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The climate gap: Poor hardest hit by climate change

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People who live in neighborhoods with dirtier air and water -- usually low-income and ethnic minorities -- will bear the brunt of climate change, according to a report, ?The Climate Gap,? released last month.

Climate change will increase pollution, harm public health, raise the costs of food, energy and water, and result in job losses, with the greatest burden falling on communities of color and the poor, the study found.

?Climate change is real. So is the climate gap. It?s not something fictitious, made up by communities who feel underrepresented,? said Manuel Pastor, one of the report?s authors and a professor at the University of Southern California.

Pastor, who directs the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the university?s Center for Sustainable Cities, says that as environmentalists and policymakers come up with policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they also need to address the disproportionate impact that climate change will have on the neediest populations.

?Environmentalists have had carbon blinders on,? Pastor said. ?They?ve been focused on how to reduce carbon emissions ... without considering that co-pollutant effects, cost issues and green jobs creation are essential to the conversation.?

Climate change, studies show, will increase extreme weather events such as heat waves, floods, droughts and wildfires. Air pollution will also worsen with the warming temperatures. Both will take a toll on public health, with people of color and the poor worse off.

African Americans in Los Angeles are twice as likely to die from heat wave-related illnesses than other city residents. A study of the 2006 California heat wave found that Latinos had the highest rates of emergency room visits and hospitalizations in the state. The risk of death because of heat wave-related illness is also higher for infants, the elderly, people with chronic conditions, and those without air conditioning or access to transportation to get to cooler places.

In some cases, people had air conditioning but felt they could not afford to turn it on, said report coauthor Rachel Morello-Frosch, a professor of environmental science, policy and management in the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. Communities of color and low-income people tend to live in areas abundant in heat-absorbing concrete and asphalt and lacking in parks and trees that provide shade. This ?heat-island effect,? said Morello-Frosch, intensifies the impact of heat waves.

Minimizing the effects of heat waves requires investment in access to quality housing, air conditioning, transportation, cooling centers, green space, as well as more public outreach and education, she said. Another strategy to reduce the impacts of climate change on communities of color is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions

in neighborhoods with the heaviest polluters.

But this would take an economic toll on the same communities. That?s because the heaviest polluters and emitters of greenhouse gases in California, including power plants, oil refineries and cement factories, employ more people of color (60 percent of their workforce) in jobs that tend to be unionized and higher paying.

Climate change will also result in job losses in the agricultural and tourism sectors, which employ large numbers of minorities.

Some argue that policies that reduce greenhouse gases would increase energy and water costs for consumers, especially those who can least afford it.

Poor families already spend much of their household income on water, food and electricity costs, according to the report. Those in the lowest income group paid three times as much for water, and twice as much for food and electricity as those in the highest income group.

?The do-nothing approach will make gaps worse,? said Morello-Frosch.

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