



COVID-19

& ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

THE NEGATIVE HEALTH OUTCOMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CLOSELY MIRROR THE RACIAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES THAT ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES HAVE FACED FOR DECADES.

The legacy of environmental racism in NYC has led to the disproportionate siting of polluting infrastructure in low-income communities and communities of color, which has resulted in higher levels of respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses, increasing their susceptibility to COVID-19.

Furthermore, new research is showing that higher levels of PM_{2.5} are associated with higher death rates from COVID-19, and that **marginal decreases in pollution could have resulted in hundreds fewer COVID-19 deaths in NYC.**¹

While worldwide air pollution exposure has been decreasing during this pandemic, it is unclear how concentrations are affected in specific environmental justice communities that currently endure the highest levels of air pollution and are still supporting many essential services.

We are seeing these environmental justice consequences amplified by the coronavirus pandemic; the same communities dealing with higher rates of chronic disease are being hit hardest by the virus. **People of color are being infected and dying from COVID-19 at disproportionate rates.**

In NYC, African Americans and Latinos represent higher rates of fatalities than their representation in the population. As of April 2020, Latinos make up 34 percent of people who have died of the virus but only 29 percent of the population; African Americans make up 28 percent of those who have died, but only 22 percent of the population.^{2,3,4}

Preliminary data shows that the Bronx has experienced 2x the fatalities than the rest of the city, and with the South Bronx being particularly impacted by high numbers of cases.⁵

Compounding these clear disparities, **it is likely that NYC is undercounting the COVID-19 related deaths – some estimates suggest as much as 40%** – due to residents who are dying at home and not included in the official death toll.⁶ In fact, City officials recalculated the initial toll the virus has taken and disclosed a new staggering number — adding nearly 4,000 to the total.⁷ In order to truly understand COVID-19 disparities and where the need for support is greatest, we must fully understand which communities are being most impacted.



COVID-19 & CLIMATE EMERGENCIES

SIMILARLY, TO CLIMATE CHANGE, COVID-19 IS A THREAT MULTIPLIER. WHEN THE TWO CRISES INTERSECT, THE EFFECTS OF POOR AIR QUALITY, EXTREME HEAT, AND SEVERE STORMS ON EJ COMMUNITIES WILL BE DISASTROUS.

According to the NYC Panel on Climate Change, **by the 2050's New York City can expect to see the number of 90 degree days to double, and the number of heatwaves to either triple or quadruple**, which puts increasing strain on our energy grid and causes the most polluting power plants to be fired up, worsening air quality and increasing electricity costs.

New Yorkers who are currently suffering from higher rates of asthma and respiratory issues – whose best defense against COVID-19 is to stay in their home – will have to deal with skyrocketing electricity costs in order to cool their homes. In the event the grid becomes so strained to trigger blackouts and brownouts, **those most vulnerable to both heat-related illness and COVID-19 will be trapped home with no relief from the heat.**

The City's main point of intervention for heat emergencies is to open up public cooling centers when a heat emergency is announced. The usual ways New Yorkers keep cool will likely be unavailable – public pools and beaches are likely to remain closed, and maintaining social distance in parks and cooling centers presents a challenge.

The 2020 Atlantic Hurricane Season is already predicted to be more active than usual.⁸ Superstorm Sandy battered nearly 1/3 of all NYCHA units (over 35,000 units across 400 buildings), damaged critical public and private infrastructure, and disrupted access to food, drinking water, healthcare, and other critical services.⁹ **Hurricane evacuations may be complicated by social distancing orders, especially in low income communities of color where there is a deep reliance on now-reduced public transportation.** Furthermore, emergency shelters play a crucial role in housing displaced residents.

HOW CAN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES SAFELY FOLLOW THE STAY-AT-HOME ORDER DURING A HEAT EMERGENCY WITH NO A/C OR ELECTRICITY?



COVID-19

& A JUST RECOVERY FOR NYC

Access to safe and healthy housing is a human right. Millions of Americans have faced unemployment as a direct result of COVID-19, and millions more are expected to lose their income. **For low-income people and people of color who are more likely to be renters, and who faced financial precarity even before the crisis, this crisis has put ever more pressure on wallets, making already costly essentials such as rent and electricity unaffordable. The ability to keep the lights on and homes cool in the summer months and to keep the water running to stay sanitary are essential to environmental justice.**

The COVID-19 global pandemic is an opportunity to recognize that community preparedness in NYC needs to account not just for extreme weather events like heat waves and hurricanes, but also brace for the threat of emerging infectious diseases. **Community resiliency has to be holistic and just; we need preparedness strategies for the many health crises that will only be exacerbated and complicated by climate change.**

COVID-19 is decimating our economy, and the widespread job loss and trauma for many people will continue to grow. **Climate solutions will create direct opportunities for coming out of an economic collapse, but only if there is large-scale, coordinated citywide action rooted in equity.** By investing in the infrastructure transformation we need to reach a completely renewable energy economy, we can put millions of people back to work with good wages and protection.

A JUST RECOVERY FROM COVID-19:

- **Prioritize COVID testing** in EJ & other low income communities and communities of color
- **Freeze rent and utility payments** through the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Expand the NYS Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) for cooling** to meet the needs of COVID- and heat-vulnerable communities.
- **Cooling centers & hurricane evacuation shelters must adapt, and provide: social distancing guidelines, advance notice of their locations, functioning A/C, and overnight access**
- **Invest in resilient, clean and distributed energy to reduce strain on the grid.**
- **Commit to climate adaptation investments to build community resiliency**
- **Equitably allocate recovery resources** to frontline low-income communities of color.
- **Invest in a Climate & Community Stimulus** that prioritizes environmental justice communities for climate change solutions to jumpstart the regenerative, green economy.

REFERENCES

1. Friedman, Lisa. "New Research Links Air Pollution to Higher Coronavirus Death Rates." The New York Times, The New York Times, 7 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/climate/air-pollution-coronavirus-covid.html?referingSource=articleShare
2. Eligon, John, and Audra. "Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States." The New York Times, The New York Times, 7 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html
3. "Bleak Records in N.Y. and N.J., but Leaders See Coronavirus Curve Flattening." The New York Times, The New York Times, 8 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-new-york-update.html#link-1edae20.
4. "Workbook: NYS-COVID19-Tracker." COVID19, covid19tracker.health.ny.gov/views/NYS-COVID19-Tracker/NYS-DOHCOVID-19Tracker-Fatalities?%3Aembed=yes&%3Atoolbar=no&%3Atabs=n
5. https://thecity.nyc/2020/04/bronx-residents-twice-as-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-in-nyc.html?fbclid=IwAR0JP-8w6KMM5elnf_aLfUzgdYulflhPdmYCndqAHM77mUv2GOWkwT_P75Yo
6. Hogan, Gwynne. "Staggering Surge Of NYers Dying In Their Homes Suggests City Is Undercounting Coronavirus Fatalities." Gothamist, Gothamist, 7 Apr. 2020, gothamist.com/news/surge-number-new-yorkers-dying-home-officials-suspect-undercount-covid-19-related-deaths
7. Lawrence, Quil. "New York City's COVID-19 Death Toll Soars Past 10,000." NPR, NPR, 15 Apr. 2020, www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/14/834647854/new-york-citys-covid-19-death-toll-soars-past-10-000
8. The Weather Channel. "Hurricane Season Forecast to Be Above Average." The Weather Channel, The Weather Channel, 15 Apr. 2020, weather.com/storms/hurricane/video/hurricane-season-forecast-to-be-above-average.
9. "Impact of Hurricane Sandy." About Hurricane Sandy, NYC.gov, www1.nyc.gov/site/cdbgdr/about/About%20Hurricane%20Sandy.page.



About NYC-EJA: *Founded in 1991, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance is a non-profit, 501(c)3 citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice.*

Learn more at www.NYC-EJA.org

Co-authors: *Jalisa Gilmore & Priya Mulgaonkar, Eddie Bautista & Annel Hernandez*

Graphic Designer: *Priya Mulgaonkar*

Photo credit: *John Minchillo/AP via ABC News*