



 PEOPLE

All Communities Deserve A "Cool and Green" COVID Recovery

MAY 23, 2021 [ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE](#), [EXTREME HEAT](#), [GREEN SPACE](#), [URBAN HEAT ISLAND EFFECT](#),

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by **Reann Gibson**

Over the last 14 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of nearly everyone in the United States and abroad. While we have all suffered, communities of color have [borne the brunt](#) of the illness, job loss and death of the pandemic. As summer approaches once again, these communities are about to experience another health threat: heat waves.

Like COVID-19, severe heat waves are not an equal opportunity health threat. The most disinvested neighborhoods — those dominated by buildings, pavement, and parking lots — are hit the hardest. The built environment of these places absorbs and traps heat,

creating a “[heat island effect](#)” that makes them dangerously hotter than other neighborhoods while worsening their air quality.

At the same time, the climate crisis is causing more frequent heat waves that often last longer.

Every year, [extreme heat kills more people in the United States than any other weather-related event and hospitalizes thousands more](#), disproportionately burdening communities with the least resources.

With fewer parks, trees, and open green space, many under-resourced Black and Latinx neighborhoods will swelter this summer as we begin to recover from the pandemic. Findings from the [Healthy Neighborhoods Study](#) show that residents in Eastern Massachusetts will experience scorching heat — with temperatures up to 20 degrees higher than in other parts of the region. This is true for other areas across the country as well.

That’s not an accident. It’s the result of decades-old racist policies and current development practices.

For years, majority Black and brown communities have been [marginalized](#) on many fronts because of intentional disinvestment, [redlining](#), the location of [brownfields](#) — sites targeted for redevelopment though they may be contaminated with hazardous waste — and development that added gray surfaces at the expense of green spaces.

These are the communities that suffer from worse health over time and are most negatively affected by changes like climate disasters and gentrification.

In fact, [research](#) has found that communities across the United States that experienced redlining — the formerly legal practice of restricting home loans for people of color to certain areas — are hotter and have worse air quality.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Communities and elected leaders can do something.

The COVID-19 recovery process offers an opportunity to prepare high-risk communities for the climate challenges they will disproportionately face as temperatures rise. Equitable development plans need to green, cool, and resource Black and brown communities.

Recovery and resilience funds must be directed toward at-risk neighborhoods, including support for increased energy efficiency, green infrastructure, flood mitigation, expanded public transit, and financial support for home renovations.

State and city governments must invest in the equitable development of parks and urban green spaces so that all residents have access to safer, cooler, and less polluted environments — and a better quality of life. Parks and trees not only cool the environment, but they also create opportunities for people to exercise and play, reduce stress, and socialize.

Additionally, residents should help determine how to expand green space and have opportunities to formally own or lease the land for community use, whether that's for a community garden or a park or a playground to mitigate heat island effects over the long run. [They should have ownership](#) over what happens in their communities — which not only leads to more [effective solutions](#) but also meaningfully contributes to better health.

That's why it's essential to center plans and responses for heat and climate impacts on those living and working in the places most impacted. Leaders must spend time in these communities to learn about the unique challenges people face; meet residents where they are, when they're available, in the languages they speak; and listen. We must rely on community expertise and create opportunities for communities to lead in visioning and development of the spaces they would like to see.

Society can't continue to tolerate the same kinds of inequities that make some areas more vulnerable to both COVID-19 and extreme heat. Justice demands that policymakers correct generations of discrimination and work to create a future where health and well-being for all are prioritized.

The climate crisis and COVID-19 [are everyone's problems](#). Communities of color should not continue to bear the greatest burdens.

[Reann Gibson](#) is a senior research fellow at the Conservation Law Foundation and manager of its [Healthy Neighborhoods Study](#).

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