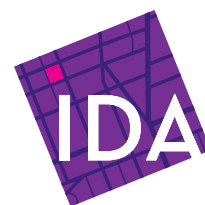




# The Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities

2026 TRENDS REPORT

A 2026 PUBLICATION CREATED BY  
THE INTERNATIONAL DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION



INSPIRED LEADERS  
SHAPING CITIES

## ABOUT IDA



### IDA

The International Downtown Association is the premier association of urban place managers who are shaping and activating dynamic downtown districts. Founded in 1954, IDA represents an industry of more than 2,500 place management organizations that employ 100,000 people throughout North America. Through its network of diverse practitioners, its rich body of knowledge, and its unique capacity to nurture community-building partnerships, IDA provides tools, intelligence and strategies for creating healthy and dynamic centers that anchor the well-being of towns, cities and regions of the world. IDA members are downtown champions who bring urban centers to life. For more information on IDA, visit [downtown.org](http://downtown.org).

IDA Board Chair: Kris Larson, LPM, AICP, President & CEO, Downtown Houston+

IDA President & CEO: David T. Downey, IOM, CAE, Assoc. AIA

### IDA Research Committee

The IDA Research Committee is composed of industry experts who help IDA align strategic goals and top issues to produce high-quality research products informing both IDA members and the place management industry. Chaired and led by IDA Board members, the Research Committee advances the work set forth in the IDA research agenda by publishing best practices and case studies on top issues facing urban districts, establishing data standards to calculate the value of center cities, and furthering industry benchmarking.

IDA Director of Research: Cathy Lin, AICP

IDA Research Manager: Clay Daneker

**IDA would like to thank MIG for their generous support of *The Value of U.S.***

***Downtowns and Center Cities* research.** Downtowns are the unparalleled economic, civic and cultural hearts of our cities and regions. MIG's planners, designers, economists and strategists help downtown organizations and their partners create thriving city centers and districts, vibrant and resilient communities and attractive and memorable places. To learn more, visit [www.migcom.com](http://www.migcom.com).

International Downtown Association  
1275 K Street NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20005  
202.393.6801  
[downtown.org](http://downtown.org)

© 2026 International Downtown Association, All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form—print, electronic, or otherwise—without the express written permission of IDA.



CONTENTS

|                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| Executive Summary   | 4  |
| Introduction        | 6  |
| Methodology         | 7  |
| Downtown Typologies | 8  |
| Economy             | 9  |
| Inclusion           | 11 |
| Vibrancy            | 14 |
| Identity            | 18 |
| Resilience          | 19 |
| Conclusion          | 20 |
| <b>References</b>   |    |
| Endnotes            | 24 |
| Photo Credits       | 25 |

# Executive Summary

## A STRONG DOWNTOWN IS CRITICAL FOR A SUCCESSFUL CITY AND REGION

The *Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities* articulates the unique and significant impact that downtowns and urban districts provide to their respective cities and regions. The study demonstrates the varied contributions and multiple benefits that investing in these districts brings to a broad range of audiences and stakeholders.

57 UPMOs across the U.S. have participated in the study as of 2025, an increasingly broad and varied sample that reflects urban districts of all types in a wide range of cities and in every region of the country. 2025 study districts included downtown Houston, downtown Jacksonville, downtown Tacoma and downtown West Palm Beach. Our analysis of eight years of research shines a light on how crucial a healthy downtown is, not only to those who live and work there, but to the success of the entire city.

Our research identified five key principles—economy, inclusion, vibrancy, identity, and resilience—and analyzed more than 150 key metrics within the principles to quantify the value of a given U.S. downtown. The study relied on both public and proprietary data sources as well as data collection by the partner urban place management organization (UPMO), defining the district beyond the boundaries of the UPMO. Metrics were calculated by change over time, by square mile or acre, and by share of city and regional value, allowing IDA to measure each downtown against its respective city and region. The study also benchmarks the performance of U.S. downtowns and creates a baseline for future data collection and comparisons to other downtowns.

Downtown and UPMO leaders are facing a new reality in a post-pandemic environment. Return-to-office and visitation recovery have plateaued, and while rapid population growth continues in almost all downtowns, residents still make up just a small portion of the downtown customer base. These findings affirm that while downtowns are no less critical or important to their cities than they have ever been, repositioning for long-term sustainability is crucial. While geographically small, with a median area encompassing 2.2% of the city, downtowns remain the immensely valuable, diverse, efficient, inclusive, and resilient hearts of their communities.

**Economy:** Downtowns concentrate outsized economic impact through both high land values and employment concentration, which makes them indispensable to local and regional economies. Across all study areas, downtowns average \$2.9 billion in land value per square mile, while the typical downtown captures 11% of citywide land value within just 2.2% of the city's land area. This means that investments downtown can create a multiplier effect that ripples throughout the city.

The typical downtown hosts 19% of its city's jobs. While total employment downtown has mostly rebounded since the COVID-19 pandemic, footfall data from Placer.ai reveals that recovery of in-person workdays has plateaued. Median worker visits in 2025 remained at roughly 80% of 2019 levels, with *established* downtowns, those with the greatest density and share of employment, lagging the most in worker presence recovery. This underscores the need to rebalance downtown real estate towards a less office-focused mix that includes more "live" and "play" space.

**Inclusion:** Downtowns and urban districts, with their numerous attractions and opportunities, have the ability to bring together diverse residents, visitors and workers from all backgrounds and walks of life. Downtown residents tend to be young, racially diverse and highly educated. 44% of downtown residents are between the ages of 18 and 34, and 54% have a Bachelor's degree or higher educational attainment compared to just 35% nationally. While downtown communities are typically more racially diverse than the U.S. overall, they often are not more diverse than their city and neighboring communities, creating contrasts which can strongly influence local perceptions of downtown.

Despite their high levels of educational attainment, downtown communities do not necessarily have higher incomes, in part due to the large concentration of young people, who are early in their career, living there. Since most downtown households are also renters, this concerning combination makes rising rents particularly troubling to center city communities. In the median downtown, rents grew by 91% from 2010 to 2023, with some downtowns seeing rent increases of over 200%.

**Vibrancy:** Downtowns have a dense, walkable environment with numerous entertainment and cultural amenities, making them very attractive to prospective residents. Interest in downtown living continues to drive a surge in population growth, as 85% of IDA's study districts saw population growth from 2019 to 2023. In those four years, the median downtown increased by 11%, far outpacing the population growth of the city and the nation overall.

Center cities are also hotspots for the experience industry, a collection of business sectors which make up the “play” in live-work-play: arts, entertainment and recreation, food and beverage service, accommodations, and retail trade. Downtowns command a large share of business activity in this area despite their small size. However, Placer data reveals visitation recovery has plateaued as well, though much closer to 2019 levels.

**Identity:** Downtowns are the repositories of many histories – they have long been central to urban life and brought together diverse people and cultures, and as a result are home to not just work and recreation, but historical and cultural assets as well. A typical downtown contains 29 structures on the National Register of Historic Places, 52 public art installations, 7 museums and 18 live entertainment venues, all packed into a study area of just 1.7 square miles. These cultural, recreational, and entertainment assets are not just central to the identity of the city and region – but serve as key downtown visitation magnets and anchors for downtown.

**Resilience:** A combination of diversity, density of resources and services, and a mixed-use walkable environment connected by a network of mobility options makes downtown a resilient place. Downtown living encourages an environmentally sustainable lifestyle, and across the board downtowns rate significantly higher than the city in Walk Score (90 downtown vs 45 city), Bike Score (77 downtown vs 51 city), and Transit Score (67 downtown vs 34 city). While downtowns adapt to the new realities of hybrid work after decades of focus on an office commuter clientele, the diversity and density of resources and services on offer put downtowns in a stronger position to rebound from economic, social, and environmental shocks and stresses than other parts of the region.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOWNTOWNS

**Repositioning Downtown's Built Environment:** With annual in-person workdays for downtown employees plateauing far below 2019 levels, UPMOs and municipal leaders must accept that we have reached a new normal and adapt accordingly. Downtowns are greatly oversupplied with office space for a post-pandemic work environment. According to *Reimagining Cities: Disrupting the Urban Doom Loop*, a recent research report by real estate brokerage Cushman & Wakefield, the strongest economic and land-value outcomes come from a built environment that's only 42% workplaces, with the rest being residential and recreational space. Yet the typical downtown is almost 70% workplaces.

Such a significant shift in the built environment will take considerable time, even with policy interventions. Downtowns will remain important employment centers for the city, but the current environment will require initiative, innovation and collaboration from UPMOs and policymakers to seize opportunities when they arise and adaptively reuse surplus office space with new uses.

**Placemaking as Economic Development:** There is a growing awareness, not only within the UPMO community but also publicly, of the nexus between placemaking and economic development. With visitation recovery plateauing around 94% of 2019 levels, renewed growth in this area is needed to replace the now-diminished presence of workers in downtown. Downtowns are beginning from an enviable position in this area, with strong concentrations of cultural and entertainment assets located downtown. Additionally, placemaking has long been central to the work of UPMOs, they are the leading experts on creating a vibrant sense of place in their city. Leveraging existing assets, capitalizing on large scale events, and partnering with stakeholders on specific interventions can curate a positive downtown experience which is not just clean and safe, but also fun. This work will support existing small businesses by driving foot traffic and can draw new entrepreneurs to fill vacant spaces by showing that downtown is the place to be. The fundamental work of UPMOs has never been more important to their districts.

## Introduction

Downtown stands at the economic, cultural, and social core of every city. Downtowns go beyond driving economic growth and innovation; they also serve the community as dynamic cultural centers where people gather to enjoy shared experiences. In a post-pandemic environment, this role as a cultural and community hub is only growing more important to the future of downtowns.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated profound changes in work patterns, exposing vulnerabilities in the central business district model that many downtowns were built around for decades. Expanding focus on a mixed-use environment which accommodates visitors and residents along with workers will position downtowns for long-term success and renewed growth.

While recent years have brought new challenges, the history of downtowns is one of resilience and reinvention. Downtowns and UPMOs are now in a position to renew and refocus as spaces of culture, identity, and belonging for the whole city. Through strategic place management and thoughtful planning, downtowns and urban centers across the U.S. can reaffirm their importance to their cities, regions, and the nation.

Downtown is **2.2%**  
of the city's land  
and accounts for:



**19%**

Citywide  
Jobs

**4%**

Citywide  
Residents

**9%**

Experience  
Industry  
Revenue

**11%**

Assessed  
Property  
Value

Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (2024), American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023), LEHD OnTheMap (2022)



## Methodology

IDA's research identified five key principles—economy, inclusion, vibrancy, identity and resilience—and analyzed more than 150 key metrics within the principles to quantify the value of a given U.S. downtown. The study relied on public and proprietary data sources as well as data collection by the partner UPMO, defining the district beyond the boundaries of the UPMO. Metrics were calculated by change over time, by square mile and by share of city and regional value, allowing IDA to measure each downtown against its respective city and region. Though downtowns are generally small geographic areas, with a median size of just 1.7 square miles and a median share of the city land area of 2.2%, they can also vary widely in geography. The smallest participant, downtown Albuquerque, is less than 0.5 square miles; the largest, downtown Charlotte, is 9.3 square miles. Because of this, many metrics will be compared across downtowns on a per square mile or per acre basis, or as a percentage of the city total.

57 UPMOs across the U.S. have participated in the study as of the end of 2025, an increasingly broad and varied sample that reflects urban districts of all types in a wide range of cities and in every region of the country. Our analysis of

eight years of studies shines a light on the crucial role of a healthy downtown, not only for residents and workers but for the entire city's success.

For this *Trends Report*, downtown indicators are generally summarized using the median across all Value of Downtowns study areas. The median is used to emphasize conditions in a typical downtown and to avoid results being disproportionately influenced by a small number of exceptionally large, dense, or high-value downtowns. This approach is particularly important for cross-city comparisons, where distributions are often highly skewed. Prior editions of the report reported means for some indicators. Beginning with this edition, medians are used more consistently for cross-city comparisons to improve interpretability and better reflect typical downtown conditions.

Occasionally, for select metrics intended to describe overall system performance or intensity, such as assessed value per square mile, we report weighted averages. These averages reflect the aggregate contribution of downtowns to citywide or system-level outcomes rather than the experience of an individual downtown.



## Downtown Typologies

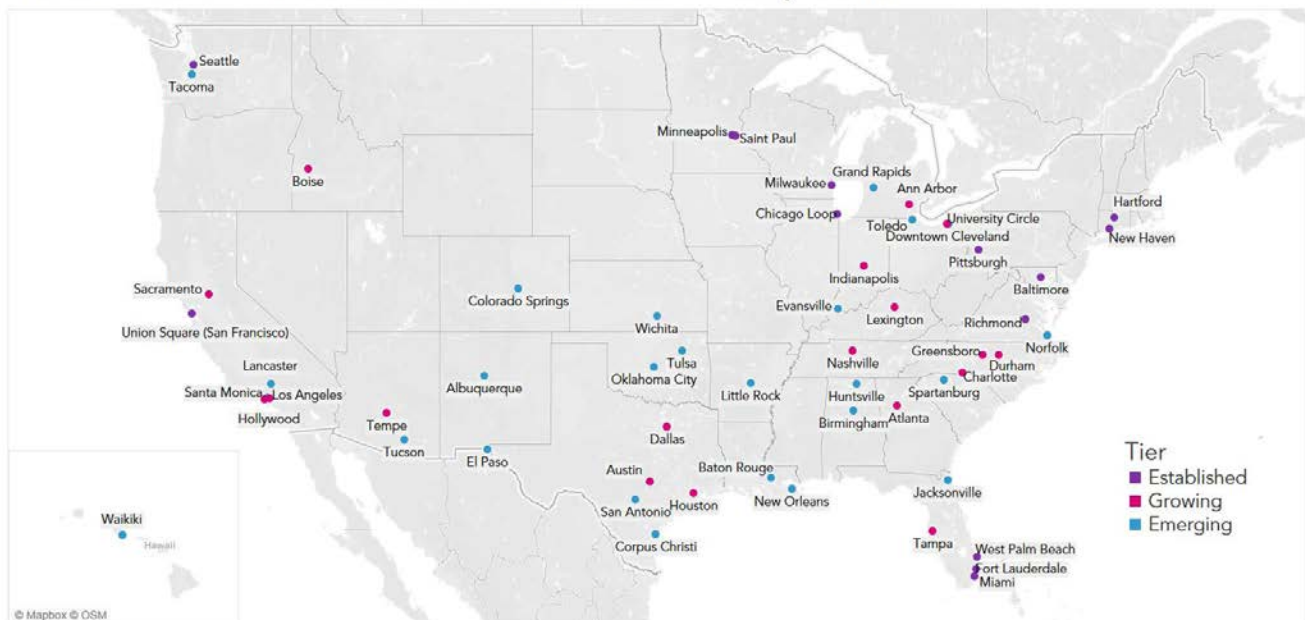
Based on the data collected for the *Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities*, IDA identified three tiers of downtowns: **established, growing and emerging**. Criteria included rate of growth and citywide share of residents and jobs, density of residents and jobs and assessed value per square mile. Downtowns with the greatest density, land value, and share of citywide resources made up the *established* tier. Other downtowns fall into the *growing* or *emerging* tiers based on how quickly they are growing.

Generally, as a downtown moves from *emerging* to *growing* to *established*, figures across all categories rise. For example, *established* downtowns have by far the highest density of workers, generate the highest assessed land values, and host the largest share of their city's residents and workers.

*Growing* downtowns are an exception to this generalization on growth metrics, with a population growth rate double the typical downtown since 2010. These are the downtowns which have entered a phase of rapid development and change which provides new opportunities for downtown and the city as a whole. Most *growing* downtowns are also starting from a smaller base of employment and population, which can make their growth percentages look especially dramatic.

*Emerging* downtowns could be described as those with the most potential; they have yet to accumulate the density of development found in *established* downtowns or enter a rapid growth period like *growing* downtowns. They often have lower land values and lower density, but these lower land values also mean lower rents that make these downtowns attractive to makers and creatives, and lower density creates development opportunities for investors and developers. *Emerging* downtowns may be the tier of downtowns best positioned to adapt to new post-pandemic realities, as they are less burdened by over-supply of office space than their *growing* and *established* counterparts. *Emerging* downtowns also had the earliest and largest recovery of in-person workdays post-pandemic.

### *Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities Study Districts*



## Economy

Downtowns have a long-standing role as the hubs of regional economies, with incredible concentration of jobs in a small district. While assessment and taxation methodologies vary from city to city, it is near universal that downtowns have the most valuable land in the city. Their role as an employment center, along with concentrating the greatest density of development and highest land values in the city makes them crucial to municipal finances by generating a disproportionate amount of property tax revenues.

**Fiscal Impact:** Across all study areas, downtowns average \$2.9 billion in land value per square mile, while the typical downtown captures 11% of citywide land value within just 2.2% of the city's land area. As a result, public and private investments in a downtown's built environment can be expected to yield dividends that spread well beyond just one neighborhood and benefit the city as a whole. Downtowns always have high land value relative to the city, but some stand out as exceptional even among their peers. Waikiki, Seattle, Norfolk, Austin, and Nashville all have over \$10 billion in property value per square mile.

**Employment Centers:** Downtowns remain a central employment center for the city and region, concentrating nearly one in five of all city jobs. In some downtowns, such as the three *established* downtowns of Miami, New Haven, and Seattle, the level of concentration reaches even more striking levels, with more than 50% of citywide jobs located downtown. Even as downtowns transform into more complete destinations for live, work and play, workers will continue to play an essential role in the vitality of downtown and the city overall.

Total job numbers have largely recovered from a slight decline due to layoffs in 2020. As of 2022, the most recent data year available from LEHD OnTheMap, *established* and *growing* downtowns had collectively recovered to 2019 job totals or slightly exceeded them. *Emerging* downtowns however, still lag behind, with median employment levels 3% below 2019. As employment centers, downtowns remain strong, but worker presence has structurally shifted. While recovery of overall employment may be nearly complete, recovery of in-person workdays is not.



### Land Value per Square Mile (weighted average)

Emerging  
Downtowns

\$1.9B

Growing  
Downtowns

\$2.1B

Established  
Downtowns

\$4.9B

Source: Local urban place management organizations



### Share of Citywide Jobs

Emerging  
Downtowns

15%

Growing  
Downtowns

19%

Established  
Downtowns

39%

### Job Density (workers per acre)

32

43

51

Source: LEHD on the Map (2022)

**Remote Work Impact:** In 2025, in-person workdays downtown has plateaued well below pre-pandemic levels. The median downtown only has 80% of worker visits compared to 2019, according to data from Placer, a foot traffic and visitation data provider. After steady gains through 2024, worker presence stalled in 2025, signaling that hybrid work patterns may have reached a new equilibrium despite additional high-profile calls to return-to-office in 2025. This represents a significant shift for downtowns, where office workers have long formed a reliable and significant share of daily activity.

*Established* downtowns, which have the greatest density and largest share of the city's workforce, have also been the hardest hit by shifts in work practices, with a median recovery rate of 65%, compared to about 80% for both *growing* and *emerging* downtowns.

Despite these challenges, not all downtowns are seeing declines in worker presence. Of the 57 IDA study districts, nine now exceed their 2019 in-person workdays, and two *emerging* districts stand out in particular: Lancaster, CA and Waikiki, each reporting worker visits more than 10% above pre-pandemic levels.

**Looking to the future:** With annual in-person workdays for employees at downtown workplaces plateauing at roughly 80% of 2019 levels in a typical downtown, UPMOs and policymakers must adapt to a new normal. Downtowns remain, and will continue to be, major centers of employment and commercial activity, especially office uses; however, UPMOs and city leaders need to rethink the balance of the downtown built environment portfolio now that the post-pandemic realities have set in. *Reimagining Cities: Disrupting the Urban Doom Loop*,<sup>1</sup> a recent research report by real estate brokerage Cushman & Wakefield, suggests that an optimal real estate product mix in a walkable urban environment consists of 31% residential space, 42% workplaces, and 26% recreational or “play” spaces. The same research found that a typical downtown is nearly 70% workplaces, and only 16% live and 15% play spaces, highlighting a significant need to reposition older and struggling office properties with new uses and renewed purpose.

Rebalancing will also require attracting new types of businesses and services. Growing visitation may require new hospitality, entertainment and recreational assets while supporting existing retail, drinking and dining establishments. Sustained residential growth will require amenities that many downtowns currently lack, such as varied grocery options and pharmacies, as well as high-quality infrastructure like green spaces and schools.

## Downtown Worker Presence Recovery

| 2025<br>Percentage<br>of 2019<br>In-Person<br>Worker Days | Emerging<br>Downtowns | Growing<br>Downtowns | Established<br>Downtowns |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
|                                                           | 82%                   | 80%                  | 65%                      |

Source: Placer.ai (2019, 2025)

## Downtown Employment



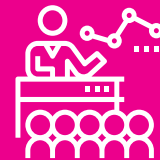
**21%**  
TOTAL CITYWIDE  
KNOWLEDGE JOBS



**25%**  
TOTAL CITYWIDE  
CREATIVE JOBS



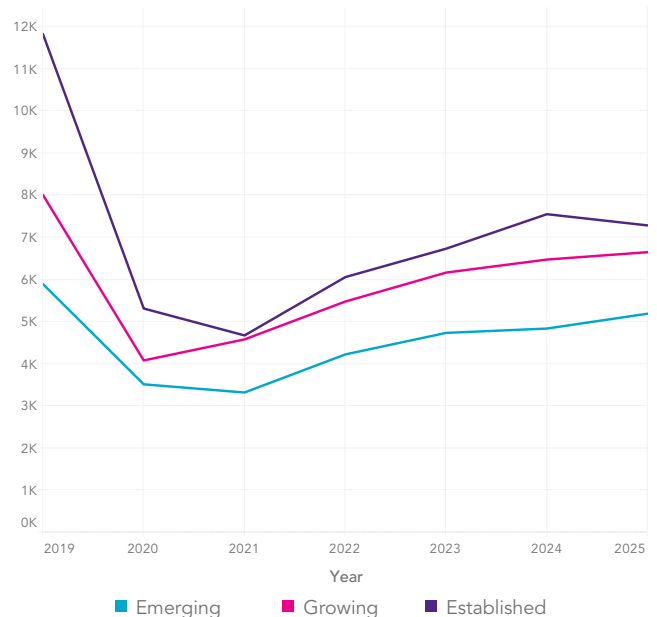
**19%**  
CITYWIDE  
JOBS



**5%**  
JOB GROWTH  
2010–2022

Source: LEHD OnTheMap (2022)

## Annual Worker Visits per Acre



Source: Placer.ai (2019–2025)

## Inclusion

Downtowns and urban districts have the ability to welcome and bring together diverse residents, visitors and workers from all backgrounds and walks of life. Downtown residents tend to be young, racially diverse and well-educated.

**Age:** Downtowns generally attract younger residents. In the median downtown, the share of 18-to-34-year-old residents is 16 percentage points higher than the city overall, reflecting the strong appeal of downtown living for students and young professionals. By contrast, there are fewer families and seniors living downtown. Only 11% of downtown residents are 65 or older, compared to 18% nationally, and just 6% are under 18 compared to 22% nationally.

**Race/Ethnicity:** Downtowns are more racially and ethnically diverse than the rest of the nation as a whole: about half of downtown residents are non-White, 47%, higher than the 42% population nationally. But downtowns are often less representative than their surrounding cities. In 44 of 57 study downtowns, the downtown had a lower share of non-White residents than in the broader city. These contrasts are notable as they can influence local perceptions of downtown as more exclusive.

**Education:** Socioeconomically, downtown residents are well-educated, with 54% having a Bachelor's degree or higher education credential, compared to just 35% nationally. Despite these high levels of educational attainment, the typical downtown resident is not necessarily high-income as they are generally younger and earlier in their career. In fact, in 60% of study downtowns, the median income for downtown households is lower than for the city. However, downtown incomes have been rising quickly in recent years, and are nearing parity with the rest of the cities.

**Housing:** Housing affordability is a major concern for downtown residents. Rents have risen quickly, with the median rent in a typical downtown increasing 91% from 2010 to 2023—nearly doubling over the period. This trend is accelerating; in the previous edition of this report, the increase was 84% from 2010 to 2022. In many cities, downtowns are already among the more expensive neighborhoods, with the median downtown rent \$114 higher per month than the median city rent.

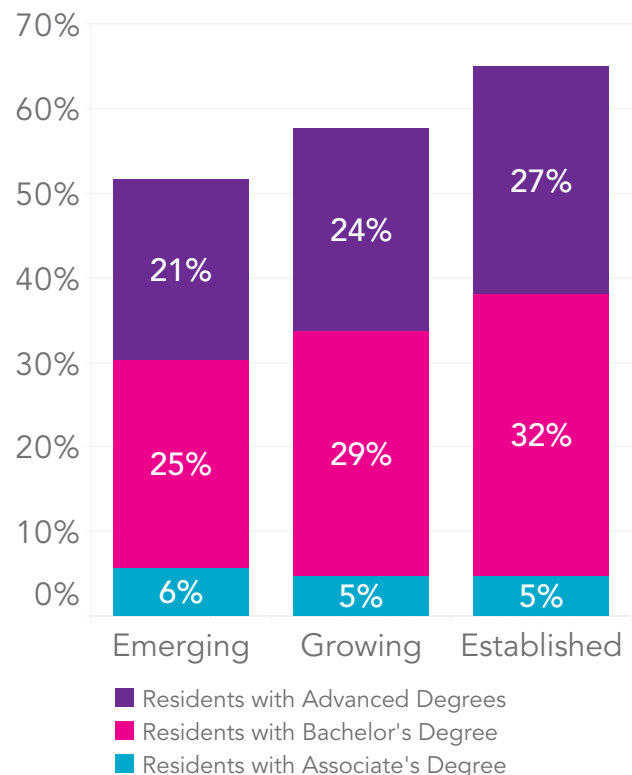


### Downtown Residents

|       |                                      |
|-------|--------------------------------------|
| 9     | RESIDENTS PER ACRE                   |
| 47%   | ARE NON-WHITE                        |
| 54%   | HOLD A BACHELOR'S OR ADVANCED DEGREE |
| 44%   | ARE AGES 18–34                       |
| \$63K | MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME              |
| 34%   | LIVE IN MIDDLE-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS     |

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023)

### Downtown Degree Holders



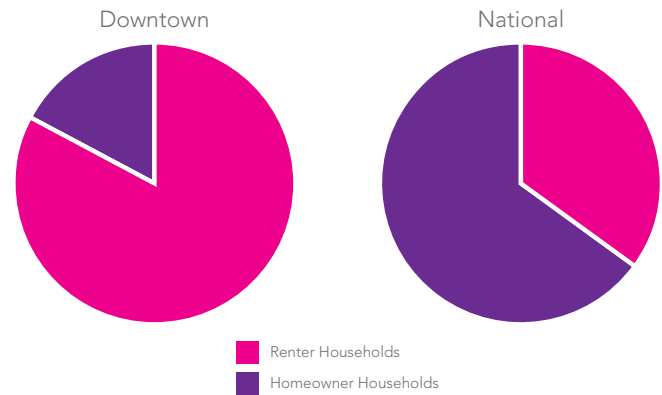
Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023)

Because most downtown households rent, the impact of rising rents is especially acute. In the typical downtown, 82% of households are renters, and in more than a quarter of downtowns, the share of renters exceeds 90%. This imbalance makes downtown communities uniquely vulnerable to displacement in the face of rapidly rising rents, limits their ability to benefit from appreciating property values, and shrinks the potential pool of future residents.

Affordability, however, does vary across cities. In about one-third of study downtowns, downtown rents are more affordable than the city median, with rents potentially several hundred dollars per month less than elsewhere in the city. A few downtowns also have relatively high homeownership rates—Spartanburg and Huntsville, for example, both have a majority of households that own their homes.

Additionally, downtowns offer strong value to residents through better access to transit, services, and public amenities, which can help offset higher housing costs. The Center for Neighborhood Technology's *Housing and Transportation Index* quantifies this by measuring the combined share of income a typical household spends on housing and transportation. Even though roughly two-thirds of downtowns have higher rents than their city overall, downtowns are more affordable in this combined index: a typical downtown household spends 37% of its budget on housing and transportation, compared to 44% for the median household citywide. In practical terms, this means a typical family saves about 7% of its income by living downtown rather than elsewhere in the city.

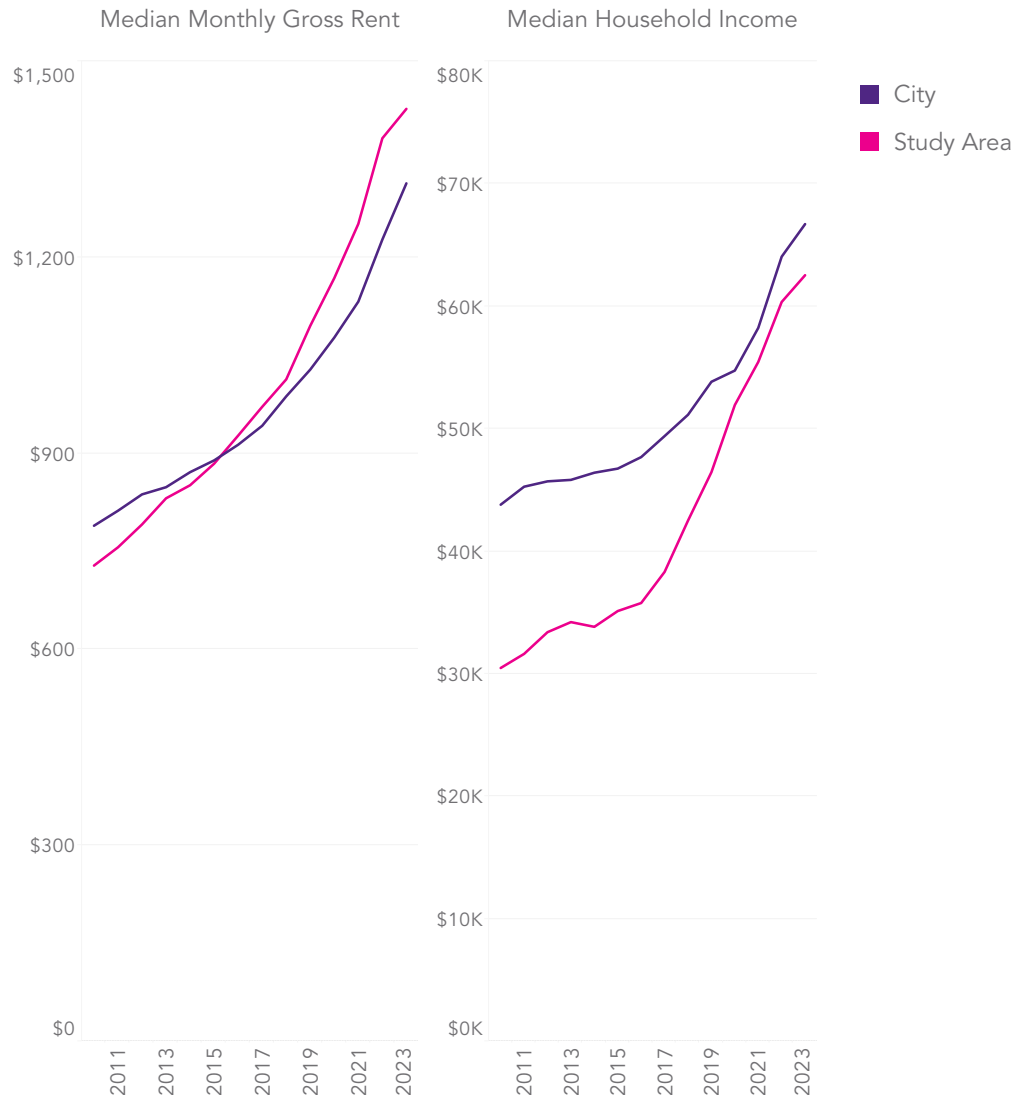
## Housing Tenure



Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023)



## Downtown and City Income and Rent Comparison



Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2010–2023)

**Looking to the future:** Housing affordability remains a critical issue in nearly all downtowns. Rising rents threaten to make downtowns an enclave of the wealthy, rather than being a representative part of the city. Additionally, the downtown housing stock is heavily skewed toward young renters. Limited homeownership opportunities and a lack of family-sized units make it difficult for young families to stay downtown as their needs change. Continued repositioning of downtown real estate inventory to a less office-dependent portfolio can solve two problems at once by expanding the total inventory of housing and variety of housing types to meet high demand for downtown living.

## Vibrancy

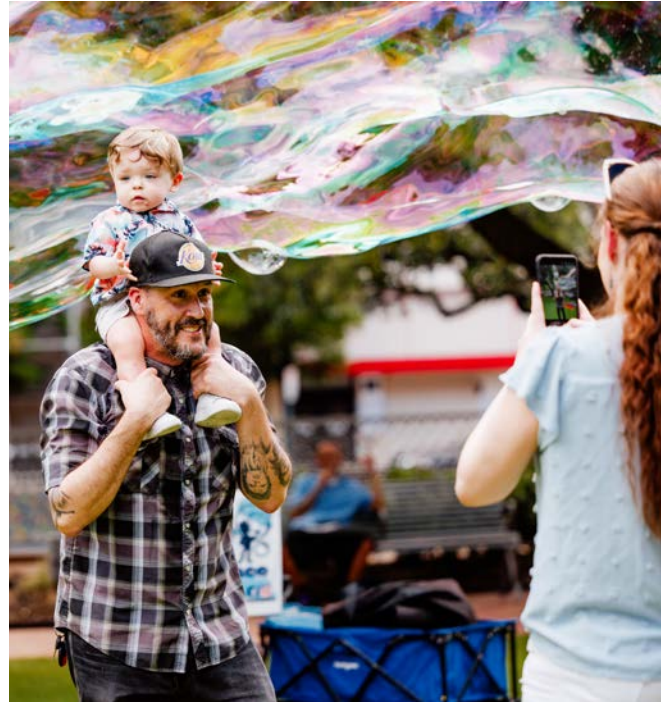
Density of development, cultural amenities, and a variety of event and venue offerings make downtowns vibrant and active. While COVID-19 has fundamentally altered the downtown work environment, it did not diminish the desire for downtown living. This sustained demand is a promising sign for UPMOs and city leaders charting a course to transition the urban core from a central business district model toward a more balanced, mixed-use neighborhood.

**Population Change:** For well over two decades, downtowns have been the fastest-growing residential areas in their cities, and that trend seems to be accelerating. From 2000 to 2023, a typical downtown grew by 42%, against citywide growth of just 13%. From 2019 to 2023, 85% of study districts increased in population. The median downtown population growth in that period was 11% in just four years, more than 20 times faster than the median study city, which grew by less than half a percent over the same period.

A handful of Sun Belt downtowns: Nashville, Greensboro, Tempe, West Palm Beach and Spartanburg stand out as national leaders in post-pandemic residential growth. Each of these downtowns expanded their residential population by more than 33% from 2019 to 2023.

**Experience Industry:** The experience industry is a core driver of downtown vibrancy. As UPMOs and cities work to diversify office-heavy built environments, increasing visitation is a critical strategy to revitalize downtowns by making downtown a place that visitors, workers, and residents alike all choose to be. The experience industry encompasses four sectors that generate a significant share of downtown visits: retail trade; food and beverage service; accommodations; and arts, entertainment, and recreation.

Many downtowns are already starting from a solid baseline in this sector. Downtowns have long been hubs of cultural institutions, hospitality properties, dining and shopping. The median downtown has \$382M in sales per square mile across the businesses in the four sectors making up the experience industry. A typical downtown has more than five times the sales density of the rest of the city, and accounts for 9% of citywide sales in the experience industry, with Waikiki leading the study with \$7 billion in sales per square mile and 35% of citywide sales.



**Visitation:** Visitation has always been key to downtowns, perhaps more than many realize. Whether they are locals coming downtown in need of professional services or simply a night out, or the coveted big spending out-of-town tourists, those who are neither workers nor residents have always been the lion's share of downtown's audience. The impact of structural changes to work arrangements has made a noticeable and significant impact on downtown, but visitation to downtown remains strong. Footfall data reveal that while downtown visitation has also plateaued, it has recovered close to pre-pandemic levels, far above the recovery of worker presence. In 2025, a typical downtown recovered to 94% of its pre-pandemic annual visitation, which captures everyone who goes downtown but is not a worker nor a resident.

Among the three tiers, *growing* downtowns show the strongest visitation recovery. Sixty-seven percent of *growing* downtowns have recovered 90% or more of their 2019 visitor volume, compared with 57% of *established* downtowns. Because many *growing* downtowns already had sizable visitor bases, this stronger recovery means that the median *growing* downtown now attracts more annual visitors than the median *established* downtown—a reversal of the 2019 pattern.

# The Experience Industry

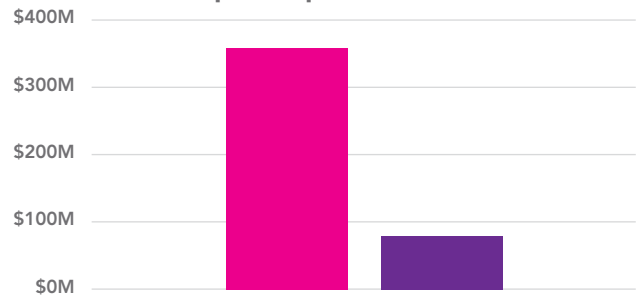


## Experience Industry Sales Concentration

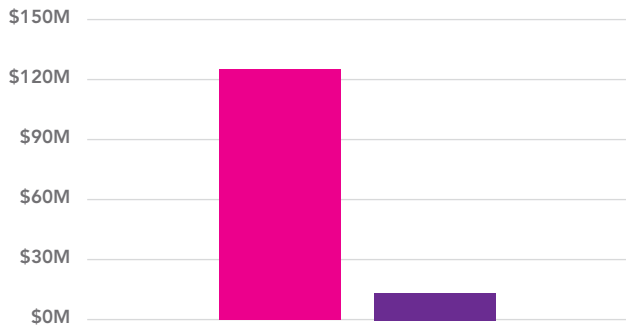
Downtowns are hubs for visitation, concentrating **5x more** business activity per square mile across all sectors of the experience industry than the rest of the city.

■ Downtown ■ City

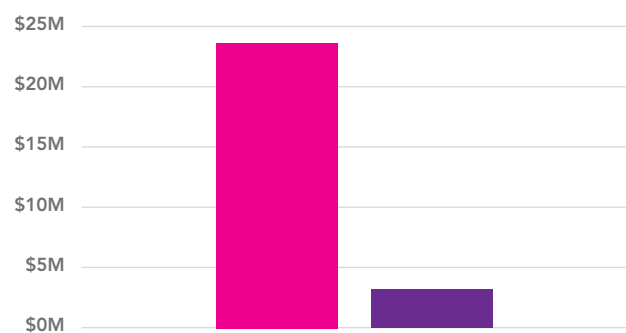
## Experience Industry Total Sales per Square Mile



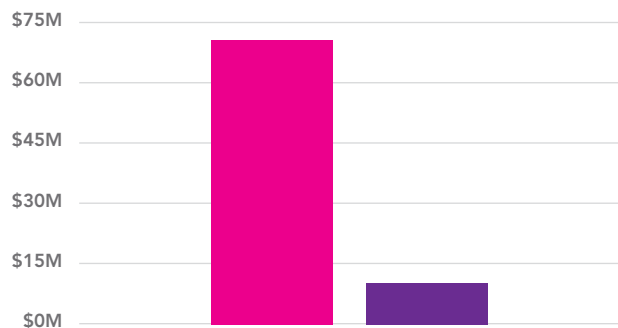
### Accommodation



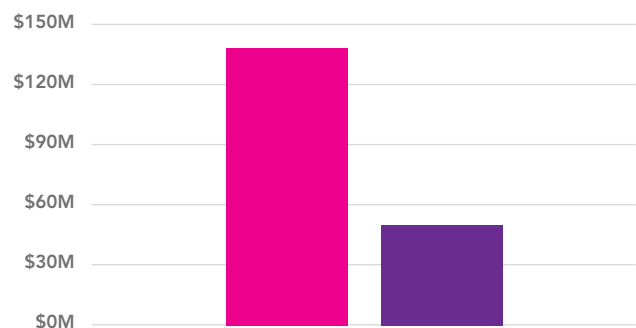
### Arts, Entertainment and Recreation



### Food and Beverage Service

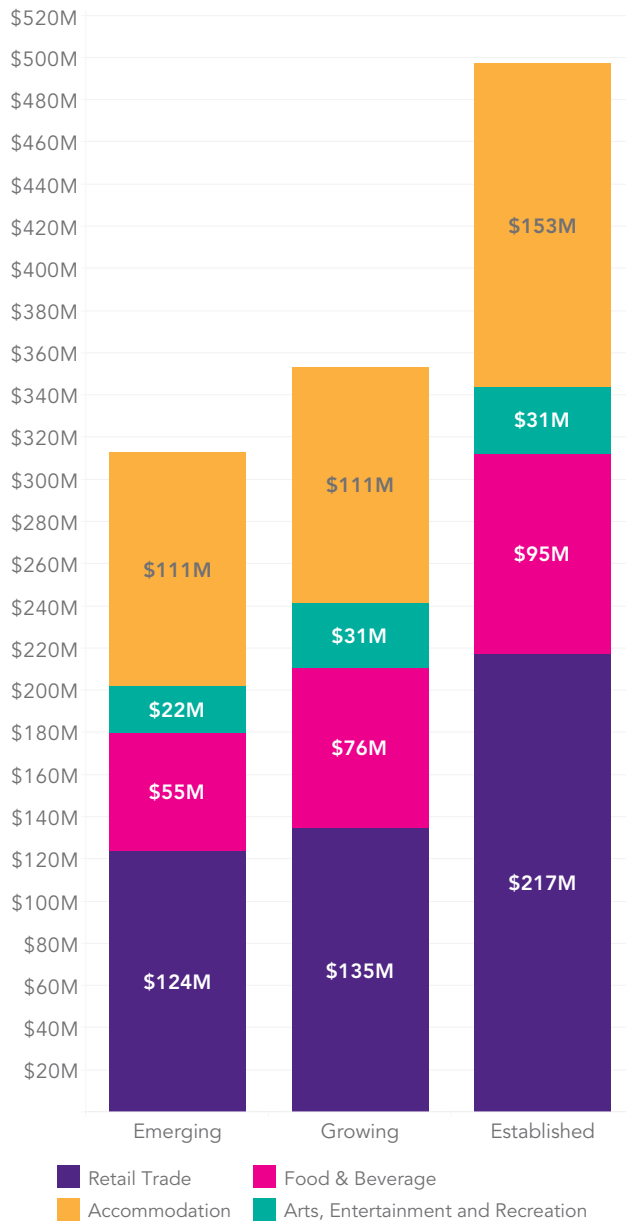


### Retail Trade



Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (2024)

## Downtown Experience Industry Sales per Square Mile



Source: ESRI Business Analyst Online (2024)



## Visitor Recovery

Downtowns with >90% 2019 Visitation

Emerging  
Downtowns

16 of 25  
(64%)

Growing  
Downtowns

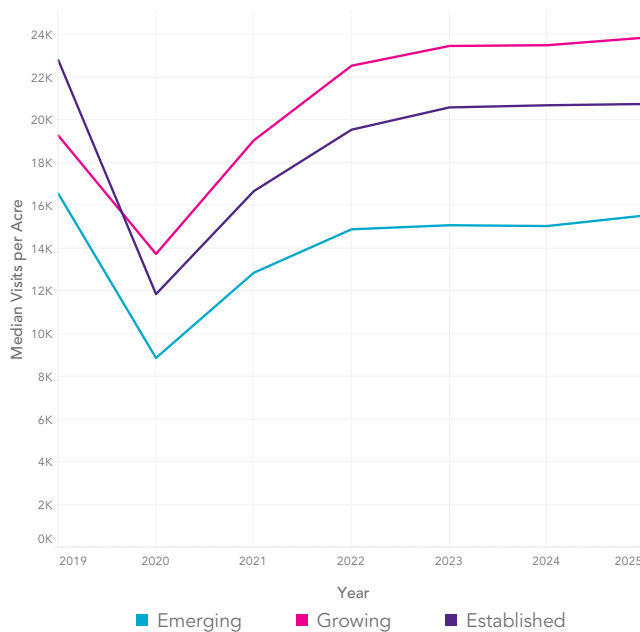
12 of 18  
(67%)

Established  
Downtowns

8 of 14  
(57%)

Source: Placer.ai (2019, 2025)

## Annual Visitors per Acre



Source: Placer.ai (2019–2025)

Individually, downtown visitor recovery ranges from a low of 66% of 2019 levels to a high of 122%, illustrating that macro trends and downtown typologies explain only part of the story. Local factors such as perceptions of safety, event programming, cultural anchors, and hospitality offerings play a decisive role in shaping visitation outcomes for each downtown.

**Looking to the future:** Growing the experience industry and expanding visitation will be central to the future vitality of downtowns. This means not only attracting big spending out-of-town visitors, but also reengaging local and regional audiences who may need encouragement to “rediscover” what their downtown has to offer. Positioning downtown as the destination for fun, culture, and unique experiences provides a path not just to recovery, but to meaningful new growth.

The year 2026 presents a particularly strong set of opportunities for North American UPMOs. Major events—including the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the America250 semiquincentennial celebrations in the United States—will draw substantial domestic and international attention. Downtowns that prepare to capture this demand through programming, partnerships, hospitality enhancements, and cultural activation will be well positioned to accelerate visitation and strengthen their experience industry.

## Identity

Downtowns are more than economic engines for the city, far more than just dense clusters of offices and housing. They are the beating heart of regional culture and identity. Downtowns are rich with cultural, historical, and recreational treasures that bring together people from all walks of life. A typical downtown contains 29 structures on the National Register of Historic Places, 52 publicly displayed art installations, 7 museums, and 18 live entertainment venues all packed into a study area of just 1.7 square miles. These cultural, recreational and entertainment assets are not just major anchors for downtown visitation and the experience industry, they are central to shaping the character of downtown and defining the identity of the entire region.



The typical  
downtown  
has...



29

HISTORIC  
PLACES



52

PUBLIC ART  
INSTALLATIONS



7

MUSEUMS



18

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT  
VENUES

Source: Local Place Management Organizations

## Resilience

Downtowns are inherently resilient places because their urban form naturally supports more sustainable, lower-impact lifestyles. Mixed land uses put work, shopping, dining, and essential services close together, while strong transit access and walkable street networks reduce dependence on cars. The median downtown Walk Score is 90, nearly the top of the 0–100 scale, compared to 45 citywide.

**Sustainable Commutes:** Downtown residents make strong use of the sustainable travel options available to them. In the median study city, they are five times more likely to walk to work and twice as likely to take transit as residents elsewhere.

This is especially notable given that only about 7% of downtown residents also work downtown—meaning most are commuting to other neighborhoods or job centers, yet still choosing lower carbon modes. A few downtowns stand out as exceptions, such as Seattle (23%) and the Chicago Loop (18%), where a substantial share of residents both live and work downtown.



Downtown residents  
are **5x more likely**  
to walk to work



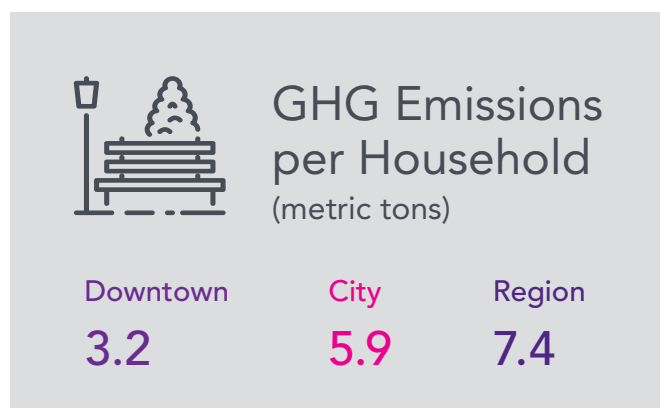
Downtown residents  
are **2x more likely**  
to take transit to work

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (2019–2023)

**Environmental Impact:** These travel patterns reinforce downtowns' role as sustainable neighborhoods. Because residents have viable alternatives to driving, greenhouse gas emissions are much lower downtown: a typical household produces just 3.2 metric tons per year, less than half the median level for study regions (7.4 metric tons).

**Looking to the future:** While downtowns are inherently more sustainable neighborhoods, commute patterns have begun to shift in the opposite direction in the post-pandemic era. From 2019 to 2023, the share of downtown residents driving to work increased by 2–3 percentage points across all tiers, a reversal of long-standing trends toward walking, biking, and transit. This likely reflects the impact of hybrid work schedules, which can make transit passes less cost-effective, reduce the predictability of commuting routines, and increase the appeal of driving for sporadic office trips.

These changing patterns underscore the importance of continued investment in walkability, bikeability, and high-quality transit as core resilience strategies. For UPMOs, strengthening these networks is not only about reducing emissions—it is essential to supporting a vibrant, mixed-use environment where residents, workers, and visitors can move comfortably and sustainably.



Source: Center for Neighborhood Technology (2022)

## Conclusion

Downtowns remain the indispensable heart of their regions: small in footprint but large in impact. Across all study areas, downtowns average \$2.9 billion in land value per square mile, while the typical downtown captures 11% of citywide land value within just 2.2% of the city's land area. What happens downtown does not stay downtown; this massive economic impact makes downtown the keystone of municipal finance and regional economies.

Though return-to-office rates are stabilizing at 80% of pre-pandemic figures, and visitation rates at 94%, downtowns are primed for their next evolution. Residential growth remains very strong in almost all downtowns, and while the 91% increase in median rent from 2010 to 2023 creates affordability pressures, it also signals robust appetite for downtown living. Meanwhile, the experience industry provides a powerful economic baseline: a typical downtown generates \$382 million in sales per square mile across retail, dining, entertainment, and accommodations—five times the density of the city overall. Combined with their dense concentration of cultural and civic assets, downtowns remain the place where people come together to work, live, and play together—an enduring platform for inclusivity, regional identity, and shared prosperity.

Looking ahead, sustained success will come from embracing and adapting to the new normal. The “who” of downtown has changed remarkably. Continued residential expansion, as well as renewed visitation growth, will mitigate the decline in worker presence from hybrid and remote work. However, these changes will take time. Large shifts in the incumbent built environment cannot be accomplished quickly, and in most downtowns, land ownership is highly fractured with many individual and institutional players. UPMOs have key roles to play in this transition: convening these diverse stakeholders, building a consensus vision for downtown's future, and advocating for needed policy interventions to local and national leaders to make the vision reality. It helps to cook with the right ingredients, and downtowns have it all: employment opportunities, diverse communities, historic and cultural assets and multi-nodal connectivity. With purposeful leadership from UPMOs, public officials, and private partners, downtowns can move from recovery to growth and deliver prosperity for the entire city.

## Emerging Downtowns

- ALBUQUERQUE
- BATON ROUGE
- BIRMINGHAM
- COLORADO SPRINGS
- CORPUS CHRISTI
- EL PASO
- EVANSVILLE
- GRAND RAPIDS
- HOLLYWOOD
- HUNTSVILLE
- JACKSONVILLE
- LANCASTER
- LITTLE ROCK
- NEW ORLEANS
- NORFOLK
- OKLAHOMA CITY
- SAN ANTONIO
- SPARTANBURG
- TACOMA
- TOLEDO
- TUCSON
- TULSA
- UNIVERSITY CIRCLE
- WAIKIKI
- WICHITA

- 1% OF CITYWIDE LAND AREA
- \$1.9B ASSESSED VALUE PER SQUARE MILE
- 6% CITYWIDE EXPERIENCE INDUSTRY SALES
- 2% OF RESIDENTS AGED 25 TO 34 YEARS

Note: Assessed value based on weighted mean of tier.



GROWTH  
AVG. 2010 – 2023

DOWNTOWN CITYWIDE  
15% 4%

DENSITY  
RESIDENTS / ACRE

5 4

INCOME  
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD

\$44K \$63K

DIVERSITY INDEX

66 72



-5% GROWTH (2010–2022)

32 DENSITY (JOBS PER ACRE)

15% CITYWIDE JOBS

17% CITYWIDE KNOWLEDGE JOBS

18% CITYWIDE CREATIVE JOBS



15  
HOTELS

4,073  
HOTEL ROOMS



SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUTE

DOWNTOWN  
30%

CITY  
17%

WALK SCORE



DOWNTOWN CITY  
80 39

BIKE SCORE



DOWNTOWN CITY  
66 47

TRANSIT SCORE



DOWNTOWN CITY  
52 23

## Growing Downtowns

- ANN ARBOR
- ATLANTA
- AUSTIN
- BOISE
- CHARLOTTE
- CLEVELAND
- DALLAS
- DURHAM
- GREENSBORO
- HOUSTON
- INDIANAPOLIS
- LEXINGTON
- LOS ANGELES
- NASHVILLE
- SACRAMENTO
- SANTA MONICA
- TAMPA
- TEMPE

2% OF CITYWIDE LAND AREA  
 \$2.1B ASSESSED VALUE PER SQUARE MILE  
 6% CITYWIDE EXPERIENCE INDUSTRY SALES  
 6% OF RESIDENTS AGED 25 TO 34 YEARS

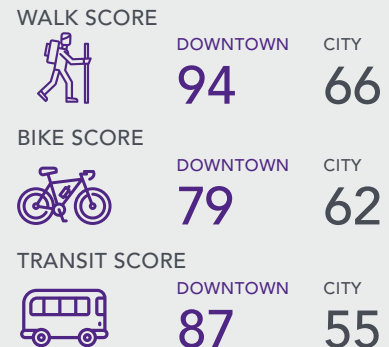
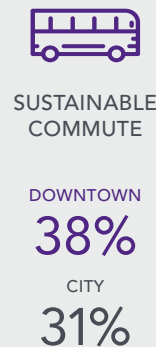
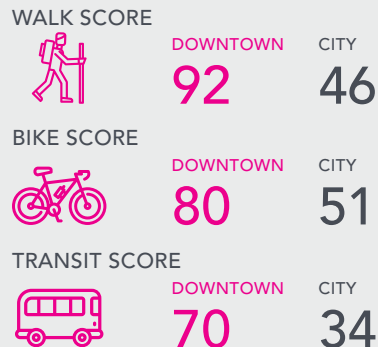
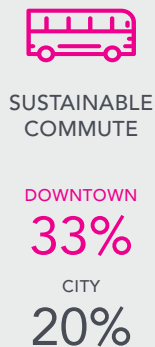
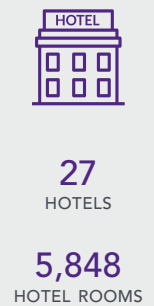
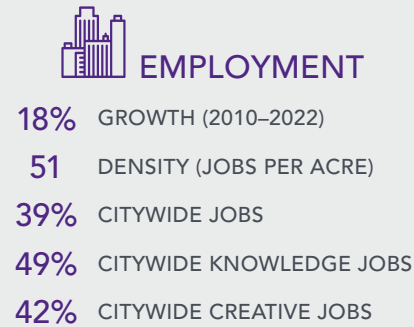
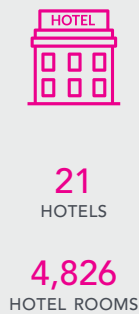
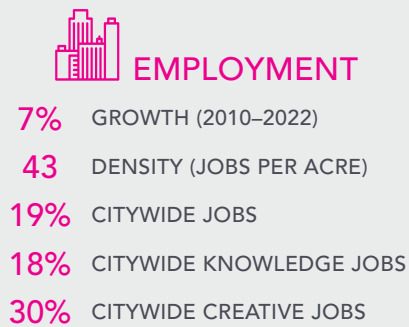
Note: Assessed value based on weighted mean of tier.

## Established Downtowns

- BALTIMORE
- CHICAGO
- FORT LAUDERDALE
- HARTFORD
- MIAMI
- MILWAUKEE
- MINNEAPOLIS
- NEW HAVEN
- PITTSBURGH
- RICHMOND
- SAINT PAUL
- SAN FRANCISCO
- SEATTLE
- WEST PALM BEACH

5% OF CITYWIDE LAND AREA  
 \$4.9B ASSESSED VALUE PER SQUARE MILE  
 18% CITYWIDE EXPERIENCE INDUSTRY SALES  
 13% OF RESIDENTS AGED 25 TO 34 YEARS

Note: Assessed value based on weighted mean of tier.



## About the Value of Downtowns Study

Building on IDA's unique industry-wide perspective and expertise, this study quantifies the value of U.S. downtowns and center cities across more than 150 metrics organized under five core value principles, with a focus on how downtowns contribute to the city and region around them. *The Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities* study is a partnership between IDA and local urban place management organization (UPMO).

*The Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities* research articulates the inherent value a downtown provides to the greater city, highlighting a district's contributions based upon 150+ key data points in the principles of Economy, Inclusion, Vibrancy, Identity and Resilience. The primary project goals are to:



Provide a **common set of metrics** to communicate the value of downtown.



Expand the **range of arguments** UPMOs can make to their stakeholders using publicly available data.

IDA began this research in 2017, working with Stantec's Urban Places group and the first cohort of 13 UPMOs to develop a methodology for compiling and evaluating data from those 13 downtowns. In 2025, our analysis has expanded to include 57 downtowns and center cities across the U.S.

IDA and our UPMO partners work together to collect more than 150 individual metrics for the most recent year and over the past decade and three geographic levels (study area, city, and MSA/county). In addition, for employment data we collect three different jobs totals (primary, all jobs, and all private) for all years between 2002 and 2022 to show more nuanced employment trends over time. The demographic and jobs data included in the study is now beginning to extend beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, but some real estate, tax, and assessment data include 2024 and 2025 figures.

REFERENCES

ENDNOTES

PHOTO CREDITS



## Endnotes

- 1 Rockey, Rebecca, David Smith, Kevin Thorpe, Christopher Leinberger, and Michael Rodriquez. Reimagining Cities: Disrupting the Urban Doom Loop: Cushman & Wakefield, 2024. <https://www.cushmanwakefield.com/en/united-states/insights/reimagining-cities-disrupting-the-urban-doom-loop>.

## Photo Credits

### Covers

LEVS Park Jax. (2025). *LEVS park gathering*. Jacksonville, FL.

Brandon Martin. (2024). *Houston skyline at dusk*. Houston, TX.

Katya Horner. (2011). *Bikers in park*. Houston, TX.

### Page 6

Ryan Ketterman. (2025). *Bike rider along waterfront*. Jacksonville, FL.

### Page 7

Egidio Narvaez. (2025). *People at art event*. Houston, TX.

### Page 14

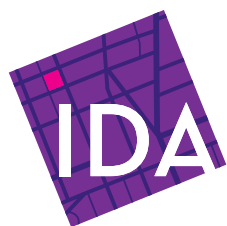
Egidio Narvaez. (2025). *People posing for picture at event*. Houston, TX.

### Page 16

Lucy Gruidl. (2025). *People dining outside*. Tacoma, WA.

### Page 18

Toni Smailagic. (2025). *People in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville*. Jacksonville, FL.



International Downtown Association  
1275 K Street NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20005  
202.393.6801 | [downtown.org](http://downtown.org)  
© 2026 International Downtown Association, All Rights Reserved