EXTREME HEAT AND BLACK COMMUNITIES

WHY BLACK FAMILIES ARE AT RISK

Climate change has a number of human-made causes, including pollution from cars, trucks, buses, and power plants. The gases released when coal, natural gas, oil, and other fossil fuels are burned make the Earth warmer. As a result, extreme heat days—or days when temperatures are much hotter or humid than average—are increasingly frequent. Heat, especially when excessive, can trigger illnesses and exacerbate existing health problems.¹

The impact of extreme heat is not evenly distributed

Places across the United States with large Black populations experience higher temperatures on average, making Black communities uniquely vulnerable. They are more likely to live in areas with high levels of air pollution, limited access to green spaces, and inadequate infrastructure for cooling. This is especially true in urban settings crowded with buildings, full of heat-absorbing concrete, and without cooling vegetation like trees.², ³, ⁴

Air pollution and air quality

Heat exacerbates ground-level ozone (also known as smog) and particle pollution (also known as soot). Both of these forms of air pollution can aggravate asthma. Black communities with greater exposure to air pollution have higher than average childhood asthma rates.⁵

The disproportionate impact on these communities can be attributed to historic discriminatory planning practices commonly known as “redlining.” Because of these practices, many roads, railways, and polluting facilities (e.g., manufacturing, sewage, and power plants) are located in and around Black neighborhoods.⁶, ⁷, ⁸ Black children are over seven times more likely to die from asthma than white children.⁹

Health impacts of extreme heat

In addition to asthma, overall health impacts of extreme heat in Black communities are wide-ranging. Non-Hispanic Blacks have the second highest rate of heat-related deaths in the United States.¹⁰ The maternal mortality rate of Black women in the United States is about three times higher than that of white women.¹¹ Extreme heat increases the risk of heart problems during labor and delivery, preterm labor, low birth weight, and pregnancy loss.¹², ¹³

Exposure to extreme temperatures can also lead to heat exhaustion as well as respiratory and heart problems. Without emergency treatment, heat stroke can cause permanent disability or death. Children, the elderly, and people with preexisting conditions are the most vulnerable to extreme heat.¹⁴
Redlining and heat islands

Redlining is now banned, but institutional racism has a long-lasting impact.

To this day, neighborhoods that were historically redlined remain hotter, have fewer trees, and have more heat-trapping pavement than majority white neighborhoods that were not. Black people are 52% more likely than white people to live in these urban heat islands.

And structural racism extends far beyond housing: disparities in education, wealth distribution, health care, and access to jobs can force people to remain in neighborhoods that tend to have more buildings to absorb and re-emit heat.

Urban heat islands can be up to 22°F hotter than surrounding suburban and rural areas.

Learning disruptions

In addition to the health issues caused by extreme heat, many Black children experience learning disruptions because of where they live and attend school.

A 2020 study looked at 270 million exam scores of US students between third and eighth grades. Researchers found that Black and Hispanic students had significantly lower test scores than white students on days when temperatures were above 80°F.

The correlation between higher temperatures and the amount students learned during the school year is linked to the lack of air conditioning in many underfunded school districts.

Make your voice heard

There are small-scale solutions that can mitigate and protect communities from the growing threat of extreme heat. In urban environments, this can include planting trees and painting roofs white to cool buildings.

You can urge your lawmakers to support policies that promote these kinds of initiatives and prioritize environmental justice. Learning about climate change and talking about it with friends and neighbors can be effective. You can also advocate for laws and policies that reduce the greenhouse gas pollution causing climate change.

Advocacy will help us move toward the large-scale solutions we need.

Your elected representatives at all levels of government work for you. To find out who your government representatives are, head to www.usa.gov/elected-officials. Then, pick up the phone or write an email to your elected officials letting them know why climate change, extreme heat, and the health of Black communities matters to you.

Join Moms Clean Air Force to learn more about climate change and what you can do. https://www.momscleanairforce.org

For links and sources, please visit: https://www.momscleanairforce.org/sources-heat-black-communities

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The mission of Moms Clean Air Force is to protect children from air pollution and climate change. We envision a safe, stable, and equitable future where all children breathe clean air. We fight for Justice in Every Breath, recognizing the importance of equitable solutions in addressing air pollution and climate change. www.momscleanairforce.org