

# Climate Change and the African American Community



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## THE UNEQUAL BURDEN OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Energy policy and climate change are issues of fundamental importance to the African American community. While the impacts of climate change are global, the effects are not spread evenly across the world. Instead, climate change is likely to have different impacts on people of different socioeconomic and racial groups.

Currently, stark disparities exist in the United States between those who benefit from the causes of climate change and those who bear the costs of climate change.

- African Americans are already *disproportionately burdened* by the health effects of climate change, including deaths during heat waves and from worsened air pollution. Similarly, unemployment and economic hardship associated with climate change will fall most heavily on the African American community.

- African Americans are *less responsible* for climate change than other Americans; historically and at present, African Americans emit less greenhouse gas.

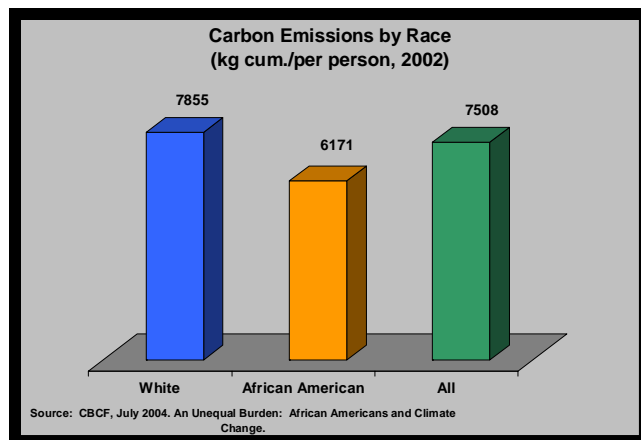
**African  
Americans  
Emit 20%  
less carbon**

- Policies intended to mitigate climate change can generate large health and economic benefits or costs for African Americans, depending on how they are structured.

## DIFFERENCES IN EMISSIONS BY RACE

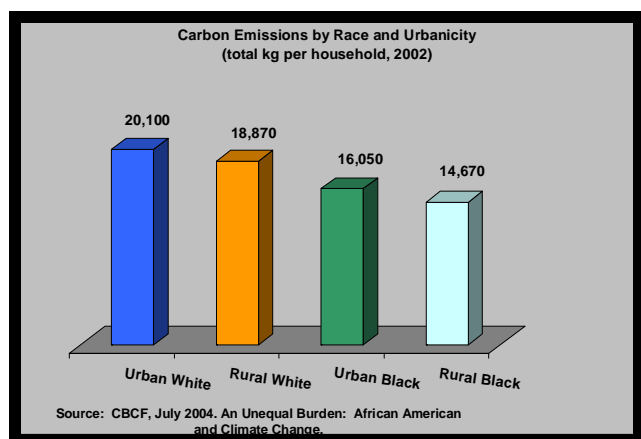
African Americans contribute significantly less to greenhouse gas emissions than others in the U.S. in both direct emissions of carbon dioxide from energy use, and indirect emissions, or emissions generated during the production or delivery of consumed products.

- On average, African American households generate 14% less carbon than White households directly through fuel use (i.e. gasoline, electricity, natural gas, and home heating) and are responsible for emitting 36% less carbon indirectly through other purchases.
- Overall, African Americans emit 6,171 kg of carbon dioxide per person, a little over 20 percent less than whites and nearly 18 percent less than all Americans.



### Significant Difference in the Carbon Footprints of African Americans by Geography

There are large differences between patterns of energy use in urban and rural communities, both with respect to direct fuel consumption, and the purchase of other goods and services. Urban populations have approximately 8% higher carbon emissions than rural populations for both African Americans and Whites. African Americans in rural areas have the smallest carbon footprint of any other group at about 23 percent below the national average.



### Why Differences in Emissions?

In total the African American community is less environmentally destructive than Whites, particularly with respect to consumption. They reside in highly urban areas, drive less, use more public transport, use less electricity, and generally purchase less energy related products than Whites.

- In part, the lifestyle differences are related to income.

### *Household Energy Expenditure*

Despite emitting 20% less carbon dioxide in total than Whites, African Americans spend a higher fraction of their income on carbon-intensive purchases. Consequently, African Americans are more likely to be affected by changes in the price of energy or carbon.

In particular, low-income African Americans are among the most vulnerable populations in society to sudden increases in the price of energy. The lowest income groups reported spending 13% of total expenditures on direct energy purchases, relative to just 9% of total expenditures for other Americans.

### **HEALTH AND ECONOMIC BURDENS**

#### *Health Effects*

African Americans disproportionately bear the substantial public health burden caused by climate change. The primary effect of changing weather patterns on health is likely to be an increase in the prevalence of heat-related deaths. Secondary health effects are expected to include increased asthma and cancer deaths and related illnesses from air pollution, as well as changes in the range of communicable diseases, and energy associated health problems. Globally, climate change *already* causes an estimated 160,000 deaths annually, and the number will worsen as the rate of change increases over the coming decades.

#### *Economic Effects*

By altering weather patterns, climate change directly affects numerous sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and energy use. In addition, by harming health and habitats, climate change is likely to have non-market effects as well.

Climate change largely determines the productivity of our forests and fields, whether we heat or cool our homes, and the amount of water available to drink or irrigate crops. A great proportion of African Americans reside in the south and work in the agricultural industry and therefore, will be most vulnerable to environmental changes that significantly impact jobs and weather conditions.

Across the globe, humans currently emit over 6.3 billion tons of carbon annually, the **average estimate** for total global damages from climate change according to Dr. Richard Tol's survey of the literature is **over \$600 billion per year**.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Since global warming is expected to disproportionately impact African Americans, policies that aim to meaningfully reduce global warming are important. African-Americans have a particular interest in the choice of environmental policies for two reasons:

**First**, African Americans are generally more vulnerable to pollution impacts because of their spatial distribution. Therefore, African Americans may be disproportionately worse-off with the use of market mechanisms for pollutants that cause local hot spots, unless additional safeguards are added to limit the impact of local concentrations.

**Second**, as a result of lower average income and wealth, African Americans are more vulnerable to environmental policies with regressive impacts. These include environmental policies that have distributional patterns similar to consumption taxes. In as much as market mechanisms reduce the overall costs of emission control, these methods can reduce the transmitted costs to African Americans.

### **FACTORS INFLUENCING OPTIMAL CLIMATE POLICIES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS**

#### *Effective at Reducing Carbon and Ancillary Pollutants*

The optimal policy will reduce carbon emissions in such a way as to facilitate meaningful international cooperation to reduce global emissions of carbon dioxide.

#### *Economically Efficient*

Given the estimated damages from climate change, an optimal climate change policy would employ market mechanisms such as tradable permits or taxation to maintain economic efficiency. Additionally, economic efficiency can be aided by stimulating significant public investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy. Policies that generate revenue by taxing carbon pollution or auctioning carbon permits will be more economically efficient than those that do not generate revenue. Ultimately climate policy that is flexible in where carbon abatement occurs, and uses revenues from abatement to pursue an efficient transition will reduce the vulnerability of the economy to oil price shocks.

#### *Equitable*

A final important component of any climate policy is the ability to offset detrimental effects on vulnerable populations and individuals. For example, regressive increases in the price of energy can be offset by redirecting revenues to vulnerable populations utilizing policy alternatives such as: tax incentives and direct transfers.

#### Necessary Criterion for Environmental Policy Proposals

Reduce Carbon Dioxide and related pollutants across the globe

Promote energy efficiency and generate revenues

Equitable, specifically



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