



**Zika and the City:
How Epidemics Impact the Health, Real Estate, and Tourism of Our Cities**

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The NYUSPS Schack Institute of Real Estate Urban Lab develops new understandings of the economic and real estate trends that are shaping our cities.

Key Takeaways:

- Despite the ongoing trend of state governments wresting control from municipalities, policy occurs most often at the local level.
- Eliminating the threat of Zika requires continuous monitoring and concerted efforts to educate urban residents.
- A city's tourism and public health sectors are deeply intertwined, with each informing the other's success.
- Large sporting events like the Rio Olympics often serve as entry points for addressing public health issues like Zika.
- Despite the threat of Zika, Florida remains one of the most popular tourist destinations in the U.S., due in large part to its quick and effective response strategy.
- A city's tourism industry must account for public health crises when determining its target demographics. In the wake of Zika, Miami should steer clear of marketing campaigns geared toward families of child-bearing age and instead focus on attracting older visitors.

With spring break on the horizon, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have [warned people](#) to exercise caution when traveling to Miami, Texas, and Central and South America, among other locations worldwide. Although many areas that once held the virus have now been declared "Zika free," the threat of Zika still looms large.

As of March 2017, over 5,000 cases of Zika [have been reported](#) in the U.S., with over 1,000 of these cases hailing from Florida. As cities like Miami, Los Angeles, and Austin prepare for an influx of college students, they must also take extra precautions to prevent the spread of the disease.

Recently, the NYUSPS Schack Institute of Real Estate Urban Lab hosted a series of panels to discuss the economic and health-related impacts of Zika in Miami and around the world. The first panel featured a discussion between Miami Beach Mayor Philip Levine and renowned urbanist Richard Florida about Miami's organized efforts to combat Zika, while the second panel engaged NYUSPS's academic experts in a conversation about the impact of public health crises on the tourism and sports industries.

Battling the Bug

Miami's battle with Zika provides a fitting case study for exploring these issues. As the second most visited city in the U.S., Miami's economic success is heavily dependent on its hospitality and tourism industries. In the last year, the presence of Zika has threatened to halt this steady inflow of visitors. "If you want economic development through tourism, you can't do it if you don't have adequate health services in the place you're bringing tourists to," says Kristin Lamoureux, the former associate dean of the NYUSPS Jonathan M. Tisch Center for Hospitality and Tourism.

When the first instances of locally transmitted Zika infections were discovered in Miami last summer, the region faced a difficult decision: to annihilate the epidemic by [spraying an aerial insecticide](#) or risk ending up like Puerto Rico, where Zika is now endemic. Although the decision

was controversial, Mayor Levine says that aerial inoculation was ultimately the right call. “I don’t want to be the mayor that had the opportunity to do the right thing, but instead did the popular thing,” he says.

Indeed, the Zika epidemic in Miami highlights the extent to which our health and safety depend on the sound judgment of our elected officials. As Miami Beach’s efforts have made clear, policy occurs most often at the local level. “Even though Americans’ faith and confidence in their executive branch and Congress is at an all-time low, their faith and confidence in their local leaders is at near-record highs,” says Richard Florida.

Thanks to the diligence of local Miami officials, the state of Florida experienced a [record-breaking tourism year](#) in 2016, with a total of 85 million visitors and around 1.2 million people employed in Florida’s tourism industry from January to September. Despite this recent success, government leaders must remain vigilant about monitoring the Zika epidemic.

A Significant Impact on Sports and Tourism

According to Arthur Caplan, the co-director of NYUSPS’s Sports and Society program, Zika remains a global emergency, particularly in places like Puerto Rico and Brazil.

Last year’s Rio Olympics shone a spotlight on the tension between the public health community and the world’s sports and tourism industries. At the time, over 150 doctors and professors petitioned to postpone the Olympics to prevent the spread of Zika. “An unnecessary risk is posed when 500,000 foreign tourists from all countries attend the Games, potentially acquire that strain, and return home to places where it can become endemic,” [the letter](#) read.

Although he, too, advocated to postpone the Olympics, Caplan’s fellow co-director Lee Igel says there was ultimately an upside to hosting the games in Rio. In many cases, Igel finds, “sports became the entry point to address public health issues.” To a certain degree, the Rio Olympics helped to spread worldwide awareness of the disease.

With this global platform, however, comes great responsibility. Moving forward, Mayor Levine argues that cities must continue to remain transparent with visitors and residents about the threat of Zika. Lamoureux also believes that tourism markets would benefit from identifying demographics for which Zika presents a less severe threat. Rather than designing a marketing campaign geared toward families of child-bearing age, for instance, cities like Miami should focus on attracting older visitors, who may be less concerned about the virus.

In addition to these marketing strategies, cities must view the Zika epidemic as an impetus to invest further in their public health sectors. “How can you grow if you don’t invest?,” says Mayor Levine. “I can’t imagine a greater investment in the world [than public health].” It’s a lesson worth noting as cities like Miami await a flood of tourists this spring.