

Climate Justice

Executive Summary¹

Climate change impacts communities in different and unequal ways. With roots in environmental justice, climate justice also includes concepts of international and intergenerational equity. While most of the impacts of climate change are felt by the Global South, the vast majority of cumulative greenhouse gas emissions are generated by countries in the Global North. There is a temporal aspect to these issues as well, as young people and future generations are more likely to suffer from climate impacts compared to older people.

There are justice dimensions to many of the different impacts of climate change, including extreme heat, wildfires, drought, and extreme storms, among others. With extreme heat for example, some of the most dangerous of the extreme weather events, the elderly, low-income, and urban communities are disproportionately affected. Wildfires and wildfire smoke disproportionately impact those with underlying health conditions, such as asthma, and those who lack the resources to evacuate. Climate-intensified drought will impact employment opportunities for low-income workers in the agricultural sector. American Indians are also many times more likely to experience drought compared to any other demographic group. Inland flooding disproportionately affects urban communities, as cities are typically built on impervious surfaces that exacerbate flooding, in addition to communities that reside within the floodplains. Tropical cyclones, which are projected to grow stronger because of climate change, disproportionately impact those who cannot afford to evacuate and people with underlying health conditions who might experience an interruption of healthcare services. There are also issues of regional justice and inequitable recovery associated with cyclone impacts. For example, both Texas and Puerto Rico were struck by Category 4 hurricanes in 2017. While Texas began receiving federal assistance prior to the hurricane making landfall, Puerto Rico suffered more severe and wider impacts due to slower and reduced federal assistance, higher vulnerability, and infrastructural and geographic challenges.

Although federal law related specifically to climate justice is currently limited, the Biden Administration's Justice40 Initiative requires that 40% of the investments made in climate and clean energy be delivered to disadvantaged communities. This goal also aligns with the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act's investment of \$369 billion toward climate solutions and environmental justice. One of the most frequently used tools in cases involving environmental and climate justice is the National Environmental Policy Act, which is used to challenge government actions that have not adequately considered the environmental justice dimensions of a given project. Absent federal law on the topic however, states, including New Jersey, New York, and Washington, have started to enact climate justice laws, and others are considering similar legislation.

¹ This is a summary of Climate Justice authored by Amruta Nori-Sarma, Quinn Adams, Devin O'Donnell, Katharine Teigen, and Jonathan I. Levy