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Climate, Racial Equity, and Hunger Series: Latino/a Communities

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What Are Climate Change and Climate Justice?

Climate change is a long-term shift in global measures of climate, such as precipitation and temperature, caused by human activities that increase greenhouse gas levels. Its many effects include rising sea levels and prolonged heat waves. Climate justice is a practice that promotes equity by responding to the harmful impacts of climate change in ways that center the challenges of historically marginalized groups.

Climate, Hunger, and Racial Equity

While climate change impacts everyone, regardless of race, policies and practices around climate have historically discriminated against and excluded people of color. Due to structural racism, communities of color bear the negative impacts at a higher rate. Addressing climate change through a climate justice approach ensures that climate change is addressed in a racially equitable way that centers the voices and leadership of people of color.

Although this is often not acknowledged, Latino/as have a long Indigenous lineage in the Americas, with societies established centuries before the land was invaded by Spanish and English colonizers and long before the United States was formally established. Today, there are more than 59 million Latino/as living in what is now the United States. Some were born in the U.S. while others migrated from what is now Mexico, Central America, or South America.

While Latino/as are culturally and racially diverse, all have been hurt by inequities based on race and/or ethnicity that are an inherent part of structural racism. These inequities include a racial wealth divide, areas of racialized concentrated poverty, and racial health inequities. These worsen the impacts of climate change on people of Latin American descent, including food insecurity.

KEY TERMS

Racial Equity

A concept and practice that focuses on achieving equal outcomes for people of color. This lens responds to structural racism and its consequences. To learn more, visit bread.org/racialequity.

Climate Shocks

Events such as droughts or floods caused by disturbances in the usual pattern of rainfall and temperatures.

Climate Change Worsens Hunger in Latino/a Communities

Latino/as no longer experience food insecurity at twice the rate of the typical U.S. household, but are still twice as likely as white households to face hunger.

Climate change exacerbates food insecurity due to four main factors:

- The Racial Wealth Divide
- Racial Housing Segregation, Lack of Investment, and Racialized Concentrated Poverty
- Racial Health Inequities
- Lack of Sovereignty

Read “[Hunger and Poverty in Latino Communities](#)”

The Racial Wealth Divide

The racial wealth divide between white and Latino/a households is 8:1¹, and it increases among households experiencing hunger.² This divide was created by racially inequitable policies³ that deprived Latino/as of opportunities to build wealth. It increases the susceptibility of Latino/as to experience hunger during climate crises.

- Lack of wealth made it difficult for Latino/as to prepare for and recover from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.⁴

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The U.S. is one of the largest producers of the greenhouse gases that cause climate change. It has not done enough to work with countries such as those in Central America's Northern Triangle to enable them to adapt to climate change.



- During climate-induced disasters, the racial wealth divide widens. This typically results in white households gaining five times as much wealth from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) relief funding than Latino/a households in similarly-damaged areas.⁵

Learn more about climate justice in African American and Indigenous Communities at bread.org/climate.

Racial Housing Segregation, Lack of Investment, and Racialized Concentrated Poverty

Climate change has forced Latino/as in Central America to become climate refugees.

- Several countries have experienced rising temperatures and drought for decades, preventing many farmers from earning a living and thus increasing hunger.⁶

Latino/as in the U.S. are also disproportionately affected by climate change. Housing discrimination has forced many into racially segregated neighborhoods⁷ that lack community-level wealth to independently fund critical infrastructure to address climate change. This increases the susceptibility of Latino/as experiencing hunger during climate shocks.

- Latino/as are three times as likely as whites to live in areas of racialized concentrated poverty,⁸ which have higher exposure to climate shocks and lack community amenities to lessen the effects of climate change.
- Critical infrastructure (i.e., roads, bridges) is often destroyed by natural disasters, making it harder for Latino/as, who often live farther away from work, to commute.

Racial Health Inequities

Latino/a workers of all citizenship statuses face occupational segregation in low-paying jobs that are more likely to expose people to environments that can cause health problems.

- In 2015, Latino/as held about one-third of construction jobs and half of agriculture jobs,⁹ including 73 percent of farmworkers, who are largely undocumented.¹⁰

Endnotes:

1 Limon, Noerena. State of Hispanic Wealth 2019 Report. Hispanic Wealth Project. <http://hispanicwealthproject.org/downloads/2019-SHWR-Annual-Report.pdf>

2 The black-white wealth divide increases among households living in or near the poverty line.

Gamblin, Marlysa. Racial Wealth Gap Learning Simulation, Policy Packet, Page 4. Bread for the World Institute. <https://d1w64so4kzmy9.cloudfront.net/institute/simulation/Racial-Wealth-Gap-Policy-Packet.pdf>

3 Endnotes ii, vi and viii.

4 "A Year after Hurricane Harvey." New York Times. 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/us/hurricane-harvey-houston.html>

5 The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the U.S. Oxford Academic. 2018. <https://academic.oup.com/socpro/article/66/3/448/5074453>

6 "How Climate Change is Pushing Central American Migrants to the U.S." The Guardian. 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/06/us-mexico-immigration-climate-change-migration>

Farmworkers are more likely to be exposed to extreme heat, which can lead to heat stroke and require expensive medical treatment—increasing a family's chances of experiencing hunger.

Lack of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the freedom of a people to choose what their future will be.¹¹

- People of Latin American descent have been historically excluded from building wealth, exercising political authority, and managing their communities autonomously, all of which undermine their ability to prepare for climate change.
- During Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Puerto Rico was limited in its ability to respond because, lacking statehood, it had to wait for the federal government to initiate disaster response,¹² unlike neighboring islands with independence. This lack of sovereignty cost thousands of Puerto Ricans their lives.¹³

Conclusion

People of Latin American descent need the resources and space to exercise their power to protect their communities, confront climate change, and end hunger. All policies should use a climate justice framework that is population-centered and racially equitable:

- **Honor the expertise and leadership** of Latino/a communities to co-create and lead in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases for all climate response efforts.
- **Center the leadership** of Latino/as to co-develop strategies to eliminate racialized concentrated poverty and the racial wealth divide and to address climate impacts on Latino/a workers.
- **Equitably increase investments** in Latino/a-led initiatives to strengthen infrastructure that is susceptible to being destroyed by disaster linked to climate.
- **Walk in solidarity with** Latino/a communities as they exercise their sovereignty to make decisions to prepare for, and respond to, climate change in their communities.

7 See ii and viii (pgs. 12-14).

8 U.S. Concentrated Poverty in the Wake of the Great Recession. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/u-s-concentrated-poverty-in-the-wake-of-the-great-recession/>

9 Climate Change and U.S. Latinos. Nrdc.org <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/nuestro-futuro-climate-change-latinos-report.pdf>

10 Selected Statistics on Farmworkers. Farm Worker Justice. <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/sites/default/files/resources/NAWS%20Data%20FactSheet%2005-13-2019%20%20final.pdf>

11 Porter, Robert B. The Meaning of Indigenous Nation Sovereignty. HeinOnline. 2002. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/arzjl34&div=15&id=&page=>

12 Colony State or Independence: Puerto Rico's Status Anxiety Adds to Debt Crisis. The Guardian. July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/puerto-rico-statehood-sovereign-rights-debt-crisis>

13 Hernandez, Arelis R., McGinley, Laurie. "Harvard Studies Estimates Thousands Died in Puerto Rico because of Hurricane Maria." The Washington Post. May 18, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/harvard-study-estimates-thousands-died-in-puerto-rico-due-to-hurricane-maria/2018/05/29/1a82503a-6070-11e8-a4a4-c070ef53f315_story.html