

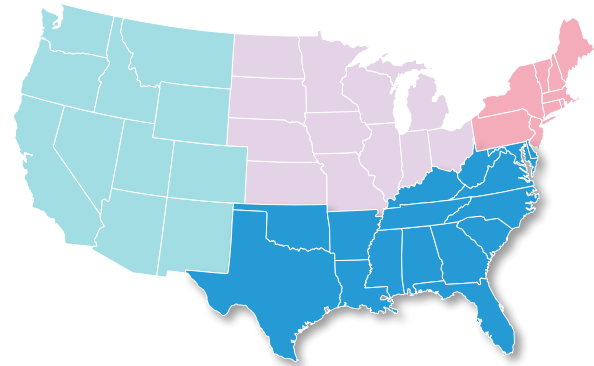
Focus on the South

The U.S. must take rapid climate action to prioritize and protect health and equity, including a rapid transition away from the burning of fossil fuels.

The South is experiencing impacts of climate change, including extreme heat, more intense tropical storms and hurricanes, amplified storm surges, and rising sea levels. Cities across the region are experiencing more dangerous heat waves. Extreme rainfall, high tide flooding, and extreme coastal floods are becoming more common and severe. They are projected to worsen.

Climate change is harming the health of residents in the region

- **Extreme Heat:** Extreme heat can cause heat exhaustion and heat stroke; contribute to poor pregnancy outcomes; harm lungs, kidneys, and hearts; worsen mental health; and contribute to higher crime rates and more suicides. Extreme heat means lost labor hours for outdoor workers and fewer days children can safely play outside or participate in sports. Warmer nights, longer, hotter summers, and humidity are increasing, and are particularly harmful to health. People living in cities, low-income and rural communities, children, and outdoor workers are at especially high risk.
- **Extreme weather:** Climate-intensified disasters, such as hurricanes, can cause injury and death; damage health facilities; limit access to healthcare, safe water and housing; cause power outages; and harm mental health. People with disabilities or chronic conditions like asthma and heart disease, older persons, and low-income communities are among those at greatest risk. Evacuations, power outages, and disruptions to healthcare are particularly harmful during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Poor air quality:** Air pollution causes lung and heart disease, poor birth outcomes, childhood asthma, and early death. The Southeast region has higher levels of particulate air pollution than many other parts of the country.



- **Water pollution:** Sea level rise and flooding increase the risk of water contamination. Climate disasters impact drinking water infrastructure.
- **Infectious disease:** Climate change is increasing the range of mosquitos that carry illnesses like dengue, chikungunya, and Zika virus.

Climate change and health equity

Everyone's health is at risk from climate change, but some communities bear a greater burden. Decades of racially-biased policies including structural discrimination in housing, zoning, and industrial and transportation infrastructure put certain communities at higher risk of the health harms from climate change, air pollution and extreme heat. Black and other people of color, rural communities, and the poor are disproportionately impacted, deepening the region's significant existing health inequities.

The region has among the nation's highest maternal and infant mortality rates and preterm birth rates^{1,2,3} - and climate change exacerbates these harms. The South has the highest energy insecurity in the country, with many families in the region struggling to pay their monthly utility bills.⁴ The region's rural health systems and infrastructure are particularly vulnerable to climate change, and failures to invest in healthcare access and strong health systems have put the most vulnerable communities at risk. By compounding environmental exposure risks to those already burdened by structural discrimination, climate change is amplifying the region's health disparities.

Climate change and worker health

Climate change harms worker health and safety and affects the region's productivity. Six of the ten states with the highest rates of occupational heat-related deaths are in the Southeast region, accounting for nearly 30% of U.S. occupational heat-related deaths between 2000 and 2010. The Southeast is anticipated to have the largest heat-related reduction in labor productivity in the U.S. – an estimated 570 million hours of lost labor annually by the end of the century. Action on climate change can bring tremendous opportunities to the region, including training on and employment in renewable energy jobs.

Residents in the South are worried about climate change and support climate action. Over half of adults in the region are worried about climate change and believe that climate change is already harming people in the U.S.⁴ 71% of Florida voters and 68% of Georgia voters think Congress should be doing more on climate change.^{5,6}

Action on climate change is critical to protect health and advance equity in the South

Taking urgent action to address climate change today is one of the most important things policymakers can do to protect the health of residents in their states. The 2021 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief outlines three policy recommendations to highlight how health and equity can guide action on climate change:

- 1. Rapidly increase funding to protect people's health:** Make urgent investments in research and local solutions that reduce the health impacts of climate change and that prioritize health and equity.
- 2. Account for the health-related costs of burning fossil fuels in decision-making:** Incorporate health-related costs of fossil fuels into calculations of the social cost of carbon and climate change to guide policies that prioritize health equity.
- 3. Rapidly cut greenhouse gas emissions, especially in areas suffering most from fossil fuel-related air pollution:** Reduce U.S. greenhouse emissions by 57-62% of 2005 levels by 2030 with a goal of a near zero-emission economy by mid-century. Direct at least 40% of investments towards improving air quality in under-resourced communities.

The Lancet Countdown U.S. Brief is supported by a diverse group of health experts from over 70 U.S. organizations. This document is supported by data and recommendations from the 2021 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief and global report, and prior years' reports. Additional region-specific information was obtained from the the **Fourth National Climate Assessment**. The Southern region includes: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

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