

# African American Communities and Climate Change

Climate change is here, and we are feeling its effects right now. It is causing more frequent and severe weather events, including heavy rainfall, dangerous storms, droughts and heat waves. It is increasing the spread of infectious diseases, interfering with our food sources and straining vital infrastructure like bridges and sewage systems. And if we don't act these impacts will get worse.

## Climate change disproportionately impacts African American communities

Climate change impacts all Americans, but especially hits African Americans and other communities of color.

### African American communities are more vulnerable to severe weather and floods.

[More than half](#) of African Americans in the United States live in the South, an area that is and will continue to see stronger hurricanes and increased flooding from climate change.



Many communities adjacent to [power plants](#), [petrochemical](#) plants factories and other sources of pollution are African American or other people of color. Unfortunately, recent hurricanes have shown that many of these facilities are ill equipped to deal with flooding from increasingly stronger storms, often leading to releases of air and water pollution. For example, after Hurricane Harvey, independent monitors found petrochemical plants released cancer-causing benzene at rates [six times higher](#) than safe levels. Neighborhoods near Superfund sites, which have also seen [flooding](#) from recent storms, are also [more likely](#) to be African American.

Historic segregation has resulted in African Americans living in less desirable [low-lying and flood prone areas](#) in many cities throughout the United States.. The consequences of this history were made terrifyingly clear during 2005's Hurricane Katrina, when many of New Orleans' African American residents were forced to leave their homes, including the [almost one third](#) who never returned. Even worse, more than [half of those who perished](#) after hurricane Katrina were African American.

### Climate worsens air pollution, exacerbating inequities

Climate change makes air pollution [worse](#), and this will exacerbate significant inequities already being experienced in African American communities and other communities of color. A recent study found that African Americans [breathe in 56% more particulate matter](#) than they produce from their consumption.

Polluted air is especially harmful for African Americans who have conditions which make it hard to breathe, such as asthma. African Americans with asthma have an [almost 3 times higher](#) chance of going to the hospital or dying from an asthma attack than whites.

### Climate-induced heat waves disproportionately affect African American communities.

Climate change is already [increasing the frequency of heat waves](#), a trend that is projected to increase as greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. Counties with large African American populations are [already exposed](#) to extreme temperatures 2-3 more days per year than those counties with smaller African American populations, and by midcentury, these counties are projected to experience about 20 more extreme heat days per year. This is especially troubling as a [study in California](#) found that during heat waves, African Americans are twice as likely to die compared to other groups.

This is due to a variety of factors including a [higher likelihood](#) to live in urban heat islands with nearly no tree cover and more heat-trapping pavement, and a [lower prevalence](#) of central air conditioning.

## Doctors recognize harmful impacts of climate change in African American patients

A [national survey](#) found that 86% of African American doctors believe that climate change is an important issue to address with their patients. Among those who serve in African American communities, the majority said they have seen the harms of climate change in their own patients. The most common health effects reported were injuries from severe storms, floods, and wildfires; worsening of chronic diseases due to air pollution and hotter temperatures; and an increase in allergies, due to mold and other exposures.

## The many benefits of climate action

Despite the tremendous risks climate change presents, if action is taken now, there are opportunities to create more prosperous futures for all Americans, including African Americans. These include:

- **Healthier communities:** With the right policies in place, a cleaner future will mean both avoiding the worst impacts of a changing climate such as strongest storms, heatwaves, and drought, and also cleaner air in local communities, increasing the overall health and quality of life of African American children and families.
- **A stronger American economy:** The U.S. economy can save \$930 billion by 2100 just through the lives saved from climate mitigation, according to a 2015 EPA [report](#). The report also found the economy would save tens of billions of additional dollars annually by 2100 with climate action, in power savings, avoided labor losses and damages and other avoided impacts.
- **Good jobs:** Moving toward a clean future will create new opportunities for job growth, as investments increase to modernize and clean up all sectors of our economy.
- **Improved national defense:** Many security experts count climate change as a [national security threat](#). Tackling climate change head on makes our country more secure and better able to keep our population protected.

## What you can do today

- **Fight for a clean and just recovery.** As we move to repair our COVID-battered economy, we have a chance to make it better and more just than it was before. We need to urge our leaders to rebuild better by investing in American clean energy to create more jobs and less pollution. Investing in clean energy will mean cleaner air for more of our communities and help families recover—especially if we focus these investments in communities of color that suffer disproportionately from chronic air pollution. And because we know that coronavirus is deadlier for people with conditions caused by air pollution—such as heart and lung disease—that’s more important now than ever.
- **Register to vote:** Voting is our civic duty – it’s our chance to weigh in on important issues and make our voice heard at the polls. Voting allows us to have a say in the future we leave our children. We need all our public officials to make a real and sustained commitment to fighting climate change like our lives depend on it—because they do. We cannot accept anything less from those in power. If public officials don’t make climate and the health of our communities a top priority, then it’s our job to hold them accountable.