



# Resilience thinking in a COVID world

Channeling solidarity and tenacity  
to build back resilient

A roadmap to inclusive and  
sustainable recovery

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BY ANDREW SALKIN  
RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST



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Cover and this page.  
Photos by Elvert Barnes

#### **ABOUT RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST**

Building on the pioneering legacy of 100 Resilient Cities (100RC), senior 100RC executives have now established Resilient Cities Catalyst (RCC). RCC is a new non-profit designed to help cities build the capacities and partnerships needed to understand, prioritize, and concretely address their risks and chronic stresses as they pursue their strategic goals or recover from crisis.

RCC partners with city governments, businesses, neighborhoods, and community stakeholders around the globe to:

1. Develop an enabling environment to build strong partnerships between cities and their communities allowing them to drive policy, planning, design, finance, and institutional resources for resilience-building efforts.
2. Ensure that ideas are turned into meaningful action by addressing gaps between project plans, project implementation and desired impacts.
3. Share and replicate learnings through a growing community of practice.

#### **ABOUT ANDREW SALKIN**

Andrew Salkin is a Founding Principal at [Resilient Cities Catalyst](https://www.resilientcitiescatalyst.org/), leading RCC's work connecting Cities and the Private sector to spur innovation and financing to ensure resilient initiatives actually happen. Andrew has over 25 years of experience working in and with cities. He is an urban innovator who specializes in inspiring city officials to proactively transform business as usual to achieve higher impact and more resilience outcomes. He is an expert in leveraging available budgets, public administration and governance to drive transformation.

Pushed to violence, locked indoors, too afraid to seek treatment for common ailments, or unable to afford treatment for life-threatening ones - America's urban residents and communities are reeling from the impact of successive shocks and cascading structural failures. Communities are protesting to protect themselves from systemic racism and police violence. Protesters wear masks to protect themselves from another unseen killer. America is heartbroken and sick. Americans are outraged and dying.

Civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are intertwined, as COVID-19 has laid bare America's systemic failures and inequalities. Historic and systemic racism made communities of color more vulnerable to COVID-19. They have died in greater numbers, suffered more loss, borne more of the economic burden. George Floyd's death poured fuel on a fire lit centuries ago. COVID-19 provides kindling. But behind these seemingly unconnected disasters are lessons we can glean from a universally shared experience – the COVID-19 pandemic – to tackle the inevitable, intertwined crises we will face in the future.



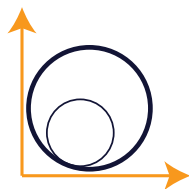
Terrence Floyd, George Floyd's brother visits the location where his brother was killed, now a memorial, at Chicago Ave and E 38th St in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photo: Lorie Shaull.

From Seattle to Los Angeles, New York City, Boston and Minneapolis, America's cities face urgent challenges resulting from economic and social inequality, climate change, and aging and inadequate infrastructure. At their darkest hour, these cities beat back the virus, despite healthcare and other systems that failed in a cascading fashion. Other countries watched in disbelief, as the world's richest country collapsed under the weight of inefficient and disconnected mission-critical systems. How could paramedics rescuing the ill not only lack life-saving masks, many asked, but also health insurance?

This begs a question. If our old normal was deeply flawed, laying bare myriad failures, why not use this moment to rebuild and heal with a real focus on equitable services including climate preparedness and a solid infrastructure for all communities?

Though these disasters are discrete, the pandemic's lessons apply equally to any disaster and any recovery plans. Though the triggers may change, our framework remains the same for what can and should be done prior to crises that will arrive.

This is our can-do moment. We have marshaled will and resources. Now we can reset the status quo for America's cities towards a more ideal end-state.



### Systems of systems

As showcased by the pandemic, cities are not monolithic administrations: they include many interconnected systems, often leaving urban ecosystems susceptible to their weakest parts.

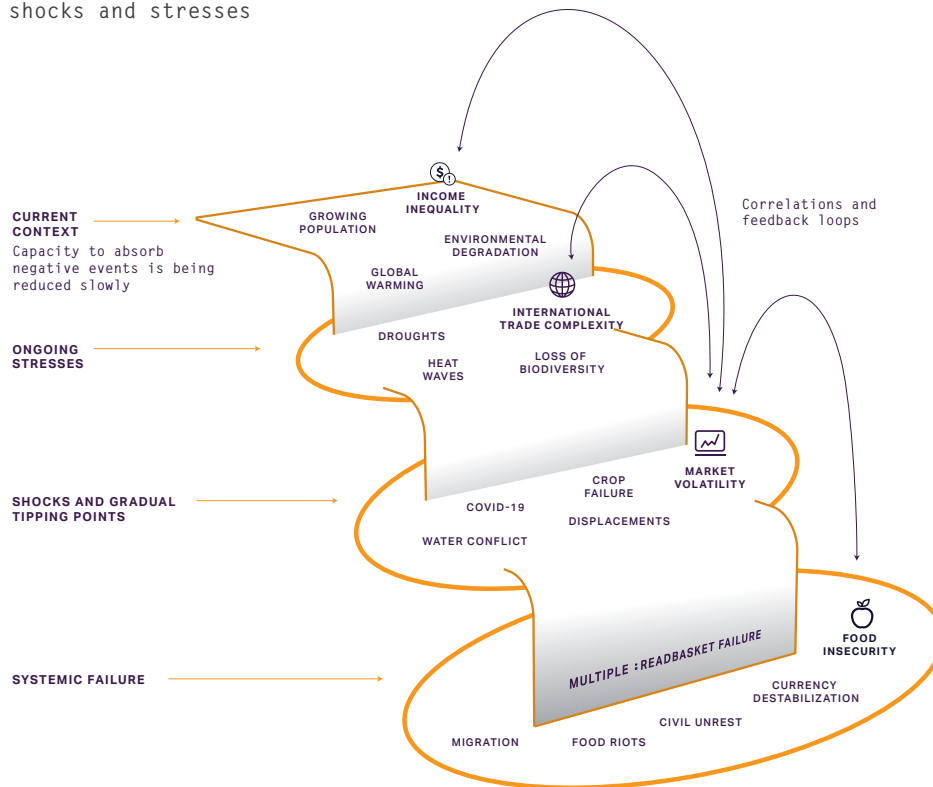
The totality of the crisis we are living through is the result of an extreme and rapid series of cascading failures across multiple systems. One shock – the pandemic, a health shock, crippled our healthcare system, resulting in over 115,000 deaths to date in the US alone, and millions of people confined indoors. This led to a second catastrophic shock – shutting down the economy, closing local businesses and schools.

Each subsequent shock or stress brought its own cascading impacts. Efforts to shore up (the lack of) public health systems – and their links – exposed systems in distress that pre-date the pandemic. These include aging and inadequate infrastructure, the impacts of climate change, and systemic inequities that damage the economy and individual households.

While it has exposed our weaknesses, COVID-19 and its ensuing recovery period is not without opportunity. This pandemic is a shared experience that provides city residents, communities, organizations, and elected leaders with a common vocabulary with which to talk about crisis. It binds us together at a point in time and gives us the impetus to move forward as one. If we seize this moment, we can use this opportunity to address far more than gaps in our healthcare system or the perils of the gig economy.



## Cascading shocks and stresses



Modified from UNDRR Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction Report, 2019.

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## COVID-19's lessons to shore up urban systems – and their links

How can we fix broken systems and heal communities? Below are some lessons learned over countless hours working with municipal leaders in the City of New York and years of working with cities in more than 40 countries around the world.

These lessons are grounded in an awareness that our old normal failed to foster healthy, thriving societies. If we agree that where we were before COVID-19 wasn't working as well as it could and should have, then we must all agree that getting back to the old normal simply isn't good enough. We need to evolve to a new normal, with higher standards for resilience practices and goals that leave all of us safer and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities the future holds.

As we look to leverage the COVID-19 recovery period, there are lessons to guide us in embedding resilience into our urban ecosystems to allow us to address our most urgent challenges more effectively. While these suggestions alone will not fix our healthcare system or resolve social or racial inequity, they can lay a new foundation for a resilient future.



### SET A VISION: WHAT MATTERS MOST TO COMMUNITIES IN BOTH HEALTHY AND URGENT TIMES?

In addition to social unrest and continued health challenges, the months ahead are sure to bring heatwaves, wildfires, and hurricanes. How can we manage challenges on multiple fronts to get on with life and thrive? At a minimum we must acknowledge our cities' evolving and more complex threat matrix so that we may better meet these intertwined, cascading, and compounded challenges. We do this by mapping a vision of what we want the new normal to be and how we want to address the failures of our previous approach to business as usual. Deep planning must be rooted in equity and inclusivity that not only better prepare our cities for the next crisis, but that also more widely and equally disperse the burden of future crises for faster recovery and healing. Recovery planning must include a formal process to engage with communities to better understand their priorities and set forth specific goals.



### BREAK THROUGH SILOS, WELCOME INNOVATION, AND ENCOURAGE PARTNERSHIPS

COVID-19 responses have unlocked innovation and flexibility in even the most rigid of systems. Governors across the country granted reciprocity to healthcare workers in other states to quickly add resources to overburdened local systems. Necessity and urgency unleashed collaboration unthinkable in crises past. The federal government acted swiftly to support workers by increasing public unemployment benefits, creating a wider and deeper social safety net ~ even if the rollout and access to these resources were flawed.



Community coming together to beautify boarded windows in La Mesa California. Photo: Tony Andrews.

As the crisis forges unlikely partnerships across cities and states and between governments, institutions, civil society and communities, we should build on these roots, not let them lay fallow, for robust responses today and tomorrow.



### STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

The pandemic pushed even the most private of individuals to check on their neighbors. Many vital links in their communities found themselves idle and eager to give back. They were aware, flexible, and available for many tasks. They delivered food and medicines to the ill and elderly. They cheered on and scoured stores for shields for frontline workers. They collected supplies for hospitals and sewed masks for households. They opened, stocked, and managed urban food pantries. Tapping these informal groups' ideas, skills, and future plans to plug holes will make recovery not only sustainable but also equitable.

Indeed, these deeply rooted human connections and efforts can help sharpen a city's vision and shore up its toolbox, energy, and vitality for a brighter and more inclusive future.

Connecting these new efforts to long-standing, trusted community-based organizations (CBOs) is critical. **RCC's Paul Nelson writes about the importance of CBOs in recovery.** Most recently, Eric Klinenberg explored in his *Palaces for the People* how the social infrastructure embedded in our communities can unite or divide and is ultimately a building block for equality. Empowering existing CBOs with the tools, resources, and opportunities to thrive will be crucial for an inclusive and enduring recovery.



A books and supplies sharing box in Richmond, Virginia. Photo: Ronnie Pitman.



## RESTORE TRUST IN LEADERSHIP AND CONFIDENCE IN THE CITY

In the pandemic's early days, confusing and contradictory messages often accompanied the fast-moving crisis. Residents must understand and trust the information they receive from leaders; critical instructions must be safe and easy to follow for both life-saving action and enduring trust.

The pandemic shone a light on tussles between local and state government in New York City. Confusion followed announcements about the timing and duration of school closures and subway safety. Weeks later, plans followed to close subways for a few hours each day for cleaning and disinfecting. This whiplash series of communications from the city left residents scratching their heads and eroded trust.

And in Washington D.C., President Trump announced the availability of widespread COVID-19 testing in March. More recently, in Tulsa, President Trump joked about suppressing testing in order to keep reported case numbers low. Contrast this with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden's early actions. She led her nation with a mix of tough truth and deep empathy that won the confidence of her residents and led to one of the most successful responses to COVID-19 in the world.

Leadership failures foster apathy and erode confidence. A lack of coordination and collaboration across different levels of government and across departments fosters leadership failures. Leaders must ensure they are leading the entire government infrastructure on behalf of the entire citizenry. Improved inter- and intra-government collaboration will not only improve service delivery but also help cities better prepare for future shocks.



## FORTIFY NEIGHBORHOODS

Strong neighborhoods make strong cities. Clarity about the infrastructure and services needed in both good times and bad will help communities thrive at prosperous moments, bounce back after upheaval, and fortify the fabric of a city. But finding the right mix of assets and resources is a complex, herculean task. A crisis, however, provides a clear and microscopic lens into weak spots within communities.

City leaders need to work with communities to identify their needs – for both vital needs in say, grocery stores, parks, schools, and public transit. Anchors that fortify communal ties should also remain top of mind. These might include libraries, places of worship, community centers – even areas where clusters gather like barbershops and gyms. To heal and prosper communities need help to articulate and work with city leaders to ensure their needs are met.

As communities define these needs, we also need to envision dynamic, flexible structures that will adapt to the evolving needs of post-pandemic communities. Questions to



consider include: Will people more often work from home? What does more residents within a community on weekdays mean for local shops and cafes equipped for light traffic? How will transit use change? Does the neighborhood have sufficient broadband and Wi-Fi? Will trash and compost piles grow if people spend more time at home? What new or expanded collection services might be required?

The rallying of communities to combat COVID-19 has been inspirational. It is essential that they have a voice in defining their needs and shaping the future of their neighborhoods. As recovery plans begin, let's think deeply about how to harness the energy and drive of communities so they emerge stronger in both good times and bad.



#### **DON'T WASTE A CRISIS**

After crises, public and political will and resources to tackle ambitious goals often align over a brief window of time. But collective memory fades fast. Not six months ago Australia was reeling from one of the worst ecological disasters in history and its landscape still carries the scars of catastrophic wildfires. Today, headlines in Sydney are about getting back to work and getting kids back to school following Australia's shutdown in response to the coronavirus. No longer are first responders airdropping food for starving animals in the bush. Only weeks ago, a Michigan family that lost their home after two dams collapsed were turned away from a shelter because they didn't have masks. That family's journey - one which will become all too familiar as America is battered by hurricanes and wildfires this summer - is now all but forgotten as protests against police violence erupt across our cities.

Our early actions must push us towards a vision of a future city that is stronger, better, safer, and more equitable. The pandemic brings an opportunity to solve some of our most intractable problems.

Once COVID-19 is behind us, cities will continue to innovate. They will test new policies, programs, and approaches to help residents through the challenging times that follow. As they go, they will learn from innovations. They will create new ways of working and thinking. New federal, state, and local resources will flow into COVID-19 response and recovery plans.

Cities have an unprecedented opportunity to leverage these resources to build solutions that address not only the health crisis but also the underlying, slow-burning challenges that disproportionately deliver loss, suffering, and economic calamity to vulnerable communities.



## TAKE TIME TO RECOVER HOLISTICALLY

We have suffered a collective trauma. And like many traumas, we are processing different pain at different paces and in different ways. We must identify, acknowledge, measure, and address all sorts of pandemic-related suffering to build back resilient. There is much for us to learn from the pain we have endured.

Cities must recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in much the same way patients do. In a holistic way that considers the whole city, all of its symptoms, and all of its residents. Recovery will be both physical and emotional. It will take diligence and time.

We are still in the early phases of learning the full impacts of COVID-19. We are still not fully aware of or processing the full health and communal impact of the virus. While many of us debate whether the health of society matters more than the health of small and big businesses, families, or the country, those in social services are only beginning to grasp the suffering in the communities they serve.

Over the coming months, we will start to understand some of the longer-term impacts of the pandemic. The fallout from shutdowns of “non-essential services” like mental healthcare, pre-schools, and family planning clinics remains to be seen. Undoubtedly, myriad long-term consequences for individuals, communities, and cities will come to the fore, ranging from joblessness to anxiety, depression, and abuse.

An orthopedic surgeon once told me that with a broken bone, invariably the focus is on the break. This is because of what one sees on an x-ray. But, by far, the bigger injury is the soft tissue damage that surrounds it. The bone knits. In weeks. But the muscle damage takes months to repair, and years to recover. Yet further muscle loss and emotional frustration perpetuate the injury and stretches out the recovery time.

COVID-19 is like a broken bone. We will find a vaccine and the bone will knit. But its surrounding damage will require time and patience to heal and strengthen. Much like a patient who is diligent about physical therapy, we can emerge from this stronger. Not just in one area, but as a whole. To do so we will need vision, creativity, and will. We can vanquish both the virus and its associated ills, and emerge stronger, together.