

EQUITY AND JUSTICE

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Key Messages

Climate change exacerbates existing burdens and vulnerabilities imposed on people of color, low-income communities, and indigenous communities in Georgia.

Historic policies and practices rooted in racism have increased the exposure of Black and indigenous Georgians to the negative impacts of climate change.

Communities disproportionately impacted by climate change need to have the authority, autonomy, and resources to shape policies and practices that strengthen their resilience.

Preface

In this portal page, we provide a general overview of climate inequity in Georgia. Climate inequity is a nuanced, complex issue that permeates Georgia's history and geography. While this page focuses on people of color, low-income, and indigenous communities, we recognize that climate vulnerability has intersectional impacts across other aspects of marginalization, including disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This article is meant to be a general introduction to the topic, and readers are strongly encouraged to deepen their understanding through the additional resources linked below.

Overview

Climate change affects the state of Georgia in many ways, including impacts on public health, community safety, agricultural yields, biodiversity, and ecosystem health. While climate change touches the lives of all Georgians, the risks and impacts are not uniformly felt by all. One recent study projected the economic damages that U.S. counties may experience due to climate change [1], concluding that 21 of the 25 counties most economically affected in Georgia also struggle with long-term persistent poverty [2]. There is an additional correlation between race and poverty in Georgia—90% of the top 20 counties in the state with the highest poverty rates also have greater percentages of Black populations than the state average [3]. The burdens of climate change in Georgia fall disproportionately on people of color, low-income, and indigenous communities, exacerbating existing racial inequities, power imbalances, and resource disparities.

One reason for the imbalance is Georgia’s longstanding history of environmental racism, characterized by the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens along racial lines [4]. Past examples of environmental racism include limiting access to nature through segregated beaches and the concentration of hazardous waste sites around historically Black neighborhoods. These policies and patterns are rooted in racist policy and cultural norms, and so the climate justice movement frames climate change as a social and political issue, not just an environmental one [5]. This framing has important implications for how the effects of climate change are understood and how solutions, including adaptation and mitigation strategies, should be designed and implemented. To better understand this topic, we outline three key themes of climate justice in Georgia before examining a set of ongoing climate change impacts in Georgia.

1. Vulnerability to climate change is a trait imposed on underserved communities, not something innate to them; examined through flooding
2. Understanding and remedying climate inequity requires addressing other forms of social marginalization; examined through exposure to heat
3. The communities that will be disproportionately impacted by climate change need to have the authority, autonomy, and resources to guide programs designed to address these issues; examined through environmental gentrification

Inland flooding: Climate change is predicted to increase the severity and intensity of flooding from both routine storms [8] and extreme weather, like hurricanes [6, 7]. People of color, low-income, and indigenous communities are more susceptible to natural disasters due to patterns of housing development [9], economic inequality [10], and racially skewed provisioning of government services post-disaster [11]. Inadequate investment in stormwater infrastructure in many communities of color and exclusion from the decision-making process also contribute to flooding vulnerabilities throughout Georgia [12, 13] and the United States as a whole [14]. On the recovery side, costly home repairs after a flood disproportionately impact underserved communities due to well-documented wealth gaps between different racial groups in the US [10, 15]. Furthermore, Black-owned homes are consistently devalued relative to homes owned by other racial groups [16], making it more difficult to obtain appropriate disaster relief funds to repair severe weather damage.

Extreme heat: As a result of climate change, temperatures across the state will continue to rise, and heat waves will become more common [17]. As people are exposed to higher temperatures more frequently and for longer periods of time, the likelihood of serious health complications due to heat exposure will increase [18]. Exposure to dangerous heat is among the most prominent and stark racial disparities facing Georgians. While many Georgians can avoid the heat by turning on the air conditioner, this option is not available to everyone. In Georgia, average energy bills are higher than the national average [19, 20]. For low-income families in particular, utility bills can exceed more than 10% of their household budget [21]. Thus, consistently cooling the home to manage extreme heat is not always financially possible - an issue known as the “energy burden.” In the South, the energy burden is intensified by the high prevalence of older, less energy efficient homes that were built before energy codes were widely adopted [21-23].

Another dominant driver creating differential exposure to high temperatures is the historic practice of redlining. Redlining was a policy carried out by the U.S. Federal Housing Authority throughout the 1930s-1960s. The agency systematically denied mortgage assistance from the US government to primarily Black neighborhoods, ensuring the segregation of residential areas [24]. Although redlining formally ended in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act, the effects of this practice linger to this day, fueling the racial wealth gap and trapping families in inferior housing [22]. Redlined neighborhoods have more impervious surfaces and fewer trees, which have a cooling effect on the surrounding area. Thus, vulnerability to heat-related health impacts is not solely an environmental issue, but a consequence of both historic and present-day practices that segregate communities along racial lines and deprive them of the resources and access to policymaking process required to address such systemic inequities.

Environmental gentrification: Even when municipalities attempt to rectify climate injustices, they can inadvertently exacerbate inequality. For example, a prominent environmental justice issue in many U.S. cities, such as Atlanta, is the lack of access to safe and quality green spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and urban tree cover for many underrepresented groups [25-27]. When cities address these gaps by constructing new public green spaces, they often initiate the transformation of these areas into enclaves for more affluent and primarily White residents. This process is so common it has its own name – environmental gentrification [28]. Following the completion of new green spaces, original residents are often negatively impacted because they feel excluded from participation [29] or through displacement from the community due to rising property values and associated taxes [30]. Thus, climate change adaptation initiatives that do not address the imbalance in economic mobility or have safeguards to ensure current residents can keep their homes often exacerbate already existing inequalities.

Organizations throughout Georgia are mobilizing to empower communities through education, research, capacity building, and inclusive planning. They also are connecting Georgians to broader national and international efforts working to stave off the most damaging effects of climate change. Within these initiatives, Georgia’s environmental justice leaders stress that climate equity requires broadening our understanding of climate change to locate and address areas where it overlaps with other forms of social and environmental injustices that Georgians face.

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