COLORADO COALITION FOR THE Homeless Creating Lasting Solutions

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HOMELESSNESS

ISSUE BRIEF 2022

Climate change is one of the biggest threats to the safety and well-being of Colorado communities. By the end of the 21st century, global temperatures are expected to rise by at least 2 degrees Celsius. This will have astounding local and regional implications, including intensified natural disasters, extreme heat, drought, wildfires, and pandemics. People experiencing homelessness (PEH) – who may be forced to sleep outside and in places not meant for human habitation – are highly vulnerable to these hazards. PEH and people who are unstably housed and living on the margins are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of access to financial resources, protective shelter, equipment, and clothing. Additionally, they face the negative impacts of social isolation and lack of political power. Climate change, natural disasters, and displacement can also exacerbate these economic, physical, relational, and social challenges.[1]

With increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, the importance of having a safe place to live cannot be overstated. The number of PEH in Colorado is estimated to be anywhere between 10,000 – 54,000.[2] According to Colorado Health Foundation's 2021 annual Pulse Poll, 1 in 5 Coloradans are worried about losing their home.[3] Despite this, elected officials and advocates do not always consider the intersection between climate and homelessness when proposing or implementing solutions or policies to address either of these social challenges. Prioritizing investments in safe, secure, sanitary, and affordable housing for those who need it most must be a top priority at every level of government as we grapple with a changing planet.

HISTORICAL TRENDS, RACE/INTERSECTIONS

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are overrepresented among low-income households and PEH. Today, Black Coloradans are over-represented in the homeless population four-fold compared to the general population. Indigenous people are over-represented six-fold.[4] State trends mirror those at the national level. Further, Black and Latinx Coloradans are more likely to rate the cost of housing as an extremely serious problem.[5] These disparities have their roots in a long history of racist housing policies dating back to the 1930s. Federal laws such as redlining, in which the Federal Housing Administration systematically refused to insure mortgages in areas with a high concentration of racial and ethnic minorities, and the Housing Act of 1937, which disincentivized the development of public housing units for poor communities, severely limited housing options for BIPOC families and prevented them from building wealth.[6] Advocating for meaningful housing and climate policies requires reckoning with these unjust policies, the impacts of which are still felt today.

Race-based housing policies show that our built environments are "race-specific spatial imaginaries,"[7] pushing marginalized populations into low-opportunity neighborhoods that lack access to quality housing options, grocery stores, transit options, green spaces, employment and educational opportunities. Residents in these areas also tend to face environmental racism, meaning they are disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards like heavy industry, pollution from traffic, and toxic waste facilities. The voices of these communities are often neglected in the fight for basic rights to environmental resources such as clean air and water.[8] The poisoning of Flint Michigan's water with lead, a majority poor black neighborhood, and the delayed response to address the crisis is one such example on the national level.[9] Locally, Denver's redlined neighborhoods like Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea (GES) (see box to left/right/above/below) continue to have the highest levels of poverty and health problems related to environmental issues, as well as other related factors like stress and lack of access to healthful foods.[10]

The Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea (GES) neighborhood (zip code 80216) in northeast Denver is one of the most polluted zip codes in the country.[11] The GES neighborhood is situated along the Interstate-70 (I-70) and its population is 74.7% Hispanic/Latinx, many of whom are immigrants and essential workers. Many homes in this neighborhood are in serious need of repairs and residents are at high risk of displacement due to gentrification, industrialization, and increasing pollution. Studies have found that GES residents have higher rates of cardiovascular disease, risk of cancer due to elevated levels of lead and arsenic in the soil, asthma from proximity to industrial and vehicle exhaust, and depression. The area also has the highest rates of emergency department visits among youth.[12] This is a prime example of how racial inequities translate to polluting infrastructure, inadequate housing, and poor health in marginalized communities.

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VULNERABILITY

How Housing Impacts Health

Housing is a social determinant of health, meaning it is one of the many conditions that influence individual and community health outcomes. Simultaneously, health conditions both mental and physical, lack of or inadequate insurance, and high-cost care may cause housing instability. Systemic barriers to stable, affordable housing are already jeopardizing the health and well-being of PEH. Extensive research shows that in addition to housing barriers, extreme environmental conditions can cause psychological harm, physical injury, and even death among PEH. Further, due to underlying health conditions, social isolation, lack of resources, and exposure, PEH are at increased risk of the effects of extreme weather and natural disasters.[13]

Preexisting Conditions and Chronic Illness

Health conditions such as diabetes, respiratory disease, and cardiovascular disease are common among PEH and may increase the risk of harm from severe environmental conditions.[14] For example, a study conducted by the American Heart Association found that adults experiencing homelessness have 60-70% higher rates of cardiovascular events compared to the general population. BIPOC who are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity are at particularly high risk. The same study links historical housing segregation and the inability to access areas of opportunity to an increased incidence of cardiovascular disease among Black adults and higher rates of high blood pressure and cholesterol in Latinx neighborhoods.[15]

Extreme temperatures, drought, wildfires, poor air quality, and viral or bacterial illness aggravate preexisting conditions and chronic illnesses, leaving PEH and other intersecting, marginalized groups at increased risk of heat stroke, dehydration, and respiratory illness.[16] This risk is further compounded by mental and behavioral health challenges which reduce resiliency to extreme conditions.[17] Studies show that chances of death from extreme weather is elevated among people with psychiatric disabilities, alcohol dependency, and cognitive impairment, all of which are more prevalent among people experiencing homelessness.[18]

While recommendations to avoid adverse health effects may include staying indoors, wearing appropriate clothing, using air conditioning, or increasing air flow, and spending time in public places with air conditioning and air filtration systems, these options are often unavailable to PEH.[19] Research shows that hospital admission rates and emergency room visits among PEH increase during extreme weather and periods of poor air quality due, in part, to health impacts. It is worth noting that PEH are also more likely to access emergency medical services as an alternative to shelter during these events.[20]

CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURAL DISASTERS, AND DISPLACEMENT

Many scientific studies have drawn connections between climate change and the rise of natural disasters like pandemics, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, and floods, all which put low-income people and PEH at a disproportionate risk. Adding to already high rates of homelessness, climate change and severe weather events are forcing new people into the cycle of homelessness every year as people lose their homes to fire and extreme weather events. Globally, natural disasters make 14 million people homeless each year. As climate change worsens, the risk of displacement is expected to increase.[21] For example, years after Hurricane Katrina displaced more than 1 million people in New Orleans, Hurricane Ida hit the same marginalized, low-income households in August 2021. It is also important to consider that most recovery resources, including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding, tend to be directed to higher-income and whiter communities, reinforcing the racial disparities in environmental response and the ability of BIPOC communities to build wealth.[22]

GLOBALLY, NATURAL DISASTERS MAKE 14 MILLION PEOPLE HOMELESS EACH YEAR

MOST RECOVERY RESOURCES TEND TO BE DIRECTED TO HIGHER-INCOME AND WHITER COMMUNITIES

Locally, the 2013 flood in Northern Colorado destroyed 273 mobile homes, most of which were never replaced, and forced countless residents out of their communities permanently.[23] Mobile homes and lower-cost rental units tend to be in areas more prone to natural disasters, putting low-income communities who often lack resources to rebuild at greater risk of damage and displacement. Additionally, when disasters damage and destroy homes, the need for immediate housing solutions increases, the rental market is squeezed, and prices are driven up.[24] The recent Marshall Fire in the Bolder area, for example, destroyed more than 1,000 homes in a community that was already facing a serious housing shortage. Following the fire, major rental companies were scolded by the Colorado Attorney General for price gouging. Hundreds of families who prior to the disaster could afford their homes have now been priced out of their communities or simply cannot find any available housing because demand is so high.[25]

Extreme Temperatures

According to one study out of Toronto, Canada, 88% of participants reported that extreme weather has had a negative impact on their health and 60% indicated that it has required them to change their daily routines.[26] Winter conditions can lead to frostbite, hypothermia, trench foot, freezing to death, depression, stress, isolation, cold, flu, and pneumonia. Summer conditions can result in dehydration, fatigue, lethargy, immobility, trouble breathing, sunburn, heat stroke, fainting, crime, violence, irritability, and seizures.

Heat is a particularly important consideration for urban areas. The majority of PEH reside in these areas - typically because that is where services are located and where housing costs are the most prohibitive - and are often unable to escape the heat. Buildings, roads, and parking lots are typically built with materials that retain heat during the day making them up to 20 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than outlying green areas, a phenomenon called urban heat islands.[27] While there isn't explicit data for impact on PEH specifically, extreme heat is one of the leading causes of weather-related deaths in the United States killing more than 11,000 Americans between 1979-2018.[28] In the last 20 years, extreme summer heat has become more frequent across the contiguous 48 states, with western regions setting records for numbers of high temperature days.[29] In July 2021, Denver Metro area was 5 degrees hotter than its surrounding areas. According to a report by the Colorado Health Institute, Denver ranks third in the nation in intensity of the urban heat island effect, leaving thousands of unhoused people to face scorching heat.[30] It is important to note that the tracking and reporting of PEH mortality related to extreme temperatures is deficient, making it hard to clearly identify emerging trends.

Drought

With extreme heat also comes drought. Colorado faces an increasing risk of severe droughts in the coming decades. Warmer temperatures enhance evaporation from soil, making periods with low precipitation drier. Dry soils further suppress rainfall allowing for droughts to persist. A changing climate also impacts precipitation patterns in the Western states. The combination of shifting precipitation and warmer temperatures also affect Western snowpack, potentially decimating the water supply. Scientists are confident that on a global scale, wet places such as the tropics and higher latitudes will get wetter, while dry places in the subtropics (where most of the world's deserts are located) will become drier. [31] Water is essential to life, making periods of drought particularly punishing for PEH who already lack regular access to clean water.

WILDFIRES AND POOR AIR QUALITY

Wildfires in Colorado and across the West are becoming more frequent and destructive and are expected to worsen, in part due to dry vegetation caused by drought conditions. [32] Not only do wildfires destroy homes and displace people as they did during the Marshall Fire, but they also lead to poor air quality conditions. For example, Denver's Air Quality Index ranked the worst in the world on August 7, 2021, due to smoke from California's Dixie Fires. [33] Wildfires are one of the main sources of fine particulate matter PM 2.5. It is particularly dangerous because it can enter the bloodstream and cause severe heart and lung diseases. [34] Wildfire specific respiratory hospitalizations increased by 10% in 2019 alone. Exposure to particulate matter from wildfires is a growing threat to PEH who may spend long periods of time outside. [35]

"This is climate change, and it must be addressed before it wipes out humanity. I'm thankful I am not homelessness right now."

Speaking from the GES neighborhood in the aftermath of the Dixie fires, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless client, Jesse, explains, "My eyes felt stuffy and red. I work in gardening. This was not my first time having to be outside experiencing a wildfire, but it was really hard to adjust being outside this time." With the help of CCH, Jesse is now living in a subsidized home. He emphasizes, "This is climate change, and it must be addressed before it wipes out humanity. I'm thankful I am not homelessness right now."

DENVER'S AIR QUALITY INDEX RANKED THE WORST IN THE WORLD ON AUGUST 7, 2021, DUE TO SMOKE FROM CALIFORNIA'S DIXIE FIRES

It is important to note that housing itself can reduce certain fire risks. Due to a lack of affordable housing options, PEH are forced to perform basic acts of survival in public and without proper equipment. This often means using propane to cooking food or keep warm in encampment settings. This is a fire hazard and, in some cases, may lead to explosions. [36] This is a growing concern, particularly given Colorado's susceptibility to wildfires. Getting and keeping people housed is an important tool to reduce this environmental hazard.

Pandemics

Climate change is inextricably tied to the increased risk of pandemics. For example, with deforestation, many animals facing a loss of habitat are forced to migrate. As temperatures rise in colder regions, the potential for contact with animals and spillover of germs between wildlife and people is inevitable and no longer geographically predictable. We are at the risk of seeing pandemics that could be even more severe than the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. [37]

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of both a sweeping public health catastrophe and an economic crisis for low-income families and PEH. Stay-at-home orders do not provide realistic guidance for people who are unhoused or in inadequate, overcrowded housing or shelter. Access to clean water, air, healthy food, and the security of housing was already an issue for many low-income families who subsequently lost their jobs and faced the possibility of eviction, foreclosure, and homelessness during the pandemic.

Outside shelters, PEH have little access to hygiene products, washing stations, or portable toilets that are crucial in preventing virus spread. In shelters, particularly high-density congregate settings, PEH are unable to practice physical distancing, putting them at risk of becoming sick. These devastating impacts from the risk of future pandemics should motivate investment in affordable, accessible housing as well as shelter infrastructure that supports the health of PEH.

Food Insecurity

Environmental conditions also influence food security, or physical, social, and economic access to safe and nutritious foods. Agricultural production is central to food availability which largely depends on climate conditions like predictable temperatures and precipitation. Climate change also affects the global system of food processing, transportation, storage, and consumption.[38] On an individual level, the impacts of climate change on the global food system are likely to make nutritious foods more expensive and harder to access. These challenges are compounded by growing housing instability which makes safely storing food more challenging.

As of 2021, 1 in 3 Coloradans are struggling with hunger and are forced to choose between paying rent or putting food on the table.[39] PEH are also more likely to be malnourished, which reduces capacity to tolerate exposure to extreme environmental conditions exacerbated by climate change.[40] While the agricultural industry has historically been adept at adjusting to changing conditions, populations with low incomes and limited resources are likely to feel the negative impacts of climate change on food security.[41]

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Making connections between environment, health, and housing plays an important role in advancing good, equitable public policy. Community, nonprofit, and government leaders must invest in interventions and infrastructure to support PEH and Colorado's environment.

Strategic and Emergency Interventions

Moving forward it will be important to track PEH mortality, emergency department visits, and health outcome data related to environmental conditions to help inform interventions. Such interventions may include strengthened street outreach programs that respond specifically to extreme weather and environmental issues, distributing survival gear, connecting PEH with shelter options, and referring them to permanent housing.

Sustainable Housing Infrastructure

Sustainable, affordable housing development is essential to mitigating the impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable and least resourced Coloradans while reducing harm to the environment. Sustainable development patterns may include increased energy efficiency standards, transit-oriented development, zoning for higher density development, accessory dwelling units, and innovative housing solutions like 3D printed homes, and development aligned with enhanced hazard risk reduction standards. These types of development will improve housing affordability and availability, reduce transit time for residents, lower maintenance costs, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, strengthen social and environmental equity, and bolster community resilience. Sustainable development is an expressed priority of Governor Polis' administration as well as state and local policymakers.[42] It should be considered alongside any strategies to address homelessness in Colorado. Connecting PEH with housing will improve their health and provide protection from some of the harsh impacts of climate change. Sustainable housing will also mitigate impacts of homelessness on the environment.

The Bottom Line

Housing alone will not protect us from natural disasters and extreme weather events; however, Colorado's dearth of housing disproportionately impacts PEH and puts them at risk of harm and even death. Secure housing is linked to every quality-of-life measure: food security, better education, improved health, financial stability, and racial equity. Investment in sustainable housing infrastructure, strategic and emergency interventions, and policy changes that push back against the history of inequitable housing policies are all essential components of the solution.

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