

Energy Justice and Climate Change: Key Concepts for Public Health



Climate change is a threat multiplier.

Climate change exacerbates health inequities, disproportionately harming the most vulnerable among us. That includes children and pregnant women, people with low income, the aged and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, some communities of color, indigenous people and tribal communities, immigrants, marginalized people of all races and ethnicities and outdoor workers, to name a few.

Difficulty in accessing the political, economic, social and environmental resources that enable people to cope with climate threats, such as extreme heat and natural disasters, can contribute to a potentially unmanageable energy burden as climate change worsens.

U.S. communities that lack accessible, affordable household energy services often have poorer health, fewer educational and economic opportunities, limited political representation and inadequate access to health care. As climate change worsens, alternative energies, such as solar or wind are becoming competitive at similar, or even lower, prices than fossil fuels like coal and natural gas.

Alongside community leaders, public health professionals have a role to play in monitoring, evaluating and supporting this transition to a healthier energy supply. A thoughtful energy transition provides opportunities for mitigating climate change and promoting health equity at the same time.

How do structural racism and climate change contribute to energy burden?

In the same way that climate change disproportionately affects certain populations, energy is a health equity issue. For over 60 years, the environmental justice movement has raised awareness that people of color and low-income communities often bear the brunt of “brown” environmental issues. Meanwhile, white and more affluent communities enjoy the benefits of “green” environmental benefits.

In the context of energy, race – even more than class, is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country. Housing in general is one of the best known and most well-documented social determinants of health. The affordability, location and quality of housing all have been independently linked to health. It is important to acknowledge the effect that historical practices of redlining and discriminatory mortgage lending have had on our nation.

Spotlight: Heat islands

Poor-quality housing and blighted neighborhoods diminish property values, increase crime and erode the cohesiveness and political power of communities. As a result, many people of color and low-income communities in urban areas lack the infrastructure investment for things like green spaces that are critical to cooling urban heat islands.

These neighborhoods get much hotter on average than other areas, negatively impacting the health of residents and increasing energy usage. Residents who rent their property lack the long-term incentive to invest in costly air conditioning units for a short-term residence. And with the exception of Dallas and Phoenix, there is no law requiring landlords to provide air conditioning the way they must provide heat. This places renters at higher risk.

Through ongoing racial discrimination and worsening climate change, communities of color face increasingly impossible trade-offs when managing the cost of their undue energy burden and other household needs.

Key concepts

ENERGY INSECURITY *An inability to adequately meet basic household energy needs, such as gas, appliances, plumbing, heating, cooling.* In 2015, 31% of U.S. households reported struggling to pay energy bills or to maintain adequate heating and cooling in their homes. About one in five households reported reducing or forgoing basic necessities like food and medicine to pay an energy bill. Eleven percent of households reported keeping their home at an unhealthy or unsafe temperature due to costs.

CASE STUDY The U.S. Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program assists eligible low-income households with their heating and cooling energy costs and provides bill payment assistance, energy crisis assistance, weatherization and energy-related home repairs. For more information: www.benefits.gov/benefit/623

ENERGY BURDEN *The proportion of a household's monthly income that is spent on home energy costs.* Low-income households often face an energy burden that is three times higher than other households.

CASE STUDY The Kentucky Utilities WeCare program stands for Weatherization, Conservation Advice and Recycling Energy. The program assists with home weatherization for low-income populations, leading to a decreased energy burden through increased energy efficiency. For more information: www.lge-ku.com/wecare

ENERGY EQUITY *Fair distribution of benefits and burdens from energy production and consumption.* Energy equity requires equitable distribution of risks and hazards, as well as available and affordable energy sources. While unfamiliar to many residents, equity-centered energy and utility policies significantly enhance household economic stability and improve the overall quality of air, water and other natural resources that affect our health and well-being. Working directly with communities to build their capacity around energy planning and decisionmaking is key to advancing equity.

CASE STUDY Partnership for Southern Equity's Just Energy Circle and Just Energy Academy works to eliminate energy insecurity by advancing policies and institutional actions that promote racial equity and shared prosperity for all in the growth of metropolitan Atlanta and the American South. For more information: www.sites.google.com/view/pse-just-energy-circle and www.justenergyacademy.org

ENERGY JUSTICE *The principle that all people should have a reliable, safe and affordable source of energy; protection from a disproportionate share of costs or negative impacts or externalities associated with building, operating and maintaining electric power generation, transmission and distribution systems; and equitable distribution of and access to benefits from such systems. A global energy system that 1) fairly disseminates the costs and benefits of energy services and 2) contributes to more representative and impartial energy decisionmaking.*

CASE STUDY The Energy Democracy Project and the Initiative for Energy Justice develop resources to build collective power and advance the movement to democratize energy by providing law and policy resources to advocates and policymakers. For more information: www.energydemocracy.us and www.iejusa.org

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE *All people and communities have the right to equal environmental protection under the law, and the right to live, work and play in communities that are safe, healthy and free of life-threatening conditions.* Environmental justice is often associated with environmental racism, in which, whether by conscious design or institutional neglect, actions and decisions result in the disproportionate exposure of people of color to environmental hazards and environmental health burdens.

CASE STUDY WE ACT for Environmental Justice in New York City builds healthy communities by ensuring that people of color and low-income residents participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices through member participation in education, policy, advocacy, research and more. For more information: www.weact.org

JUST TRANSITION *A set of principles and practices focused on changing the energy industry from fossil fuels to alternative energy sources, which ensures workers' rights and offers economic opportunities for affected communities.* This cultural, as well as economic, shift emphasizes sustainability in the face of climate change.

CASE STUDY Coalfield Development trains former coal industry workers in Appalachia for jobs in sectors such as solar energy, sustainable construction and mine-land reclamation. For more information: www.coalfield-development.org

HEAT EQUITY *The development of policies and practices that mitigate heat islands and help people adapt to the impacts of extreme heat in a way that reduces the inequitable distribution of risks across different populations within the same urban area.*

CASE STUDY In Dallas, the National Center for Healthy Housing worked together with the Health and Wellness Alliance for Children to update the "Minimum Urban Rehabilitation Standards" of the Dallas City Code Housing Ordinance, requiring landlords to provide air conditioning in all residences of Dallas the same way heat is currently required. For more information: www.nphw.org/nphw-2020/-/media/files/pdf/topics/environment/built_environment/housing_ordinance_dallas.ashx

Note: Key concept definitions were courtesy of a variety of sources. For references, please email climatechange@apha.org.



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