FACT SHEET

The 2020 Census & the Environment

HOW CENSUS DATA ARE USED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & CLIMATE ACTION

JAE JUNE LEE & CARA BRUMFIELD

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Census data and census-derived data help us understand the impacts of the climate crisis, environmental hazards, and government policies on communities.
- Policymakers, advocates, and other data users rely on census data to help enforce equitable protections from environmental hazards, including those in the Clean Air Act.
- These data guide investments in communities and programs that mitigate causes of the climate crisis, build resiliency to harmful climate impacts, and reduce exposure to environmental hazards.

Every decade, the Census Bureau fulfills a constitutionally-mandated count of every person living in the United States. It is the largest peacetime mobilization undertaken by the federal government, cumulating in data vital to U.S. social, political, and economic systems. Census data also form the statistical backbone of efforts to understand the impacts of the climate crisis and environmental hazards (e.g., pollution), as well as the consequences of policy decisions on communities. Due to a long and continuing history of unequal protections and racist policies (such as **redlining**), people of color and low-income communities disproportionately bear the health and economic burdens caused by environmental hazards. The climate crisis also hits many of these same communities the hardest. Policymakers, civil rights advocates, and others rely on census data to develop and implement equitable policies and practices that advance climate and environmental justice.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & CLIMATE ACTION RELY ON CENSUS DATA

Census data provide rich demographic information that is useful for assessing the impacts of the climate crisis and environmental hazards on a community's quality of life—and for identifying those who are most vulnerable. Researchers and advocates often combine core demographic data from the decennial census with data on income, housing, weather patterns, environmental hazards, or commuting patterns from other sources. These other data sources include surveys designed using the decennial census, such as the American Community Survey (ACS) which provides valuable socio-economic data on an annual basis.

When combined with other data, decennial data can provide critical insights. Disaster planning and response is a case in point. The bureau's **OnTheMap** application—an online data tool—provides information on the location and magnitude of disaster impacts and contains detailed demographic, social, and economic data collected from the decennial census and census-derived data sets. Government agencies and emergency response teams use census data from OnTheMap and other tools to prepare for and respond to extreme weather events and other disasters—as well as to help communities recover. Knowing who lives where can help agencies and organizations plan evacuation routes and identify where to distribute supplies. For instance, it may be important to send wheelchair-accessible transportation to places with larger populations of older residents.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Policymakers, advocates, and researchers draw on census data and related data sources to promote environmental justice (the equitable development and implementation of environmental policies and protections)—especially for those who live closest to environmental hazards. Census data show how environmental hazards affect communities' quality of life and help ensure that environmental statutes and protections—such as the Clean Air Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act—are equitably enforced. For instance, a group of **Minnesota residents used census data** to push back against the placement of a wood-burning power plant in their community by arguing that the large population of elderly residents and children was at risk. Ultimately, they succeeded: the power plant was not built in their area.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uses census data in its **Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool**, an online resource for decision-makers and the wider public. This tool can show, among other things, whether waste transfer stations are disproportionately clustered near communities of color and low-income communities. Such tools help federal policymakers to ensure that their actions provide "**environmental protection for all communities**."

Figure 1. **The decennial census is a core data source in environmental justice analyses**

Map of Washington, DC, showing black population estimates and locations of hazardous waste sites
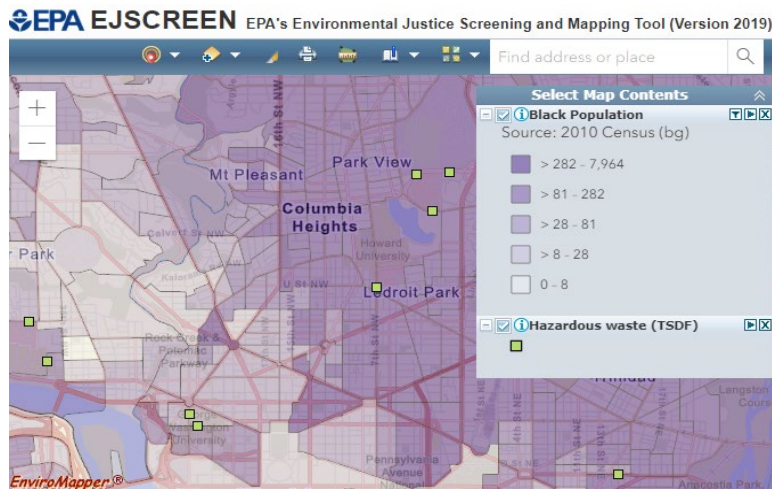
Source: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019. "EJSCREEN." United States Environmental Protection Agency, retrieved 21 October, 2019. Available at **https://ejscreen.epa.gov/mapper/**.

CLIMATE ACTION

Census data and other datasets help identify and assess the harmful impacts of the climate crisis. For instance, in 2019, NPR and the University of Maryland used ACS data to find that **low-income neighborhoods in Baltimore tend to have higher temperatures** than more affluent neighborhoods. Likely due to the **urban heat island effect**, residents in these low-income areas—who are disproportionately people of color—face an increased risk for health problems like heat stroke and high blood pressure.

Additionally, government officials, local decision-makers, and community-based organizations use census data to identify **communities vulnerable to climate impacts** and to guide investments in communities and programs that mitigate the causes of the climate crisis and build resiliency to harmful climate effects. For example, census data on population density can help **identify how close** cities and towns are to sources of renewable energy. Similarly, census and census-derived data can help decision-makers plan **public transportation** systems and design policies that encourage carpooling, working from home, and greater use of public transit—all of which contribute to reduced carbon pollution from traffic jams. A fair and accurate census is also essential for the equitable allocation of funding for programs that provide critical services to the American public such as clean water projects and neighborhood revitalization projects.

CENSUS DATA GUIDE THE DISTRIBUTION OF FEDERAL FUNDS

Federal programs that **rely** on census data or census-derived data include the following (all dollar figures are for FY 2019):

- **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)** ($3.69 billion): LIHEAP provides low-income individuals access to cleaner sources of energy.
- **Federal Transit - Capital Investment Grants** ($2.53 billion): Capital Investment Grants invest in community public transit.
- **Water and Waste Disposal Loan and Grant Program** ($1.91 billion): This program funds clean water projects, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal, and stormwater drainage in rural areas.