

Healthy Environments for All: Good for Families, Communities, and the Economy



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This is one of a series of issue briefs dedicated to helping community leaders and policymakers bolster their campaigns and strategies with the economic case for equity. The issue briefs correspond with the 13 planks of the Marguerite Casey Foundation's [Equal Voice National Family Platform](#). Additional issue briefs can be found at www.policylink.org/focus-areas/equitable-economy.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity by **Lifting Up What Works**®.

Marguerite Casey Foundation exists to help low-income families strengthen their voice and mobilize their communities in order to achieve a more just and equitable society for all.

Overview

The face of America is changing: more than half of Americans under age five are of color, and by 2044 we will be a majority people-of-color nation. But while communities of color are driving growth and becoming a larger share of the population, inequality is on the rise and racial inequities remain wide and persistent. Dismantling racial barriers and ensuring that everyone can participate and reach their full potential are critical for the nation's prosperity. Equity—just and fair inclusion of all—is essential to growing a strong economy and building vibrant and resilient communities. This issue brief describes the economic benefits of creating healthy environments for all—both through targeted strategies that improve the quality of neighborhood environments where low-income people of color live and work, and through larger-scale shifts toward a clean energy economy that does not rely on fossil fuels.

Why Healthy Environments Matter

The quality of the air, water, and built environments in which people live and work impacts every aspect of their lives. Low-income people and people of color are far more likely than affluent Whites to live in neighborhoods where they are exposed to higher levels of pollution and have less access to open, green spaces.¹ As a result, they are at greater risk for many health problems that are heavily influenced by the physical environment, such as asthma and lead exposure.²

At the same time, although low-income communities contribute less of the greenhouse emissions that cause climate change, they are more vulnerable to the likely negative effects of climate change, including rising food, energy, transportation, and housing costs, compared with high-income communities. Low-income communities also have fewer resources that they can use to bounce back from floods and other events that climate change may cause.³ Ultimately, a dramatic economic

shift must occur to move our nation away from business as usual and toward a fossil fuel-free economy that creates meaningful work and livelihood for all.⁴

A bold, just plan to halt climate change while bringing opportunity into communities must address both the environmental crisis and the lingering economic crisis. Reducing climate pollutants in neighborhoods makes communities healthier, and ensuring that people live and work in healthy environments—places with clean air and water and no exposure to hazardous waste—not only improves residents' health and well-being but also benefits the economy. Healthy workers are more productive and take fewer sick days than those with chronic health issues. They also spend less on health care, leaving more income for other family expenses. In addition, efforts to make neighborhoods greener also present major business opportunities; transitioning to local renewable energy sources creates jobs and helps communities reach both energy and economic independence.⁵

The Economic Benefits of Environmental Equity

13 Million

Missed workdays prevented each year by the Clean Air Act

\$8.3 Billion

Annual health-care cost savings due to federal clean air rules

\$1 Trillion

Projected value of green industry businesses in 2020

15%

Average household energy-cost reductions from basic energy efficiency measures

Sources: [Environmental Protection Agency](#); [Green For All](#); [Energy Star](#); [Trust for America's Health](#)

The Economic Benefits of Healthy Environments

Creating healthier environments would have many positive impacts on the economy, including the following.

- **Job creation.** Improving the environments of low-income communities and communities of color by retrofitting homes and buildings to be more energy efficient and creating sustainable green spaces can also create new good jobs. Many green-sector jobs are high-opportunity jobs that pay good wages, offer benefits and career opportunities, and are accessible to workers who do not possess a four-year college degree.⁶ During the Great Recession, green jobs were the one economic bright spot that offered more opportunity for low- and middle-skilled workers compared with the national economy as a whole, and these jobs are growing most quickly in the urban areas where unemployed workers of color are concentrated.⁷ Analyses show that green investments could create many jobs. Retrofitting 40 percent of the nation's existing building stock, for example, would create up to 625,000 full-time jobs in the next decade,⁸ and upgrading the nation's water infrastructure would create a remarkable 1.9 million jobs over just five years.⁹
- **Business development.** Improving community environments presents opportunities for business development and growth. Green industries are thriving: by 2020, green businesses are projected to be worth \$1 trillion.¹⁰ Entrepreneurs of color and community entrepreneurs can be at the forefront of this opportunity if they have access to capital, mentorship, training programs, and alternative business models like worker-owned cooperatives, which can build community wealth and security. Harnessing the economic power of anchor institutions like hospitals and universities and directing it to local businesses provides market stability and reinvestment opportunities for local entrepreneurs. The Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland use this model to expand economic and wealth-building opportunities through green, community-based enterprises that offer ownership opportunities for employees.¹¹

- **Family economic security.** Energy efficiency and water conservation lower household utility bills, which consume an increasing percentage of household budgets—particularly for low-income families. In 2013, energy costs accounted for 27 percent of the average household budget among families earning less than \$30,000 a year, a big jump from 16 percent in 2001.¹² Basic energy efficiency measures can reduce average household energy bills by about 15 percent,¹³ and retrofitting the country's building stock would garner over \$1 trillion in energy savings over 10 years.¹⁴
- **Healthier, more productive workers and communities.** When people live in healthy environments, rates of disease and illness sharply decrease. An EPA study found that improving air quality in the United States by reducing fine particles and ozone below 1990 levels would prevent 13 million lost workdays per year.¹⁵ Children are particularly vulnerable to unhealthy air and water; reducing air pollution decreases childhood asthma rates by roughly 30 percent,¹⁶ reduces school absences, and improves children's well-being.¹⁷

Key Challenges to Creating Healthy Environments

Several factors result in communities of color and low-income communities shouldering a higher environmental burden.

- **Disproportionate exposure to environmental risks.** Low-income people and people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with polluting industries and poor air quality than wealthier White people.¹⁸ Climate change will increase these risks: without explicit and targeted protections, communities already at risk will become even more vulnerable to poor health outcomes and unhealthy environments.¹⁹
- **Unequal voice and power.** Communities of color and low-income communities often also lack political voice and representation. Historical exclusion from land use and zoning decisions localized polluted waste sites near or in communities of color and low-income communities.²⁰ Compounding this deliberate exclusion, communities of color and low-income communities are inadequately protected by existing environmental measures, and response to environmental hazards in these communities is slow and inadequate.²¹

- **Lack of an equity focus within the traditional environmental movement.** Historically, a chronic and continual lack of diversity within environmental organizations has created a divide between traditional environmental issues, such as wilderness preservation, and environmental and climate justice issues that incorporate issues of race and class alongside environmental concerns.²² This divide is exacerbated as traditional environmental organizations without a racial equity lens receive a disproportionate share of resources going to the environmental movement as a whole.²³ While efforts are being made to diversify and unify the environmental movement, much work remains to create a cohesive vision that incorporates racial and economic justice in strategies to transition to a fossil fuel-free economy.

Strategies to Create Healthy Environments for All

Communities can reduce risks and improve neighborhood environments through the following strategies.

- **Increase community voice and leadership in planning and policymaking.** Regulatory agencies should include robust public input and participation in the beginning stages of decision making, ensure adequate notice periods for public meetings, provide translation services, and include testimony from local residents. Targeted training and leadership development programs can cultivate the next generation of community leaders. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Urban Habitat’s Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute is an 80-hour, six-month program that trains diverse community leaders to effectively serve on the local and regional boards and commissions that decide on transportation, land use, housing, jobs, and climate-change policies.²⁴
- **Create green career pathways.** Cities and companies can implement targeted strategies to train, hire, and help local community members build careers within green industries such as energy efficient retrofits, water infrastructure, renewable energy installment and maintenance, and within the greening of existing industries like plumbing and heating. The Emerald Cities Collaborative works in 10 cities to implement large-scale energy efficiency retrofits, providing good jobs that pay living wages and provide training and career ladders for workers of color and low-income workers.²⁵

- **Ensure access to parks and green spaces.** The health and environmental benefits of parks and green spaces are well documented.²⁶ States and localities should protect open green spaces, especially near low-income communities and communities of color. Cities can create comprehensive plans to expand and secure access to green space, such as New York City’s PlaNYC’s commitment to ensure that all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.²⁷

Equitable Growth in Action

Create Good Jobs and Healthier Neighborhood Environments through Home Energy Retrofits

Buffalo’s Green Development Zone, organized by PUSH Buffalo, is an effort to create jobs while improving the physical environment and quality of life in a 25-square-block area in the city’s long-distressed West Side. To date, PUSH has acquired 50 parcels of property ranging from vacant lots to rundown multiunit buildings. The organization works with “high-road” contractors that agree to hire locally, pay family-sustaining wages, and provide training for local residents. So far, its efforts have created 52 jobs for local residents in the zone.

PUSH recently expanded its efforts beyond the West Side. Through a partnership with New York State energy authorities under the Green Jobs-Green NY program, PUSH dispatches teams to encourage homeowners countywide to make their homes more energy efficient and connects underrepresented business owners and workers to the resulting jobs and business opportunities. By building both a market and labor pool for residential retrofits, PUSH saves homeowners money, secures economic opportunity for people who need it, and improves environmental health. Through partnerships with responsible contractors, PUSH aims to retrofit 750 residential units in the Buffalo region within two years.

Sources: [The Green Development Zone](#); [PUSH Buffalo](#); [Partnership for the Public Good](#)

- **Ensure development processes produce healthy neighborhood environments.** Currently, most environmental review processes only examine the impacts of the single development under consideration, instead of the combined impact of all pollution sources in a vulnerable community. Regulatory and permitting processes should incorporate cumulative impact analyses in decisions about where new pollution sources will be located, as the Allegheny County Board of Health did in its 2012 air quality guidelines.²⁸
- **Prevent displacement and build more green affordable housing near transit.** In many urban areas, efforts to create accessible green neighborhoods unintentionally contribute to the displacement of vulnerable low-income residents. To achieve the goal of healthy environments for all, communities need to assess how green building and infrastructure projects can lead to rising prices and displacement pressures, and act early to prevent displacement by putting equitable development tools and strategies in place, such as inclusionary zoning, community benefits agreements, and strong tenant protections.²⁹

Learn More

- [Green For All](#) Building a green economy that includes communities of color and lifts people out of poverty.
- [EnergyStar](#) A program of the Environmental Protection Agency to help families and businesses save money and protect the environment.
- [Our Power Campaign](#) Advancing state and local policies to promote both jobs and climate justice.
- [The Greenlining Institute](#) Policy, research, and organizing that focuses on helping communities of color thrive.
- [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) Environmental action group founded to protect air, water, and land through grassroots organizing and policy.

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Notes

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