



CLIMATE EQUITY  
POLICY CENTER

# Aging, Equity, & the Climate Crisis

## Engaging Older People in Building Thriving, Resilient Communities



Older adults experience some of the highest risks for climate change. These risks are even greater for older adults of color and low-income older people. By including older adults in planning for climate threats, we can reduce risk and build stronger communities overall.

### Why are older adults at risk?

Our bodies and living conditions change as we go through life. For older people, many of these changes increase the risk from climate disasters and changes.

Older adults may have:

- Lower income levels
- Higher homelessness rates
- Higher rates of disability and greater medical needs
- Medication use that impairs temperature regulation, balance, mobility, and thinking
- Limited mobility
- Increased dependence on caregivers
- High need for consistent electricity
- Reduced social support networks
- Mental health vulnerabilities including dementia, cognitive decline, and higher sensitivity to trauma

### Higher risks for older adults of color

Structural racism affects older adults. For Black and brown older adults, this can mean lower income and wealth, higher stress levels, health challenges due to pollution, and barriers to physical and mental healthcare. These further compound the impact of the climate crisis.

### Who are older adults?

Older adults are a very diverse group. Along with a growing overall population of older people, older adults of color are doubling in population.

Different needs and vulnerabilities characterize the age bands of young older adults, very old adults, and oldest old adults. Meanwhile, 30% of older adults are economically insecure.

## How Climate Risks Affect Aging

Climate change affects health and well-being for older people, but not equitably:

- **Heat:** Older adults account for over 80% of heat-related deaths in the United States; formerly redlined neighborhoods may be 20 degrees hotter than others.
- **Drought:** Worsening droughts across the US are leading to higher rates of mortality among older adults.
- **Wildfires:** Older adults disproportionately die from wildfires due to limited mobility, rural living, and medical condition. In addition, smoky air can increase stroke, heart disease, cognitive decline, and dementia.
- **Hurricanes, flood, and winter storms:** During Hurricane Katrina, 75% of deaths were older adults, although they were only 16% of the population.
- **Event recovery:** Rebuilding in the aftermath of disaster is costly and challenging, especially for older adults. Poor renters are 23% less likely than affluent renters to get FEMA housing help and poor homeowners receive half as much assistance to rebuild.



## Policy Approaches

Climate policy solutions to support older adults focus on accessibility, mobility, affordable and resilient housing, and other approaches that improve health and safety for older people both before and after climate threats occur.

- Include older adults in planning & decision making
- Ensure accessible design of streets & public spaces
- Invest in biking, walking & transit
- Create cooler, greener communities
- Increase access to affordable, resilient, age-friendly housing
- Invest in care infrastructure
- Mitigate climate change

## Older Adults as Community Assets and Policy Makers

Communities with active, engaged older adults experience many benefits: older residents' years of experience, expertise weathering challenging times, & ability to serve as social glue for vibrant communities. As communities consider the policies and plans that will best provide resilience and stability, they should ensure older adults are included in planning and decision making.

## Read the Report

For a deeper discussion of the impact of the climate crisis on older adults, along with sources for this factsheet, read the Climate Equity Policy Center's full report on [Aging, Equity, and the Climate Crisis](#).

