

Moving from Data to Engagement:

How to Connect Communities to Climate Preparedness Work

A practical guide to using community-level data to identify and connect with the most climate-vulnerable residents in your community

Overview

Community data profiles contain a wealth of information about who lives in a place, how they live, and what challenges they face. This guide walks you through how to read and interpret that data through an equity lens — focusing on the populations most likely to experience the first and worst impacts of climate change. It also provides a structured framework of community engagement questions to help you plan meaningful, equitable outreach once you understand who you need to reach.

Part 1: Reading the Data

Two indicators most consistently predict climate vulnerability: income and race. Communities with lower incomes and communities of color have historically faced greater exposure to environmental hazards, fewer resources for adaptation, and slower recovery after disasters. **Start there.**

1

Household Income

Look for charts showing how household income is distributed — particularly how many households fall below key thresholds like 200% of the federal poverty level. Higher concentrations in lower income brackets indicate higher climate vulnerability.

2

Population by Race

Don't stop at percentages. Raw numbers matter. A racial group may represent a small share of the overall population — but that still represents real people to reach. Look for the actual population count for each racial group, particularly for Black, Indigenous, Asian, multiracial, and Hispanic/Latino residents.

3

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

LEP data can point to recently arrived immigrant communities who often face compounding vulnerabilities: less access to emergency information, less familiarity with local systems, and greater fear of engaging with government institutions. Note the primary non-English language spoken — this tells you which cultural communities are present and what languages you may need for outreach materials.

4

People Living Alone

Single-person households — especially those over age 65 — face heightened climate risk. Older adults living alone may have limited mobility, fixed incomes, and

fewer social supports to call on during extreme heat events, flooding, or power outages. They may also be unable to travel to a community meeting.

5

Housing Cost Burden and Affordability

Look for the percentage of owner-occupied and renter-occupied households that are cost-burdened — spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Cost-burdened households have less financial cushion to respond to a disaster or even minor flooding. Renters are especially vulnerable, as they often have less control over housing conditions and fewer recovery resources.

 What Does "Cost-Burdened" Mean?

A household is considered housing cost-burdened when housing expenses (rent or mortgage plus utilities) exceed 30% of gross income. This threshold, widely used by HUD and housing researchers, signals financial stress and reduced capacity to absorb unexpected costs — including those caused by climate impacts.

6

Manufactured Homes and Flood Plains

Manufactured homes are often more vulnerable to extreme weather. Check whether any are located in current flood plains — and if possible, look at future projections. Sea level rise models can show where flood risk is expected to expand over the next 50 years. Homes that appear safe today may not be by 2075.

7

Vehicle Access and Transportation

Households without a vehicle face significant barriers during climate emergencies: evacuation, accessing cooling centers, and reaching recovery services. Note the percentage of car-free households and whether they are concentrated among renters or older adults. Cross-reference with public transit availability. Mapping these households by Census tract can help target outreach and inform venue selection.

8

Disability

People with disabilities face distinct climate vulnerabilities, including limited mobility during emergencies and dependence on medical equipment vulnerable to power outages. Note the size of this population and consider what it means for both your outreach approach and the physical accessibility of any meeting spaces you choose.

Part 2: From Data to People

Data tells you who is likely to be vulnerable. Service providers know who those people are. Organizations that serve low-income residents, elderly people, immigrants, and communities of color are your most important entry points.

How to Use the

- Before reaching out, visit each organization's website. Understand their mission, core populations, and programs. This shows respect and makes for a more substantive conversation.
 - Shortlist the organizations whose populations overlap most closely with the vulnerability indicators you identified in the data.
 - Contact program staff, not just leadership. Ask who runs programming for the populations you want to reach.
 - Be honest about what you're doing and why. Listen more than you talk.
 - Ask them how they define the problem — not just whether they'll support your project.
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- Community Action Programs (CAPs), which often coordinate services for low-income residents
 - Community health centers and visiting nurse associations
 - Adult education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs
 - Mutual aid networks and food pantries
 - Elder services organizations
 - Faith communities
 - Cultural and language-specific organizations
 - School-based social workers, especially those making home visits

Part 3: Community Engagement Planning Questions

Use these questions to stress-test your engagement plan and identify gaps **before you begin outreach**. They are organized by theme and apply across communities and project types.

1. Who Is Impacted and Who Is Included

- Who is most impacted by this project, and who is missing from the conversation?
- What communities have been historically excluded from similar processes, and how can they be centered here?
- What are the potential benefits and burdens for different community groups?
- participants reflect the demographics of those most impacted? Did
- the people we wanted to participate actually attend and engage? Did

2. Centering Equity and Inclusion

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- How will you adapt your methods to support a process that is culturally appropriate — and appropriate for whom?
- Are you willing to share power and act on, not just hear, community concerns?
- What power dynamics exist, real and perceived?

- How are community members involved in defining the problem, not just responding to proposed solutions?
- What support do participants need to engage meaningfully — information, facilitation, capacity-building?

3. Trust, History, and Accountability

- What is the historical relationship between your institution and this community?
- What repair and accountability needs to take place before or during this project?
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- How will you sustain relationships beyond this single project?

4. Access, Barriers, and Participation

- What are barriers — perceived or real — to participation? (Time of day, childcare, transportation, language, digital access, cost, fear of authorities)
- Is the meeting location accessible, safe, and welcoming?
- What does it mean to create a welcoming space?
- How are you making participation possible for people who don't usually or are unable to attend meetings?

5. Communication and Outreach

- What are the most appropriate and trusted communication channels to reach specific groups?
- Who are the trusted messengers within each community — and how do you build relationships with them?
- What languages are needed for outreach materials and facilitation?

6. Compensation and Valuing Community Expertise

- How will you compensate community members for their time, knowledge, and expertise?
- Whose knowledge counts as 'expertise' in this process?
- What forms of compensation are most meaningful and practical — stipends, childcare, meals, transportation?

7. Process Design and Decision-Making

- Where are you on the community engagement spectrum — informing, consulting, collaborating, or co-leading?

- How will you be clear and transparent about the purpose of the meeting or engagement?
- Does the project and/or planning committee include people from the community?
- What decisions have already been made, and which are still open to community influence?
- How are roles, responsibilities, and decision authority being shared or negotiated?

8. Transparency, Feedback, and Learning

- What is your plan for sharing back how community input changed or informed the project?
- How will you know if the engagement was successful and equitable?
- What constraints exist — legal, funding, timeline — and how transparent are you being about them?
- How will conflicts or disagreements be addressed equitably?

A Final Note on Readiness

Not everyone will be ready to engage in community planning right now — and that's okay. For families managing urgent crises, community visioning is a lower-order priority. Design your project with humility. Be prepared to hear 'not right now.' Come back. Keep showing up. The work is long, and it is worth it.