Climate Change, Mental Health, and Health Equity

Our climate is changing at an unprecedented rate with profound impacts on human life. Higher surface temperatures are changing every region of the planet, increasing the frequency and severity of extreme precipitation events and flooding, severe storms, heatwaves, drought, and wildfires. These changes have had a significant impact on national mental health, particularly in certain vulnerable communities and areas.

Climate Change is Harming Americans’ Mental Health

Climate-related disasters and longer-term changes are linked to a wide variety of acute and chronic mental health responses, including despair, anger, fear, helplessness, and stress, as well as elevated rates of mood disorders, substance use, and suicidal ideation and behavior.ii

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is a frequent result of severe weather events. At least a quarter of Houston residents impacted by Hurricane Harvey in 2017 reported symptoms meeting the diagnostic criteria for PTSD three months after the event.iii Incidence of PTSD following extreme storms and wildfires is higher for those who have lost family members or experienced significant property loss, and for those who have previously been exposed to disasters, suggesting possible compound effects.iv

- **Anxiety** is a major health impact of climate change. Over two-thirds of adults (68%) experience some level of “eco-anxiety,” defined as any anxiety or worry about climate change and its effects.vi Climate anxiety is particularly prevalent among younger adults. A recent global survey found that 59% of youth ages 16 to 25 were very or extremely worried about climate change.vii

- **Psychiatric hospitalizations, substance use disorder hospitalizations, and use of emergency mental health services** increase during periods with hotter temperatures, and research shows correlations between temperature increases and increases in the risk of intergroup and interpersonal violent crime and conflict.ivi, vii, viii Patients taking psychotropic medications may have reduced ability to control their body’s temperature and be at higher risk during heat waves.viii
Climate Change is Worsening Health Inequities

As climate change continues, the health risks and consequences it presents will be determined in large part by the impact on marginalized populations. These risks are unevenly distributed, and are most heavily impacting socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, communities of color, and geographically isolated areas which are often already experiencing poor environmental quality.\textsuperscript{ix}

- **Rural areas** of the U.S., tracts with larger shares of residents employed in agriculture and forestry, and areas with higher poverty rates and larger shares of older adults are at higher than average flood risk.\textsuperscript{x} U.S. agricultural workers are 20 times likelier to die from illness related to heat stress than civilian workers overall, and climate change is likely to double crop workers’ heat risk by mid-century.\textsuperscript{xi}

- **Members of racial and ethnic minorities** are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Mortality rates for natural disasters and extreme weather events are more than 7 times higher for American Indian/Alaska Native people, and nearly 2 times higher for non-Hispanic Black people, than for non-Hispanic White people.\textsuperscript{xii}

- **Children** are disproportionately vulnerable to poor air quality because of their developing neurological and pulmonary systems and increased activity levels, and their exposure to air pollution is associated with increased incidence of asthma and respiratory tract infections.\textsuperscript{xiii}

These and other effects show that the climate crisis is a growing threat to the health and well-being of current and future generations, and is exacerbating health, racial, and economic injustices.

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