Study links crowded housing in Greater Boston’s poorer neighborhoods with spread of COVID-19

The Boston Foundation report found that many frontline workers' living conditions makes self-isolating nearly impossible.

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Greater Boston’s long-running housing crisis likely worsened the spread of the coronavirus, especially in poorer neighborhoods where many people are jammed into small apartments.

Crowded housing conditions in cities such as Chelsea contributed to the spread of COVID-19, according to a new Boston Foundation report. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF
That’s the thrust of a report out this week from the nonprofit Boston Foundation which draws the clearest link yet between overcrowded housing and the spread of COVID-19 in Massachusetts.

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute found that cities with the highest concentration of crowded housing — which it defines as homes with more than one resident per room — also have had some of the biggest outbreaks of coronavirus. That would include cities such as Chelsea, Lawrence, Brockton and Lynn, all of which have large populations of “frontline” workers who continued to work during the height of the pandemic in the spring.

Researchers found that those jobs were certainly a factor in spreading the virus at a time when many people in more affluent towns were sheltering in place. But a bigger contributor was what happened when those workers returned home. Because they live in close quarters, isolating from relatives — even if they were sick — proved challenging.
Mares said that buildings his nonprofit operates in Chelsea and Revere — affordable units with clear rules on how many people can live in an apartment — have far lower rates of infection than their surrounding neighborhoods, where people often squeeze into market-rate apartments so they can afford the rent.

“Healthy affordable housing may not be a vaccine for COVID-19,” Mares said. “But it’s clearly an excellent preventative measure.”

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“The most indicative measure of COVID-19 spread that [the researchers] observed is the rate of crowded housing,” the study said. “Cities with the highest crowded housing rates, including Chelsea, Lynn, Lawrence, Everett and Revere, also have the highest rates of COVID-19 infection.”

It’s something of a rebuttal to an argument heard often as the virus flared in New York City and Boston this spring. Some public health experts contended that urban density — subways, busy sidewalks, packed office buildings — was a major reason why the virus spread so quickly. The UMass researchers note that Cambridge and Somerville, which rank alongside Chelsea as the most densely-populated cities in Massachusetts, had far
lower infection rates. They also have more affluent populations, meaning people are less likely to live in overcrowded apartments.

“It highlights the importance of not simply saying ‘covid is a city issue,’” said Mark Melnik, director of public policy research at the Donahue Institute. “It really tracks more with socioeconomic status.”

And in Greater Boston, socioeconomic status tracks closely with race.

The cities hardest-hit by the pandemic all have large Black or Latino populations. Even in Boston, the report points out, predominantly minority neighborhoods such as East Boston, Hyde Park, Dorchester, and Mattapan have far higher rates of infection than largely-white South Boston, Charlestown, and Back Bay.

**COVID-19 rate vs. percent people of color in Mass. towns**
The report’s authors, and participants in an online panel held Tuesday by the Boston Foundation to discuss it, cited the region’s long history of racial segregation, and mortgage lending practices known as “redlining” that pushed poorer and non-white residents into a handful of neighborhoods where there was little investment in new housing.

“None of this is a surprise. This is the impact of the historical policies that established and created structural racism,” said Dr. Thea James, vice president of mission at Boston Medical Center. “Covid was a history lesson that was laid perfectly bare for us.”

But it’s not just history, said Rafael Mares, executive director at The Neighborhood Developers, a housing nonprofit in Chelsea. The hot real estate market of recent years has priced people out of many formerly-working-class neighborhoods around Greater Boston, forcing them into more crowded living situations in the places they can still afford, such as Chelsea, Lawrence, and Brockton.

“For years, the regional housing crisis in Greater Boston has put undue pressure on our communities,” Mares said. “It has increased rents and forced many people to double up, to live in unfinished basements, to share kitchens and bathrooms with other households. What was already an unhealthy, unjust living situation has turned deadly during the pandemic.”

That’s an argument some housing advocates make for extending the state’s eviction moratorium, which is set to end on Aug. 18. Driving people out of their homes during the health crisis will likely lead many to move in with relatives or friends, they warn, thus increasing the risk of exposure.

It’s also an argument advocates make to fund and build more affordable housing in Massachusetts.