

## **The Injustice of Global Climate Change on Communities of Color**

In 2004, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation released a report that details the ways in which global climate change poses a particular threat to African Americans. The report reveals some surprising facts about how black Americans are disproportionately affected by this global problem.

Scientists are now 90 to 95 percent certain that the changes they're seeing in the climate are the result of human activities. Burning these fuels releases certain gases into the air, the most well known of which is carbon dioxide. Unfortunately, gases like carbon dioxide prevent heat from leaving the atmosphere, so slowly over time as the gases have built up, so has the heat. The gases act something like the glass in a greenhouse, letting the sun's heat in but not letting it out. That's why this problem is sometimes called the "greenhouse effect." In general, these activities are causing the Earth's average temperature to rise and creating changes in the Earth's climate. The effects include: rising average global temperature, melting of glaciers and sea ice, rising sea level, changes in weather patterns, increasing number of heat waves, increasing severity of hurricanes, changes in ocean currents, and increased drought and floods.

Most people don't think of climate change as a public health threat, and not as one that particularly affects African Americans. However, as the Congressional Black Caucus report indicates, global climate change will be more keenly felt by communities of color. For example, the frequency and intensity of tropical storms will probably increase, and Hurricane Katrina certainly demonstrated that African Americans in particular can suffer more acutely from stronger storms. Many leaders are also concerned about how the changing economy will affect black communities.

However, if African Americans are disproportionately affected by climate change, they also have more to gain from policies to slow global warming. According to one study, reducing emissions of greenhouse gases to 15 percent below 1990 levels would save an estimated 10,000 African American lives per year by 2020. Other studies indicate that African Americans could enjoy a variety of economic benefits from good climate change policies. So while global climate change might be particularly hard on African Americans, good policies that help slow climate change will help black communities more than they will other communities.

## **The Cold Facts on the Impacts of Global Climate Change**

### **Heat Waves**

- African Americans are disproportionately impacted by deaths during heat waves and from worsened air pollution. Future heat waves will be most lethal in the inner cities of the northern half of the country, such as New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia, where many African American communities are located.
- According to a report from the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, reducing emissions to fifteen percent below 1990 levels would mitigate these adverse health effects of climate change, while also decreasing air pollution related mortality, saving an estimated 10,000 African American lives per year by 2020.

- Over 500 people died as a result of the 1995 Chicago heat wave. Non-Hispanic blacks were 50 percent more likely to die in the heat wave than non-Hispanic whites.
- Scientists predict that heat waves in North America will become more intense, more frequent, and longer lasting in the second half of this century. Heat waves have stronger effects on urban populations, and especially the urban poor. African Americans are nearly twice as likely as whites to live in poverty.
- One reason urban areas are more prone to heat-related deaths is the “heat island” effect. Urban areas are typically covered in surfaces such as asphalt and concrete, which retain heat. As a result, temperatures in these areas are higher, especially during heat waves. African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to live in the inner city.

### **Air Pollution and Asthma**

- Over 70 percent of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air pollution standards.
- Higher temperatures of global warming are expected to degrade air quality through increased ozone formation.
- In every major city in the US, blacks are more likely than whites to be exposed to higher air toxics concentrations.
- Asthma will increase because of global climate change and will disproportionately impact African Americans, which are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized or killed by asthma than whites.

### **Economics**

- Unemployment and economic hardship associated with climate change will fall most heavily on the African American community.

### **Infectious Diseases**

- Climate change is expected to increase the range of many diseases, as warmer conditions will allow disease-spreading insects such as ticks and mosquitoes to live in places they previously couldn't live.
- Scientists estimate that the potential for a malaria epidemic could increase by up to 27 percent as a result of climate change. Warmer and wetter conditions in the US are likely to increase malaria rates in this country.
- African Americans are one and a half times less likely than White Americans to have medical insurance and are less likely to have regular access to medical care. As a result, increases in diseases put African Americans more at risk than other communities.

### **Resources**

*African Americans and Climate Change: An Unequal Burden*, and was prepared for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. It's available online at:  
[www.rprogress.org/publications/2004/CBCF\\_REPORT\\_F.pdf](http://www.rprogress.org/publications/2004/CBCF_REPORT_F.pdf)

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