

[Link to Article](#)

Urban Displacement Project looks at how Miami-Dade recovered from pandemic



MIAMI - Activity in downtown areas nationally looks different than it used to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

New data we've obtained shows most are struggling. CBS4 explored Miami's solution for resiliency during some trying times.

"A lot of restaurants were closing," shared Christina Crespi, the Miami Downtown Development Authority Executive Director.

In March 2020, COVID cleared beaches, emptied airports, and quieted bustling South Florida cities.

"How are you going to sustain yourself," asked Lizette Gonzalez, an assistant manager at Five Star Jewelers. "What's going to happen? A lot of people lost their jobs. You'd walk the streets, and everything was empty."

Gonzalez lost her job at Five Star Jewelers a week into the pandemic.

"We're not closing anything going forward," proclaimed Governor Ron DeSantis in September 2020.

DeSantis signaled an economic shift in late September 2020, lifting all COVID restrictions on businesses statewide.

CBS NEWS MIAMI

March 7, 2023

Unique Monthly Visitors: 40,931,847

On the same day he announced a full reopening, our cameras captured people flocking to restaurants in Wynwood.

By year's end, a welcoming sign emerges.

"We're looking at, you know, foot activity," mentioned Karen Chapple, the Director of the Urban Displacement Project. "We're looking at phones."

Chapple analyzed cell phone data in 62 major North American cities. It compared people out and about in Miami to pre-pandemic levels.

This map they described showed the area of focus from Brickell Key, Brickell Avenue, and the city's downtown core. The final months of 2020 showed a 76% recovery.

"Governor and I agreed we should be relatively open, while a lot of places were relatively closed, helped tremendously," said Miami Mayor Francis Suarez.

"We went door to door to every business to make sure they knew we were here and an asset to them," added Crespi.

In the early months of the pandemic, Miami's Downtown Development Authority moved in to help small businesses stay afloat.

"Helped folks navigate federal programs they can access and how to use social media and market themselves differently," said Crespi.

Before help arrived, Five Star Jewelers owner Jorge Carvajal temporarily laid off all but four employees. Carvajal said he has many sleepless nights.

"Locked myself in that office early," said Carvajal. "One night, around 7, my wife knocked and asked if I would ever get out of there tonight. In some cases, I didn't want her to see me in the distress I was in."

A month later, something transformational happened for the entire city.

David Guetta's United at Home virtual concert in Miami! raised money for charity and put Miami front and center.

"Condo sales went up by 70% shortly after," added Crespi. "Everyone wanted to be in Miami."

"Singular moment in time that we may never get back for a generation," added Suarez, referencing the increased interest in Miami.

Mayor Suarez sensed an opportunity for massive growth; by December, it came as a tweet.

"Answering a question on December 4th, 2020, what if we move Silicon Valley to Miami, with the response, how can I help," said Suarez.

CBS NEWS MIAMI

March 7, 2023

Unique Monthly Visitors: 40,931,847

Two years later, Miami welcomed \$50 Billion in new development. The DDA's budget nearly doubled.

"Miami is a teenager about to get their license," said Crespi. "We're growing in that way. Very rapidly."

Growth in the city and throughout Miami-Dade County.

"Did everything possible to keep businesses going or adapt to keep people employed," said Miami Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava. "The biggest concern is to make sure this growth is benefiting our local residents. So we know it's put increased pressure on our limited supply of housing that people can afford. Prices skyrocketed. We have to double down and have done that to focus on housing affordability and new housing starts for the workforce. Find ways to keep our families and workers here." (Mayor CAVA)

"Most high-cost places are doing pretty well," mentioned Chapple. "And in fact, we find the higher the median rent, the more likely you are to bounce back."

"My heart skipped a beat for what was happening," said Carvajal.

Like much of Miami, as doors reopened, the future for Caravajal and his employees brightened. Gonzalez was overjoyed to get her job back and 90% of his original staff at his five locations in the Miami area returned.

"They took a leap of faith," Carvajal said. "Trusted in the company, came back, and we were all rewarded."

Fort Lauderdale and Broward County were not part of the "Urban Displacement Project" study. We are working on collecting information to see how well Fort Lauderdale recovered from the pandemic.