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Climate, Racial Equity, and Hunger Series: African American 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 higher rates. 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.

African Americans have experienced more than 400 years of anti-Black structural racism,¹ including U.S. chattel slavery and subsequent racist or discriminatory policies. These policies helped create the largest racial income and wealth divide in the U.S.,² which has limited the ability of African Americans to respond to and prepare for climate change. Natural disasters of increasing severity and frequency have left many African Americans susceptible to facing hunger.

Climate Change Worsens Hunger among African Americans

African Americans experience food insecurity at twice the rate of the typical household and three times the rate of white households.³ Climate change exacerbates food insecurity due to four main factors:

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.

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

The Racial Wealth Divide

The racial wealth divide between white and African American households is between 13:1⁴ and 10:1,⁵ and it increases among households experiencing hunger.⁶ This divide was created by racially inequitable policies⁷ that deprived African Americans of opportunities to increase their incomes and build wealth.⁸ Lack of wealth makes African American individuals, households, and communities less equipped to cope with the financial shocks of climate change, which increases their susceptibility to experience hunger during climate shocks.

- Lack of wealth made it difficult for African Americans to prepare for and recover from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.⁹
- 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 African American households in similarly-damaged areas.¹⁰

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Did you know that African Americans contribute
23% less to climate change but bear
21% more of climate change impacts
compared to other racial groups?



Learn more about climate justice in Latino/a and Indigenous Communities at bread.org/climate.

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

African Americans have historically been relegated to the most housing-insecure conditions, from living in shacks from the 1600s through the 1800s,¹¹ to being forced to live in racially segregated, disinvested neighborhoods through the 1900s.¹²

- Consequently, African Americans are five times as likely as whites to live in racialized areas of concentrated poverty,¹³ which have higher exposure to climate shocks and lack community amenities to help lessen the effects of climate change.
- Due to the geographical origins of slavery, more than half of African Americans live in the southern region of the U.S., which is four times as likely to have severe floods and storms.

These areas also lack sufficient community wealth to independently fund critical infrastructure (i.e., roads, bridges) that is often damaged by climate shocks—making African Americans more susceptible to their communities, homes, and livelihoods being destroyed. Yet local, state, and federal governments have not equitably invested in African American communities to help meet these needs.¹⁴ This increases the susceptibility of African Americans to hunger during climate shocks.

Racial Health Inequities

Climate shocks reduce the availability of nutritious and affordable foods, which disproportionately hurts African Americans and increases racial hunger divides.

- Since African Americans are more likely to experience high blood pressure and diabetes,¹⁵ a compromised diet linked to climate change is more likely to hinder their recovery from illness.

African Americans are more susceptible to conditions linked to climate shocks such as extreme heat, because policies have forced many to live in areas of racialized concentrated poverty, which can worsen existing health

conditions—increasing medical expenses and the likelihood of experiencing hunger.

- African Americans in Los Angeles are twice as likely to die during heat waves as the average resident,¹⁶ due partly to higher pre-existing rates of asthma within the community.¹⁷

Lack of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the freedom of a people to choose what their future will be.¹⁸

- From slavery to present day, African Americans have been historically excluded from building wealth and exercising political authority and community autonomy. Among many other damaging impacts, this undermines their ability to prepare for climate change.
- African Americans also lack food sovereignty. Less than 2 percent of U.S. farmers are African American,¹⁹ and these farmers typically have fewer resources to adapt when climate change makes land difficult to farm. From farm to fork, African Americans have limited influence over the distribution and quality of the foods their communities can access.

Conclusion

African Americans need the resources and space to exercise their power to protect their communities to confront climate change and end hunger. All policies should use a climate justice framework that centers the needs of African Americans and racial equity:

- **Honor the expertise and leadership** of African American communities to co-create and lead the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases for all climate response efforts.
- **Center the leadership** of African Americans to co-develop strategies to eliminate racialized concentrated poverty, racial health inequities, and the racial wealth divide.
- **Equitably increase investments** in African American-led initiatives to strengthen infrastructure that can be destroyed during a climate-induced disaster.
- **Walk in solidarity with** African American communities as they exercise their sovereignty to make decisions to prepare for, and respond to, climate change in their communities.

Endnotes:

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4 See iii.

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6 See iii.

7 See ii, vi, and viii.

8 See iii.

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17 See xv.

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19 More Black U.S. Farmers, But Fewer Own Land or Earn Top Income. Bloomberg. April 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-11/more-black-u-s-farmers-but-fewer-own-land-or-make-big-bucks>