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Climate, Racial Equity, and Hunger Series: Indigenous Communities

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What Are Climate Change and Climate Justice?

Climate change is a long-term shift in global measures of climate, such as precipitation and temperature, caused by human activities that increase greenhouse gas levels. Its many effects include rising sea levels and prolonged heat waves. Climate justice is a practice that promotes equity by responding to the harmful impacts of climate change in ways that center the challenges of historically marginalized groups.

Climate, Hunger, and Racial Equity

While climate change impacts everyone, regardless of race, policies and practices around climate have historically discriminated against and excluded people of color. Due to structural racism, communities of color bear the negative impacts at a higher rate. Addressing climate change through a climate justice approach ensures that climate change is addressed in a racially equitable way that centers the voices and leadership of people of color.

Indigenous people have experienced more than 500 years of structural racism, including colonization, forced displacement, and discriminatory policies that undermine tribal sovereignty. This has created residential segregation and one of the largest racial income and wealth divides in the U.S. These conditions inform the way Indigenous communities are able to respond to and prepare for climate change—leaving many susceptible to losing their livelihoods and experiencing hunger for the first time or experiencing deeper levels of hunger.

Climate Change Worsens Existing Hunger among Indigenous Communities

Climate change threatens the traditions and lifestyles of Indigenous people. Many Indigenous communities have

KEY TERMS

Racial Equity

A concept and practice that focuses on achieving equal outcomes for people of color. This lens responds to structural racism and its consequences. To learn more, visit bread.org/racialequity.

Adaptation

The process of adjusting to actual or expected changes in climate and their effects.

Climate Shocks

Events such as droughts or floods caused by disturbances in the usual pattern of rainfall and temperatures.

Mitigation

Efforts to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases. These efforts limit the degree of future warming.¹

customs, traditions, and diets that are closely related to the natural environment.

Indigenous communities experience food insecurity at twice the rate of the typical U.S. household and three times the rate of white households.

Read "[Hunger and Poverty in Indigenous Communities](#)"

Climate change exacerbates food insecurity due to four main factors:

- The Racial Wealth Divide
- Racial Segregation and Racialized Concentrated Poverty
- Racial Health Inequities
- Lack of Sovereignty

The Racial Wealth Divide

The racial wealth divide between white and Indigenous households is between 8:1 and 13:1,² and likely increases

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Damage to roads caused by natural disasters creates particular difficulties for residents of reservations because it is often a long drive to the nearest grocery store. In 2019, people at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota were stranded at home for weeks due to extreme flooding.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/24/us/midwest-flooding-pine-ridge.html>



among households experiencing hunger. One in three households lives on less than \$25,000 per year, which feeds into and reinforces the racial wealth divide. Lack of wealth makes Indigenous individuals, households, and communities less equipped to cope with the financial shocks of climate change, and thus more susceptible to hunger.

Learn more about climate justice in African American and Indigenous Communities at bread.org/climate.

Racial Segregation, Lack of Investment, and Concentrated Poverty

From 1887 to 1934, the U.S. acquired more than 90 million acres of Indian Nation land—leaving Native Americans with one-third of their original land.³ Indigenous people being forced off their land to live in or near segregated reservations, coupled with racially inequitable policies that led to disinvestment in Indigenous communities, have created areas of racialized concentrated poverty.

- One in two Indigenous people who reside in counties with large Indigenous populations live in areas of concentrated poverty,⁴ compared to one in 13 whites.⁵

Disinvestment in tribal communities by state and federal government, including a lack of partnership with Indigenous communities, has led to deteriorating, sometimes unsafe, infrastructure. This lack of equitable partnership and investment has made it much harder for Indigenous people to prepare for and respond to climate shocks, which increases their susceptibility to experiencing hunger.

Racial Health Inequities

Indigenous communities experience higher rates of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes,⁶ due in large part to inequitable access to healthy, affordable food.

- As climate shocks reduce the amount of crops that are available, as well as their nutritional content, food prices rise. Consequently, Indigenous people with pre-existing health conditions will have increasing difficulty in managing and recovering from illnesses, which leads to higher medical expenses and wider hunger divides.

Lack of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the freedom of a people to choose what their future will be.⁷ More than 245 tribes are not federally recognized, meaning that their legal sovereignty is not acknowledged. Even the more than 574 recognized tribes have historically struggled to ensure that the U.S. government upholds their sovereignty.⁸ Federal laws impose many restrictions on activity on tribal lands, limiting Indigenous communities' available options to prepare for climate impacts.

The U.S. allows tribes to request a state of emergency to exercise more autonomy in times of crises,⁹ but this does not ensure Indigenous communities the resources and decision-making abilities to take preventive and adaptive measures against climate impacts.¹⁰

- Some Indigenous communities, such as the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe in Louisiana, will be among the first U.S. communities to be displaced by rising sea levels.¹¹ As Indigenous communities are displaced again, they need sovereignty to decide what is best for their futures and avoid further trauma from forced migration.

Conclusion

Indigenous communities need the resources and space to exercise their power to protect their communities, confront climate change, and end hunger. All policies should use a climate justice framework that is racially equitable:

- **Honor the expertise and leadership** of Indigenous communities to co-create and lead the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases for all climate response efforts.
- **Center the leadership** of tribes to co-develop strategies to eliminate racialized concentrated poverty, racial health inequities, and the racial wealth divide.
- **Equitably increase investments** in Indigenous-led initiatives to strengthen infrastructure that is susceptible to being destroyed by a disaster linked to climate change.
- **Walk in solidarity with** Indigenous communities as they exercise their sovereignty to make decisions to prepare for and respond to climate change.

Endnotes:

1 What is Climate Change Mitigation? BBC News. 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26980837>

2 Bread for the World would expect the white-Indigenous wealth divide to be somewhere between the white-Latino/a wealth divide (8:1) and the white-Black (13:1) wealth divide.

3 "Trust Land." National Congress of American Indians.

4 Mapping Food Security and Distress in AIAN Communities. Urban Institute. 2016. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/mapping-food-insecurity-and-distress-american-indian-and-alaska-native-communities>

5 "Fragile Environments, Resilient Communities." Bread for the World Institute. 2017. <http://hungerreport.org/2017/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/hunger-report-2017full.pdf>

6 Health of AINI Population. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/american-indian-health.htm>

7 Porter, Robert B. The Meaning of Indigenous Nation Sovereignty. HeinOnline. 2002. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/arzil34&div=15&id=&page=8> Refer to iii.

9 Sunshine, G., Hoss, A. "Emergency Declarations and Tribes: Mechanisms Under Tribal and Federal Law." NIH. January 2016. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4703113/#:~:text=As%20sovereign%20nations%20tribes%20have%20the%20authority%20to%20declare,of%20emergency%20on%20tribal%20lands.&text=This%20authority%20may%20be%20granted,authority%20of%20their%20governing%20councils.&text=Several%20tribes%20have%20exercised%20their%20authority%20to%20declare%20emergencies%20in%20recent%20years>

10 Novak, Rachael, et al. "Chapter 15: Tribes and Indigenous Peoples." U.S. 4th Climate Assessment. https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads/NCA4_Ch15_Tribes-and-Indigenous-Peoples_Full.pdf

11 Ibid.