

BIPOC Community Perspectives on Environmental Justice in Georgia

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Abstract

For decades, the environmental and climate justice spaces have been predominantly spearheaded by white activists and institutions, even as Black, Brown, and immigrant communities experience the brunt of climate change's impact. The resulting exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color's (BIPOC) experiences, perspectives, and leadership from environmental policy and conservation work has created significant blind spots that further perpetuate inequality (Jones, 2020). In a moment of reckoning, the historically white-led environmental and climate justice movements have begun to acknowledge the exclusion of people of color and its detrimental effects on BIPOC peoples and the movement overall. In order to rectify this exclusion, communities of color must be centered in movement strategy going forward. Furthermore, before community advocacy organizations and community members can advocate for and enact policies and other political decisions on behalf of these communities, we must first ask them what environmental harm has looked like and what solutions they need as we look toward the future. Toward that end, Democracy Lab South and partners conducted the first and only multilingual statewide environmental justice survey of Georgia's BIPOC and immigrant communities in 2022. This survey establishes a baseline understanding of these communities' current perceptions, needs, practices, and potential localized solutions. It is our hope that the survey and resulting policy report will serve as a catalyst for building a robust statewide environmental movement that centers those most affected by climate and environmental issues.

For decades, corporate actors, mainstream environmental organizations, and white activists have dominated decision-making regarding climate policy, even as Indigenous, Black, Brown, and immigrant communities experience the brunt of the climate crisis and have been at the front lines of the environmental justice movement. The exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color's (BIPOC) experiences, perspectives, and leadership from environmental policy and conservation efforts has created significant gaps that further perpetuate inequality, particularly in the U.S. South (Jones, 2020). From hurricanes to wildfires and extreme winter storms, climate disasters are more frequent and increasingly severe. As frontline communities that experience the consequences of environmental degradation most acutely, BIPOC, immigrant, and low-income communities are uniquely capable of leading the charge toward sustainable and equitable environmental protections (HIVE Fund, 2022).

It is time for BIPOC Southerners to collectively take control and create thoughtful climate change solutions. To that end, Democracy Lab South (Demo Lab South) and its partners

conducted the first and only multilingual statewide environmental justice survey of Georgia's BIPOC and immigrant communities. The study established a baseline understanding of current perceptions, needs, practices, and potential localized climate solutions throughout Georgia's diverse BIPOC community. By centering the experiences of BIPOC communities and codesigning policy solutions with them, policy-makers can better understand how individuals experience environmental harm, build the leadership and capacity of marginalized communities to implement solutions, and contextualize outcomes.

Demo Lab South and Community-Engaged Research Partners

Demo Lab South is a movement incubation hub that builds power, strategy, and infrastructure for diverse BIPOC community organizations in the Southern United States. We envision a Southern movement ecosystem in which BIPOC leadership and brilliance can grow. Demo Lab South partnered with community organizations across Georgia on the BIPOC Environmental

Justice Study, including 9to5–Georgia Chapter, Asian Americans Advancing Justice–Atlanta, Black Voters Matter, Coalition for the Peoples’ Agenda, Down by the River Collective, Georgia Conservation Voters, and the Latino Community Fund. All organizations are led by people of color and work to support, organize, and protect BIPOC communities in Georgia. BIPOC environmental justice partnerships were especially critical in connecting with immigrant, limited-English-proficient, and/or non-English-speaking communities across the state.

BIPOC Environmental Justice Study

The BIPOC Environmental Justice Study was developed to learn about community opinions on environmental issues, climate change, recycling, and transportation. We also collected participants’ political tendencies, age, race, income level, place of birth, voting eligibility, and zip code of residence. This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board of Kennesaw State University. The questions were adapted from Pew Research Center’s study on climate and transportation (Kennedy et al., 2023). The survey was translated using forward and backward translation methods. To ensure linguistic inclusivity of Georgia’s diverse communities, the survey was conducted in English and translated into eight languages (Bengali, Mandarin, Hindi, Gujarati, Korean, Laotian, Spanish, and Vietnamese) to facilitate participant engagement.

Participants were recruited during door-knocking and voter outreach activities by community organizers who were trained in research ethics, data collection, and recruitment. These organizers were linguistically and interculturally competent to interface with the varied target populations. Since data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, data collectors were trained in COVID-19 protocols and adhered to state and Centers for Disease Control guidelines.

Participants

Demo Lab South and our community partners collected data from 1,145 participants. Of these, 1,021 were included in the analysis. Responses were removed from those who were under the age of 18, who lacked proof of consent, who provided non-Georgia zip codes, and who did not self-identify as BIPOC. Participants represented 47 counties in Georgia including Gwinnett (28%), DeKalb (13%), Fulton (9%), Dougherty (8%),

Chatham (7%), Bibb (6%), Tift (5%), Muscogee (4%), and Lowndes (3%). Figure 1 is a map of all the counties in Georgia; shaded counties reflect where respondents completed the survey. Based on the United Way of Greater Atlanta’s 13-county Metro Atlanta classification (United Way of Greater Atlanta, n.d.), a slight majority of participants were from the Metro Atlanta area ($n = 456$, 54.5%).

The participants reported their political ideology, and there was a slightly higher representation of moderates ($n = 389$, 39.5%) than conservatives ($n = 234$, 23.7%) or liberals ($n = 362$, 36.8%). Likewise, there was a diverse representation of age groups, with a slightly higher representation of younger adults than other age groups. About 46.6% ($n = 468$) of the participants were 34 years old or younger, as illustrated in Table 1. Participants were grouped into three age categories for age related analyses: younger (18–24 years old), middle (25–64 years old), and older (65+) adults.

About an equal number of Asian ($n = 331$, 32.7%); Black, African American, or diasporic African ($n = 322$, 31.8%); and Latinx ($n = 339$, 33.5%) residents participated in the survey. Of the participants, about half ($n = 481$, 47.9%) were born outside the United States, and the proportion of those born outside the United States was higher among middle and older adult respondents. For every four participants, three were eligible to vote ($n = 744$, 74.3%). This was consistent across age groups, with a larger proportion of older adults eligible to vote ($n = 100$, 91.7%).

More than half ($n = 656$, 66.2%) of the participants were in the lower-income category. This study used the annual household income categories recommended by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute: lower (less than \$47,000), middle (\$47,000–\$108,000), and upper (more than \$108,000; Tharpe, 2018). Survey participant household income is illustrated in Table 1.

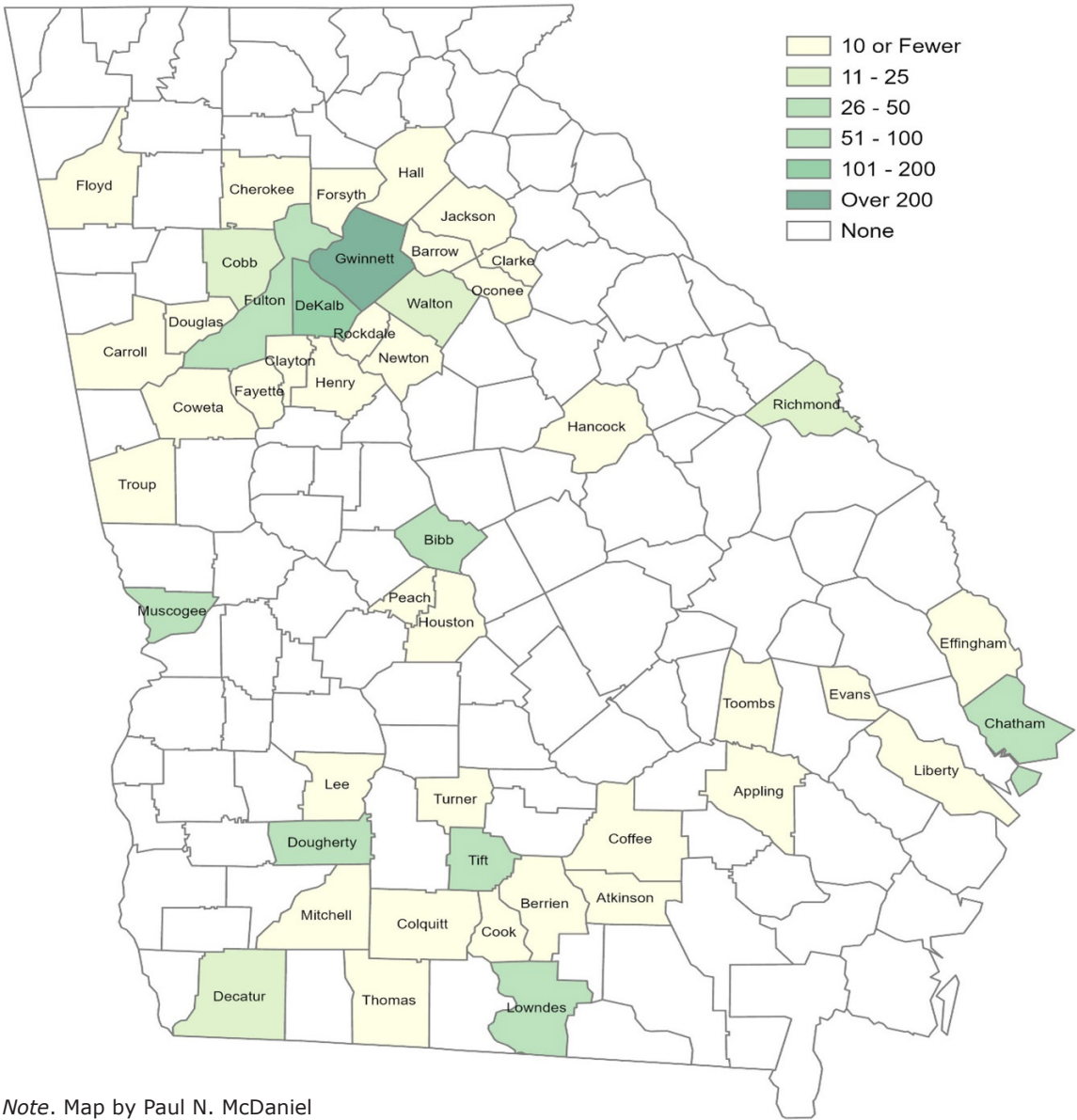
Key Findings: Top Environmental Justice Issues

Participants shared the major environmental justice issues that have personally affected them, their feelings toward climate change, their experiences with recycling, their modes of transportation, and their attitudes toward the environmental justice movement.

Personal Impact

Georgia BIPOC residents reported that environmental justice issues such as lack of clean drinking water, air pollution, lack of

Figure 1. Map of Georgia Counties Illustrating the Number of Participants by County



Note. Map by Paul N. McDaniel

Table 1. Study Participant Information

Age Breakdown		Household Income	
18-24	25.2%	< \$25,000	37.2%
25-34	21.4%	\$25,000 - \$47,000	29.0%
35-44	17.2%	\$47,000 - \$108,000	24.1%
45-54	13.4%	> \$108,000	9.7%
55-64	11.8%		
Over 65	11.0%		

transportation access, natural disasters, high energy/utility bills, and nuclear plants affected them personally. More specifically, about seven out of 10 people ($n = 716$, 72.3%) reported that they were personally affected. Of these issues, air pollution and lack of clean drinking water ranked as the top two that affected participants personally. For Black, African American, or diasporic African participants, high energy/utility bills ranked as the second-most-prevalent issue.

Climate Change

Georgia BIPOC residents were generally “very worried” about climate change and consider climate change as “somewhat of a problem” for them and their families. For a larger proportion of Latinx participants, climate change was a “very big problem” for them and their families. Survey respondents shared that climate change should be one of the top three priorities for elected officials to focus on. At the same time, most respondents thought that the U.S. government is doing “too little” to protect the rights of BIPOC communities from environmental injustices, which is reflected in Table 2.

Recycling

Although some Georgia BIPOC residents had access to curbside recycling programs in their neighborhoods, many did not have access to a recycling program. In addition, many did

not know which types of recycling programs were available to them, as evidenced in Table 2.

A larger proportion of Latinx ($n = 109$, 32.3%) and Black, African American, or diasporic African ($n = 74$, 23.1%) participants did not have access to a recycling program in their neighborhoods compared to Asian participants ($n = 39$, 11.8%). Those who did not have access to a recycling program reported dissatisfaction with the recycling options available. More specifically, among those who did not have access to a recycling program, about 64.8% ($n = 142$) reported their dissatisfaction.

Transportation

Most Georgia BIPOC residents owned or shared a car as well as traveled by car. Most had not used public transportation recently because either they had a car they could use or public transportation was not available in their communities. This was consistent across income level, place of residence, race, and political ideology. A key finding from the survey was that eight out of every 10 Georgia BIPOC residents owned or shared a car ($n = 806$, 79.8%). Similarly, eight out of every 10 Georgia BIPOC residents used a car as their primary mode of transportation to go to work, go to school, run errands, or go shopping ($n = 798$, 79.3%). However, two out of every 10 Georgia BIPOC residents had used public transportation in the past month ($n = 226$, 22.5%).

Table 2. Study Participant Responses

How Much Is the U.S. Government Doing to Protect the Rights of BIPOC Communities From Environmental Injustices?	
Too Little	68.3%
Right Amount	22.7%
Too Much	9.0%
Recycling Program Accessibility	
Curbside Recycling	44.2%
Drop-off Recycling	13.4%
No Access to Recycling	22.3%
Not Sure	20.0%
Attitudes Toward the Environmental Movement	
I am an active participant in the environmental movement.	15.8%
I support the environmental movement, but am not an active participant.	55.1%
I am neutral to the environmental movement.	21.3%
I do not support the environmental movement	2.6%
I am not sure where I stand on environmental issues.	5.2%

Attitudes Toward the Environmental Justice Movement

Some Georgia BIPOC residents are active participants in the environmental movement, and many support the movement. Slightly more individuals who live in Metro Atlanta ($n = 357$, 79%) as compared to those who reside outside Metro Atlanta ($n = 235$, 62.2%) are actively involved in or supportive of the environmental movement. When looking at the ethnic and racial communities surveyed, there was a clear indication that there was support for the environmental justice movement among Asian ($n = 259$, 79.5%), Black, African American, or diasporic African ($n = 206$, 64.4%), and Latinx ($n = 238$, 71%) respondents. Those who identified as liberal ($n = 288$, 80.4%) in their political ideology were active in the movement. However, conservative ($n = 156$, 68.1%) and moderate ($n = 252$, 64.9%) individuals also demonstrated an impressive commitment to the movement. Similarly, those in the middle and upper income ranges ($n = 264$, 79.5%) were active in the environmental movement, and those classified as lower income ($n = 431$, 66.5%) also declared their commitment. Finally, we looked at respondents' attitudes toward environmental justice based on their age. Strong majorities in all groups, younger ($n = 337$, 73%), middle ($n = 284$, 67.1%), and older ($n = 83$, 76.9%), was active in the movement. Some of these data points are presented in Table 2.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

Considering our findings, the following policy recommendations are critical opportunities to integrate BIPOC communities into the larger environmental justice movement, especially within the state of Georgia. We anticipate that these recommendations will be helpful in advancing similar conversations and studies among BIPOC and immigrant communities throughout the United States.

1. Implement a multilingual statewide public education campaign on air pollution, public transit, clean drinking water, and utility burden (9to5, 2021; Climate + Clean Equity Fund, n.d.). Build awareness about voting, advocacy, and other civic engagement activities that can drive lasting change for environmental justice issues.
2. Support more expansive research and educational programs that connect environmental justice, climate justice,

and their impact on Georgia's BIPOC communities. Dedicate research funding and staffing for rural areas and communities with limited English proficiency. Detailed data at the local and state levels can best inform equitable policy recommendations (Climate + Clean Equity Fund, n.d.).

3. Support leadership programs that develop the next generation of environmental justice leaders in Georgia. Provide BIPOC youth with the resources they need to work directly with their communities to address the most pressing environmental issues that affect them.
4. Access, leverage, blend, and braid federally funded programs with state opportunities to alleviate utility burden for Black residents, especially in South Georgia. Utilize federal investments from both the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to alleviate individual costs and support energy infrastructure that centers equity.
5. Support a capacity building and technical assistance network for Georgia's community organizations and associations to competitively apply for funding from the Inflation Reduction Act to support community-based programs that address sustainability, environmental, and climate issues.
6. Pass Georgia HB 260 during the 2024 legislative session, which would create an Environmental Justice Commission consisting of members from the African American, Asian American, Indigenous, and Latinx communities. This commission should be tasked with promoting equity and advancing environmental justice through a more inclusive decision-making lens.

The work to cultivate a robust statewide environmental justice ecosystem that builds representation of Georgia BIPOC communities is just beginning. It is urgent and necessary to expand our existing knowledge of BIPOC communities and invest deeply in BIPOC leadership and movement infrastructure.

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