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

AN IDA STUDY CALCULATING THE VALUE OF DOWNTOWN  
COMPENDIUM - SECOND EDITION

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

The *Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities* project focuses on demonstrating the impact and benefits American downtowns and center cities provide all citizens in the community. Informed by IDA's award-winning project, *The Value of Investing in Canadian Downtowns*, this study:

- Establishes a replicable, accessible, standard methodology for IDA to calculate the value of an American downtown.
- Articulates the unique contributions, importance, and multiple benefits of downtown investment for a broad range of relevant stakeholders and audiences.
- Benchmarks the performance of American downtowns and creates a baseline for future data collection.

The study identified five key principles—economy, inclusion, vibrancy, identity, and resilience—and analyzed more than 100 key data points within the principles to quantify the value of a given U.S. downtown. The study relied on both public and proprietary data sources, defining the commercial downtown beyond the boundaries of a downtown development authority or business improvement district. Metrics were calculated by change over time, by square mile, and by share of city and regional value, allowing IDA to begin measuring each downtown against its respective city and region.

Twenty-four downtown urban place-management organizations across the U.S. have participated in the study to date, informing this new industry standard. The 2017 pilot included Baltimore, Charlotte, Grand Rapids, Lancaster, Miami, Norfolk, Pittsburgh, Sacramento, San Antonio, San Francisco, Santa Monica, Seattle, and Wichita. Participants in 2018 are Ann Arbor, Atlanta, Austin, Dallas, Durham, El Paso, Greensboro, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Oklahoma City, and Tucson. Our analysis of this group of downtowns opened a window on just how much impact downtowns truly have, not only on those who live and work downtown, but also on their respective cities and regions. The findings reveal that each downtown functions as a leading economic driver in each city and region. While small in physical size, downtowns are immensely valuable, diverse, efficient, inclusive, and resilient on multiple levels.

**Economy:** Thanks to the density of economic activity, downtown investment provides a higher level of return per dollar invested than other parts of the city. The findings from the pilot downtowns highlight the economic role that downtowns play as centers of tax revenue generation, employment, and commercial real estate. Given their relatively small size (on average, just three percent of all citywide land), downtowns in this study deliver an average of 16% of the citywide property tax revenue, 42% of hotel tax revenue, and 12% of sales tax revenue. Downtowns contain 11% of the citywide assessed land value, 28% of total employment, and 36% of the city's office space. Downtowns represent economic opportunity and have a built environment that supports future growth. The mix of uses, coupled with ample commercial real estate, positions both downtown and city for continued office, job, and residential growth.

**Inclusion:** Downtowns and center cities provide access to opportunities and essential services for diverse users, positioning them as highly inclusive urban nodes. The downtowns exhibited marked demographic diversity with residents from a wide range of backgrounds. On average, downtown residents are 44% non-white, 29% middle-income, and 47% hold a bachelor's degree or higher. In most downtowns, those between the ages of 18-34, the millennial population, accounted for the largest age group, averaging 46% of residents.

**Vibrancy:** Due to their higher density and expansive user base, downtowns support a vibrant variety of retail, infrastructure, and institutional uses which offer mutually-reinforcing benefits to the region. Study downtowns outpaced their cities in residential growth between 2010 and 2016, growing an average of 27% against the citywide average of 7%. Downtowns are also regional shopping, nightlife, and entertainment centers. The average study downtown contains 14% of all citywide retail, food and beverage businesses, 35% of all hotel rooms, and generates \$53 million in sales tax per square mile (nearly 10 times the citywide average).

**Identity:** Downtowns have intrinsic cultural significance, defining the region's brand by offering historical assets, culture, recreation, entertainment, and participation in civic activities.

A blend of old and new, downtowns provide a high quality of life that attracts employers, investment, visitors, and residents. On average, the study downtowns contain 24 civic and community places, 11 museums, 84 public art installations and 81 historic structures.

**Resilience:** The mixed-use nature of a downtown allows for residential uses alongside commercial, connected by a variety of mobility options. Downtowns in this study consistently and significantly rank higher than their city in Walk Score (88 downtown, 49 city), Transit Score (77 downtown, 44 city), and Bike Score (80 downtown, 53 city). The average pilot downtown contains 5 parks per square mile, providing a multitude of health, environmental, well-being and sustainability benefits. The diversity and density of resources and services in downtown make it inherently better able to rebound from economic, social, and environmental shocks and stresses than other parts of the city and region. For instance, if one area of the market is in decline, the downtown can continue growing in other market areas.

**Downtown Typologies:** Each downtown in the study has its own unique context, and is at different stages of development. Based on the 24 study downtowns, three tiers of downtowns emerged based on average growth in employment, density, population, and assessed value. The charts on the next page show different trends across all five principles in each tier.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOWNTOWNS

**Investment:** Continued public investment in downtown will benefit current infrastructure, residents, and firms, but also generate outsized returns to the greater community. Because of downtown's economic productivity, every dollar invested has the potential to produce much greater returns than investment in less productive areas. To maintain downtown's economic impact, cities will need to continue investing in these areas where the tax revenues support the entire city. With shrinking federal funding, cities will be increasingly reliant on the local economic engines which are increasingly found in the downtown.

**Quality of Life as a Factor in Talent Recruitment and Retention:** As downtown job markets shift even more heavily toward knowledge workers and technology professionals, place-management organizations can play a crucial role in attracting and retaining talent by making sure its downtown has the amenities, qualities of place, and mix of uses these businesses increasingly seek out. The relatively recent jobs-follow-employees model hinges

on quality of place and more specifically the quality of walkable urban places where talented knowledge workers are choosing to live. Municipalities have a ready-made vehicle for investing walkable urban places by partnering with their downtown management organization. Not only can they activate public spaces, place-management organizations can also champion adaptive reuse of older industrial structures, help transform office spaces for other uses, and help keep pace with the evolving marketplace.

**Equity:** Downtown priorities need to include equitable development and growth that does not displace residents nor exclude workforce opportunities. While place-management organizations don't typically set out to address these issues, increasingly they are organizing workforce-training programs, collaborating across sectors to improve offerings for all socioeconomic levels, or they are working to diversify a downtown's tenant mix to provide goods and services for all households. Place-management organizations should seize the opportunity to embrace a collaborative approach, engaging community cooperation, public and private leadership, thoughtful planning, and a regulatory climate that encourages strategic, place-based development designed to build community wealth, inclusion and accessibility.

**Access:** As downtowns strive to be inclusive homes for diverse residents and employers, they'll want to consider several questions: *How can they attract more diversity and make it easier for all kinds of people to live, work, and belong? What workforce and middle-income employment and housing strategies have proved most successful? How can they encourage more transportation access, immigrants in the workforce, and jobs at all levels?* Downtowns should continue work to welcome everyone within and outside the community.

## CONCLUSION

Downtowns—and their place management organizations—can bring clarifying leadership to these issues, turning challenges into opportunities. We undertook this study with the goal of creating a product that would empower local leaders to work with the public and private sectors at all levels to encourage investment in and support for downtowns. As this study makes clear, investing in downtown delivers powerful benefits for the city and region.

# Downtown Typologies

Based on the data collected for the *Value of U.S. Downtowns and Center Cities* study, we identified three tiers of downtowns, defined by stage of development. We divided the 24 downtowns that have participated to date into “established”, “growing” and “emerging” tiers based on average growth in employment, residential density, population growth, job density, and assessed value per square mile. It is important to note that downtown geography and demographics served as the sole basis for the tiers and that a small sample size required a conservative approach to generalizations.

## Established Downtowns

- MIAMI
- MINNEAPOLIS
- SEATTLE

AVERAGE OF **6.1%** OF THE CITYWIDE LAND AREA WITH AN AVERAGE ASSESSED VALUE OF **\$29.4 BILLION** (28% OF THE CITY'S TOTAL VALUE) AND ACCOUNTS FOR:

- 32% PROPERTY TAX REVENUE
- 26% SALES TAX REVENUE
- 49% HOTEL TAX REVENUE
- 14% CITYWIDE POPULATION
- 41% DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS ARE MILLENNIAL


	DOWNTOWN	CITYWIDE
 <b>RESIDENTIAL</b>		
<b>GROWTH</b> AVG. 2010 – 2016	<b>29%</b>	10%
<b>DENSITY</b> RESIDENTS / ACRE	<b>26</b>	12
<b>INCOME</b> MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD	<b>\$57K</b>	\$52K




### EMPLOYMENT

- 52%** CITYWIDE JOBS
- 62%** CITYWIDE KNOWLEDGE JOBS
- 53%** CITYWIDE CREATIVE JOBS
- 69%** CITYWIDE OFFICE SPACE



- 49**  
HOTELS
- 9,479**  
HOTEL ROOMS
- 57%**  
CITYWIDE  
HOTEL ROOMS

	
DOWNTOWN NON-SOV COMMUTE	
DOWNTOWN <b>54%</b>	
CITY <b>36%</b>	

	DOWNTOWN	CITY
<b>WALK SCORE</b> 	<b>96</b>	73
<b>BIKE SCORE</b> 	<b>77</b>	68
<b>TRANSIT SCORE</b> 	<b>98</b>	58

## Growing Downtowns

- ANN ARBOR
- ATLANTA
- AUSTIN
- BALTIMORE
- CHARLOTTE
- DALLAS
- GRAND RAPIDS
- INDIANAPOLIS
- PITTSBURGH
- SANTA MONICA
- UNION SQUARE, SAN FRANCISCO

AVERAGE OF **3.1%** OF THE CITYWIDE LAND AREA WITH AN AVERAGE ASSESSED VALUE OF **\$7.4 BILLION** (11% OF THE CITY'S TOTAL VALUE) AND ACCOUNTS FOR:

- 13% PROPERTY TAX REVENUE
- 16% SALES TAX REVENUE
- 51% HOTEL TAX REVENUE
- 5% CITYWIDE POPULATION
- 52% DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS ARE MILLENNIAL

## Emerging Downtowns

- DURHAM
- EL PASO
- GREENSBORO
- LANCASTER (CA)
- NORFOLK
- OKLAHOMA CITY
- SACRAMENTO
- SAN ANTONIO
- TUCSON
- WICHITA

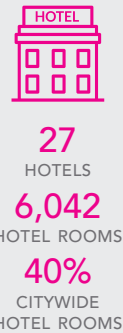
AVERAGE OF **1.7%** OF THE CITYWIDE LAND AREA WITH AN AVERAGE ASSESSED VALUE OF **\$1.5 BILLION** (3% OF THE CITY'S TOTAL VALUE) AND ACCOUNTS FOR:

- 11% PROPERTY TAX REVENUE
- 4% SALES TAX REVENUE
- 31% HOTEL TAX REVENUE
- 3% CITYWIDE POPULATION
- 41% DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS ARE MILLENNIAL



### EMPLOYMENT

- 30% CITYWIDE JOBS
- 32% CITYWIDE KNOWLEDGE JOBS
- 38% CITYWIDE CREATIVE JOBS
- 38% CITYWIDE OFFICE SPACE



### EMPLOYMENT

- 17% CITYWIDE JOBS
- 15% CITYWIDE KNOWLEDGE JOBS
- 23% CITYWIDE CREATIVE JOBS
- 25% CITYWIDE OFFICE SPACE

