

**The United Nations Secretary-General Policy Brief on  
COVID-19 in an Urban World  
Questions and Answers**

**What is a Secretary-General Policy Brief?**

As part of the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 to save lives, protect societies and recover better, the UN Secretary-General is issuing policy briefs to provide ideas to governments on how to address the consequences of this crisis. The Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World is part of this series. UN-Habitat led the collaborative effort to provide inputs into the Brief, working with a wide range of UN agencies and local government networks. The Policy Brief calls for conscious policy choices, particularly regarding inequalities, local capacities and a green, inclusive recovery.

**Who was involved in writing this report?**

The agencies involved were UN-Habitat, UNDP, UNDESA, UNEP, UNICEF, UNODC, ILO, WHO, OHCHR, all Regional Economic Commissions. Several local government networks were also engaged.

**What is the source of the statement that 90 per cent of cases are in urban areas?**

UN-Habitat has been collecting sub-national data on COVID-19 cases to understand the distribution of cases across various geographical areas. Guided by the degree of urbanization approach to defining rural and urban areas recently endorsed by the UN-Statistical Commission, UN-Habitat has identified nearly 11,000 urban areas comprising cities, towns and small urban centres with a population of over 10,000 people. Preliminary and verified data by regions is available on the UN-Habitat website <https://data.unhabitat.org/>.

**How does UN Habitat's above estimate compare with WHO's data on COVID-19 cases?**

Member States provide national-level data on COVID-19 cases to the WHO. UN-Habitat collects and analyses data from a number of sources, including at subnational / city level, and matches this with national-level data compiled by WHO.

**What is the period of coverage for this data and does it cover all countries and territories?**

The sub-national data on COVID-19 cases was collected from March to June 2020. Subnational data is released with a lag of about one month. The data is available only for selected countries and territories as some countries are not releasing national data so sub-national data is not available or accessible. Other countries are also taking longer to provide subnational data. Overall, data for some 11,000 cities is available from 120 countries and territories.



What is the source of the statement that there is no evidence that density per se correlates to higher transmission of COVID-19?

The science on influences on COVID-19's impact is still under development. [Studies from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) suggest that metropolitan size matters more than density in the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, with connectivity being a main driver. There is stronger evidence that, as has been the case with other infectious diseases, overcrowding, inadequate housing and lack of access to sanitation are key problems.

Compact well-designed cities offer health benefits as they are more walkable and help to fight climate change and protect our environment. There is a risk that if the pandemic is associated with density without evidence, there could be a new anti-urban movement at a time where our cities drive our economies and are key to deliver on the SDGs. It is crucial to have more research on the issue of density to inform discussions on the future of our cities and on designing healthy, green and resilient cities.

Which cities are taking notable measures in terms of effective response and recovery to COVID-19?

Cities like Yokohama supported the payment of rents, Addis Ababa reduced the rent for those living public housing, and Chicago, San Francisco, Paris and others postponed rental payments. Barcelona allocated emergency housing in vacant housing units for people at social risk.

Many cities expanded access to water for handwashing in deprived neighbourhoods - for example Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Lima, Costa Rica, Freetown, Nairobi, Nakuru, Dakar. Others made partial exemption on water, sanitation and urban waste tariffs (e.g. Oakland, Porto and Braga, Machakos).

Some cities also set up COVID-19 websites and information portals, for example Jakarta's Provincial Government created a dedicated COVID-19 website, in Indonesian and English, providing information and updates on COVID-19, a COVID-19 hotline service and an online 'self-assessment check' provided by the Jakarta Department of Health.

Mexico City, San Francisco, Venice, Naples, Bratislava are implementing hygiene and safety measures in public transport, such as cleaning and disinfecting.

City governments around the world are supporting local business and economic recovery, including through tax incentives (Paris), tax breaks (Madrid) or tax exemptions (Braga), financial incentives to companies (Mexico City), emergency financial support (Montreal) and direct cash transfers particularly to those working in the informal sector and vulnerable groups (Chihuahua).