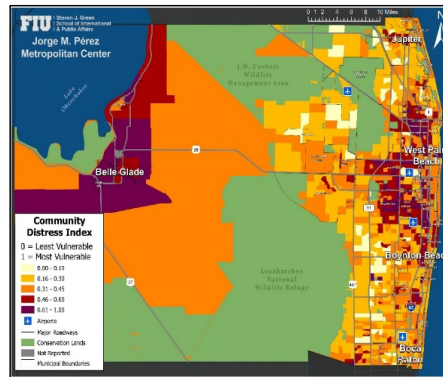
Commented [MI7]: Please review the paper for the use of the word inequality and replace with lack of economic opportunity, economic distress and other such more descriptive phrases.

Palm Beach County

Palm Beach County presents a slightly different story than the southernmost counties in the region. The countywide CDI increased from 0.37 in 2019 to 0.39 in 2025, meaning that distress has grown, but it remains lower overall than Miami-Dade and Broward. As was seen in the Metropolitan Center's [Palm Beach County Housing Equity Study from 2023](#), the county's most distressed block groups are situated in the area between I-95 and SR 91. This concentration of distressed communities is most clearly seen around the Palm Springs and Greenacres municipalities. These block groups face many of the same challenges that promote distress in their southern neighbors, with an overrepresentation of minority and immigrant demographics, higher than average poverty rates, and cost burdened households. Additionally, the City of Belle Glade also displays high levels of distress within its rural and neighboring communities due to its reliance on low-wage employment and relative isolation from the county's urban population.

In contrast, Palm Beach County's lower level of countywide CDI score is most representative of its suburban population centers, such as Boca del Mar and The Acreage. Though these communities, benefitting from strong local economies and wealthier populations, possess lower distress levels, rising housing prices and inward migration have factored into their slight increases in distress levels.¹⁶ The county's make-up, therefore, captures the persistent distress found throughout the aforementioned "spine of distress" along with new challenges that may continue to arise due to Florida's expanding economy.

Palm Beach County Community Distress Index Map, 2025



Addressing Distress

When developing an approach to address the historical levels of distress found in South Florida, there are a myriad of factors to take into account. Realities such as the unbalanced supply and demand of accessible high-wage employment and affordable housing, and the dwindling possibility of economic mobility have all created a situation that lends itself directly to the growing distress found in the results of this study. As stated in the Metropolitan Center's [Miami-Dade County Prosperity Initiatives Feasibility Study from 2016](#), the capacity for foundational change in distress gaps comes from the implementation of assistance programs for those that face the most difficult economic circumstances to achieve higher economic self-sufficiency. Examples of programs to support this economic shift include:

Workforce Development and Skills Alignment

The development of the local workforce within the distressed communities of South Florida is the most imperative aspect of prosperous development. As reported by prior studies on the topic^{17,18}, sector-based workforce programs, connecting the local workforce with educational entities and community organizations, significantly increase both

¹⁶ Redfin. (2025, October 28). West Palm Beach housing market: House prices & trends. <https://www.redfin.com/city/19373/FL/West-Palm-Beach/housing-market/migration>

¹⁷ Maguire, Sheila, John Freely, Carol Clymer, Maureen Conway, and Deena Schwartz. 2010. "Tuning in to Local Labor Markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study." Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

¹⁸ Takeuchi, Mayu, and Joseph Parilla. 2023. "Federal Investments in Sector-Based Training Can Boost Workers' Upward Mobility." Brookings Institution.

employment rates and wages earned by low-income individuals.

By emphasizing the use of vocational training and expanding the accessibility of said educational programs, counties can begin to address the most pressing needs in distressed communities. A top-down initiative in this vein would directly strengthen these communities' economic resilience, as well as bolster the economic mobility its residents can aspire for. Miami-Dade College's MDC WORKS program is a present example of how institutions and local government can play a role in strengthening the local workforce by offering targeted career guidance and training to address the needs of a stagnating workforce (See [Building Prosperity in Miami: Success and Challenges in Improving the Employment Ecosystem, 2023](#)).

Affordable Housing Stock and Anti-Displacement Measures

Increasing investments in both affordable housing supply and anti-displacement networks are both measures that can directly alleviate the distress in many of these communities. The preservation and proliferation of [safe, decent and affordable housing](#) is key to lightening the burden of housing costs for residents (See [What About Safe and Decent Housing That is Affordable?](#)), one that has become a central concern for most households in the Tri-County area.¹⁹

Additionally, the scope of an increased investment in this area should be focused on developing an affordable housing stock that is connected to other community spaces and services, such as employment centers and public transit terminals. This approach would not only alleviate the concerns regarding housing affordability and availability, but it would also address other challenges faced by residents such as educational attainment and economic mobility.²⁰

The [2016 Prosperity Initiatives Feasibility Study](#) recognized that the adoption of Community Land

Trusts (CLT) and Community Benefit Agreements (CBA) could provide residents with an organizational backstop when facing overwhelming influence by outside developers. These measures would not only ensure a lower level of displacement for established residents within the affected areas, but they would assist in the creation of a culture of equitable development by giving residents a representative voice in matters of local planning, resource allocation, and community investment

Transit-Oriented Development

As stated above, South Florida's "Spine of Distress" mainly rests along the I-95 north-south corridor that runs through the three studied counties. For this reason, placing an increased emphasis on transit-oriented development (TOD) in these communities could prove to be helpful in enriching daily activities for residents, such as improving the accessibility of employment and retail centers, reducing commuting costs, and connecting residents to wider labor markets throughout their counties.

The effects brought upon by the adoption of TOD are demonstrated in past studies conducted by the Florida Department of Transportation and Department of Community Affairs²¹, as well as academic investigations on the topic.²² These reports demonstrate that equitable TOD initiatives that consider housing, employment, and infrastructural elements can help revitalize distressed communities, while minimizing car dependency and reducing transactional costs (cost of commuting to and from activities like work, school, and social events). Utilizing an approach based on TOD principles and strengthening the communities' multimodal transportation infrastructure would enhance mobility and mitigate historical geographic isolation from economic hubs, especially for those who rely on public transportation.

Commented [MI9]: You should link our brief on this topic here

¹⁹ United Way of Florida & United For ALICE. (2025). "The state of ALICE in Florida: 2025 update on financial hardship."

²⁰ Chetty, Raj, Hendren, Nathaniel, & Katz, Lawrence F. (2016). "The effects of exposure to better neighborhoods on children: New evidence from the Moving to Opportunity experiment." *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855-902.

²¹ Renaissance Planning Group. (2011). "A Framework for Transit-Oriented Development in Florida." Prepared for the Florida Department of Transportation and Department of Community Affairs.

²² Chatman, Daniel G, and Noland, Robert B. (2013). "Transit Service, Physical Agglomeration and Productivity in US Metropolitan Areas." *Urban Studies* 51 (5): 917-37.

