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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN THE PUGET SOUND REGION OF THE SALISH SEA

Leah Wood and Shogofa Amini
Department of Global Health, University of Washington



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was prepared for both academic and policymaker audiences, as well as those who care about climate justice, including community-based organizations, community leaders and members, and foundations, to share our findings from the project "Understanding community perspectives on climate resilience in the Puget Sound region of the Salish Sea." The aim of this project was to understand how leaders and organizers from frontline communities, defined as communities first and most acutely impacted by climate change, perceive factors that support or undermine climate resilience through a series of fifteen semi-structured interviews. Resilience is a highly subjective concept, and to meaningfully capture it, we must prioritize the perspectives of those most impacted.

Throughout these interviews, participants spoke to the importance of a holistic and equitable approach to building climate resilience for frontline communities, centered on ten key themes:

1. Meeting basic needs
2. Acknowledging climate grief and anxiety
3. Honoring resilience and making space for healing
4. Strengthening mutual aid and social networks
5. Combating gentrification and displacement
6. Connecting to the earth
7. Developing linguistically- and culturally-relevant education and planning
8. Addressing institutional racism and exclusion in the environmental field
9. Centering those most vulnerable
10. Investing in young people of color

Results from this project will be used to inform programming and policy development related to the Washington Clean Energy Transformation Act, which will transition the state to clean energy by 2045. Additionally, this report can assist in building out a robust definition and understanding of climate resilience to act as a foundation for future community-driven climate resiliency planning and partnerships.

BACKGROUND

“Climate change affects all, but not all people are affected equally.”

Jacqueline Patterson, Director of the NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Program

As the impacts of climate change are increasing in intensity and frequency, we are seeing a growing disparity in how these impacts manifest within different communities [1]. Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), people with lower incomes, and immigrants/refugees often experience disproportionate risk for climate impacts due to the cumulative effects of systemic inequity and disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards [2,3]. These disparities are often the result of structural and institutional racism and discrimination, perpetuated both in policy outcomes and processes that often fail to include the voices and priorities of those most impacted [3,4].

These same communities hold rich knowledge and experience in resilience. This project seeks to center some of the perspectives of community organizers and leaders in defining climate resilience and factors that foster or inhibit this resilience. Findings from this project will inform the development of current and future tools for policymaking in Washington state.



Seattle Chinatown-International District, photo credit: Getty Images

CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Climate change is already happening in our region as a result of heightened greenhouse gas emissions, and is expected to increase in years to come. As a result, we are seeing changes in our local and regional environment, such as increased annual temperatures and rising sea levels. This, in turn, is contributing to climate hazards of increasing frequency, intensity, and duration, such as wildfire, extreme heat, and flooding, which impact individual and community health and safety [1,5].

Communities around Washington are already feeling the impacts of climate change. In September 2020, a historic wildfire season along the entire West Coast blanketed our region in smoke, resulting in hazardous air quality for millions of people [6]. Extremely hot days are expected to grow in frequency and intensity, and are associated with increased hospitalization and death [5]. Climate change can compound and exacerbate existing inequities both directly (e.g. flooding, smoke, etc.) and indirectly (e.g. food insecurity, rising cost of housing, healthcare costs) [7].

Environmental Changes

- Increased temperatures
- Extreme precipitation
- Reduced snowpack
- Sea level rise
- Ocean acidification
- Heightened storm surge

Climate Hazards

- Heat
- Flooding
- Water stress/drought
- Wildfire
- Air quality
- Infectious disease

Human Impacts

- Stress/mental health
- Physical health
- Displacement
- Loss of property
- Loss of places of cultural significance
- Loss of traditional foods and medicines

Adapted from UW Climate Impacts Group (CIG)'s 'State of Knowledge: Climate Change in Puget Sound' report and Got Green and Puget Sound Sage's 'Our People, Our Planet, Our Power' report

DEFINING FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

Frontline communities are defined as those communities that experience the impacts of climate change first and most intensely. People in frontline communities are disproportionately BIPOC, low-income, immigrants and refugees, women and gender non-binary people, LGBTQ+, and/or people who are further marginalized through their experiences of disability, incarceration, houselessness, and limited English proficiency, among other factors [8]. In defining frontline communities, it is important to note that the conditions that put people and communities at increased risk of climate impacts are not inherent, but have evolved over a long history of discriminatory policies and practices, such as redlining and the breaching of treaty agreements, that have continued to this day.

While united in their experience of inequitable climate impacts, frontline communities are incredibly diverse, multi-generational, dynamic, and rich in culture and experience. For some, the shared experience of marginalization has also opened avenues for solidarity and mutual aid within and between groups. When asked to describe their communities, project interviewees highlighted community strengths and the opportunity to learn from and partner with frontline communities.

Frontline communities are defined in King County's 2020 Strategic Climate Action Plan as "those that are **disproportionately impacted by climate change** due to **existing and historic racial, social, environmental, and economic inequities**, and who have limited resources and/or capacity to adapt. These populations **often experience the earliest and most acute impacts of climate change**, but whose experiences afford **unique strengths and insights into climate resilience strategies and practices.**" [8]

“Imagine a tree being transplanted to a new place when they were already established. These are the people that we serve.”

“A lot of people wants to be independent, even though they are asking for help connected with the public benefit, but still they want to stand up on their own feet.”

“The family, the sense of family, the sense of... it’s not just a sense, it’s who we are. It’s the knowledge, the connections we have. That we all walk in the same way, pretty much.”

“I think that’s where I find the most joy in the work that I do, because I’m able to see home in other people, almost.”

UNDERSTANDING RISK OF CLIMATE IMPACTS

Not everyone is affected by climate change equally. A person or community's risk of being impacted by climate change is determined by the intersection of their exposure and sensitivity to climate hazards like wildfires, flooding, or extreme heat.

Where you live, work, study, or play impacts the degree to which you or your community may experience climate hazards. Exposure is highest for people living in the Wilderness-Urban Interface that may be impacted by smoke and damage from wildfires; along rivers or coastlines at risk of flooding; and in cities, where high concentrations of pollutants from industry and traffic can impact air quality and heat can be trapped and amplified by concrete and pavement. Additionally, people experiencing houselessness and outdoor workers such as agricultural, fisheries, or construction workers, may experience high exposure to the negative impacts of climate hazards [2]. Sensitivity, sometimes referred to as vulnerability, refers to a person or community's ability to weather the shocks of experiencing a climate hazard, and is determined by both social and biological factors [2,3,9].

Underlying root causes, such as racial segregation and income inequality, contribute to both exposure and sensitivity, often compounding and placing a disproportionate burden of impact on frontline communities [2,3,9].

Root Causes

- Racial segregation
- Poverty
- Income inequality
- Lack of living wage jobs
- Gaps in educational opportunities and attainment
- Concentrated neighborhood disinvestment
- Political disenfranchisement and low social capital
- Increased neighborhood violence and crime

Social Factors

- Ability to afford basic necessities and resources
- Access to affordable and quality housing
- Access to reliable and affordable transportation
- Access to affordable health care
- Access to green spaces and green infrastructure
- Linguistic isolation
- Social cohesion
- Residential location

Biological Factors

- Age
- Chronic and acute illnesses
- Mental and physical ability
- Overall health status

INCREASED SENSITIVITY TO CLIMATE IMPACTS

Adapted from King County's '2020 Sustainable Climate Action Plan' and Urban Sustainability Directors Network's 'Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning

DEFINING CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Climate resilience is a highly subjective and personal concept. In this section, we highlight some of the different definitions currently being used both locally and globally. The range in definitions of climate resilience underlines the importance in critically examining how we understand this term. Through this project, we aim to engage people working within communities most impacted by climate change and to center their perspectives in defining climate resilience and identifying perceived factors that support or undermine resilience in their communities.

International Panel on Climate Change

"Resilience to climate change of a community can be defined as a combination of resistance to frequent and severe disturbances, capacity for recovery and self-organization, and the ability to adapt to new conditions" [10]

Swinomish Indian Tribal Community

"Community members maintain their connection to their homeland, confident that their health and the health of the next seven generations are not at risk due to contaminated natural resources." [11]

Center for Climate and Energy Solutions

"The ability to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to hazardous events, trends, or disturbances related to climate." [12]

Got Green & Puget Sound Sage

"Climate resilience is often defined as the ability for communities and ecosystems to "bounce back" from extreme events and withstand the long-term impacts of climate change. This often looks like programs and practices that serve to maintain the status quo. In contrast, we think of climate resilience as "bouncing forward" to tackle the root causes of the climate crisis while creating more equitable, just, and thriving communities." [7]

Stockholm Resilience Center

"Resilience is the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. It is about how humans and nature can use shocks and disturbances like a financial crisis or climate change to spur renewal and innovative thinking." [13]

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CLIMATE RESILIENCY PLANNING

Community members are experts in their own experiences and effective decision-making around climate resilience interventions centers frontline community leadership and meaningful participation. Existing frameworks around community-driven climate resiliency planning underline the benefits of centering equity and frontline community priorities in making decisions around climate resiliency interventions. This includes improved effectiveness and relevance of planning strategies, the development of pathways for continued collaborative partnerships, and the building of community capacity by placing resources and decision-making authority in the hands of frontline communities [2,3,8].

CENTERING EQUITY

Prioritizing community leadership means addressing long-standing social, racial, economic, and environmental inequities that can act as barriers for participation [2,8]. Equity is not the same as equality, which prioritizes equal treatment over fair treatment, and does not address differences in the distribution of, or access to, resources or opportunities [2].

Equity can be further broken down into three dimensions: procedural, distributional, and structural, each of which require different strategies to achieve:

Procedural Equity

- Create processes that are transparent, fair, and inclusive in developing and implementing any program, plan, or policy
- Ensure that all people are treated openly and fairly
- Increase the civic engagement opportunities of communities that are disproportionately impacted by climate change

Distributional Equity

- Fairly distribute resources, benefits, and burdens
- Prioritize resources for communities that experience the greatest inequities, disproportionate impacts, and have the greatest unmet needs

Structural Equity

- Make a commitment to correct past harms and prevent future unintended consequences
- Address the underlying structural and institutional systems that are the root causes of social and racial inequities

Adapted from Urban Sustainability Director's Network 'Guide to Equitable Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning'

SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP

Adapted from King County's '2020 Sustainable Climate Action Plan' and Urban Sustainability Directors Network's 'Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning'

STANCE TOWARDS COMMUNITY	IGNORE	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	DEFER TO
IMPACT	MARGINALIZE	PLACATE	TOKENIZE	VOICE	DELEGATE POWER	COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GOALS	Deny access to decision-making processes	Provide the community with relevant information	Gather input from the community	Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into process & inform planning	Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions	Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making; Bridge divide between community & governance
MESSAGE TO COMMUNITY	"Your voice, needs & interests do not matter"	"We will keep you informed"	"We care what you think"	"We can't do this well without you"	"Your leadership and expertise are critical"	"We want this to work so we support equitable processes led by community"
ACTIVITIES	Closed door meetings Misinformation	Fact sheets Open Houses Presentations Billboards Videos	Public Comment Focus Groups Community Forums Surveys	Community organizing & advocacy Interactive workshops Polling House meetings Community forums	MOU's with CBOs Consensus-building Citizen advisory committees Participatory Action Research	Community-driven planning Community Organizing Open Planning Forums with Citizen Polling Participatory budgeting
RESOURCE ALLOCATION RATIOS	100% Systems Admin	70-90% Systems Admin 10-30% Promotions and Publicity	60-80% Systems Admin 20-40% Consultation Activities	50-60% Systems Admin 40-50% Community Involvement	20-50% Systems Admin 50-70% Community Partners	80-100% Community partners and community-driven processes ideally generate new value and resources that can be invested in solutions

PROJECT OVERVIEW

AIM

The aim of this project was to understand how leaders and organizers from frontline communities perceive factors that support or undermine climate resilience. We set out to accomplish this by:

- 1) Engaging diverse community leaders in identifying factors related to climate resilience for frontline communities in the Puget Sound region of the Salish Sea.
- 2) Identifying pathways for continued research related to climate resilience with frontline communities in Washington.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to build on and enhance current understandings of climate resilience to support programming and policy development related to the Washington Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA), which will transition the state to clean energy by 2045. Resilience, however, is a highly subjective concept, and to meaningfully capture it, it is imperative to center those most impacted.

This project is linked to the CETA through ongoing collaboration between the Washington State Department of Health; several University of Washington groups, including the Center for Health and the Global Environment, the Climate Impacts Group, and the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences; and Front and Centered, a coalition of community-based organizations and members at the front lines of climate change. The CETA requires a Cumulative Impacts Assessment (CIA) of the health impacts of fossil fuel pollution and future climate change on Washington communities, which will guide policy decisions by state departments. This CIA includes a tool, based on work by DEOHS alumna, Esther Min, with Front and Centered, that has mapped environmental health disparities across Washington. Currently, the CIA tool does not account for resilience, though this has been identified as a priority area for inclusion in future models.

To fit the scope of this funding opportunity, this project focused on Pierce and King Counties and findings will guide future engagement around Washington state.

TIMELINE

This project took place between September 2020 and March 2021.

FUNDING

Funding for this project was provided by the University of Washington Resilience Lab and Campus Sustainability Fund.

METHODS

Between October and December 2020, interviews took place with fifteen community leaders and organizers working with frontline communities in Pierce and King counties. Interviewees were recruited using both purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to reach a diverse range of organization types and interviewee demographics. Interviewees were each compensated with a Tango giftcard worth \$50 for their participation. University of Washington IRB approval was sought before interviewees were contacted and this project was found to be exempt.

Each interview lasted roughly one hour and was held and recorded over Zoom and then transcribed into a written document. Codes were developed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, basing codes off of themes identified in the interviews and from the social determinants of health model. Each transcript was coded two times, once by each coder, using Dedoose qualitative analytical software, and analyzed for recurring themes, which are included in this report.

On February 15th, 2021, we held a follow-up session over Zoom to share back findings with interviewees and ask for feedback, which was then integrated into this report.



Washington Department of Transportation ferries, photo credit: Getty Images

POSITIONALITY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF BIAS

With any research, it is important to examine where we are coming from when we start a project. As the two lead researchers, we share some identities: we are both cis-gender women in our late 20s and early 30s, but differ in others; for example, one of us identifies as a United States citizen of multiracial English, Scottish, and Korean descent and the other identifies as an immigrant from Afghanistan.

We both are graduate students in the Department of Global Health at the University of Washington and view public health through a social determinants of health lens, believing that our environments and experiences shape our health, which are in turn shaped by our socially-constructed identities.

We believe that these identities also determine, in part, how we perceive others and how others perceive us. Throughout the project, we attempted to identify and account for these biases; we acknowledge, however, that we are limited in the scope of our understanding of some of the personal experiences shared in these interviews.

LIMITATIONS

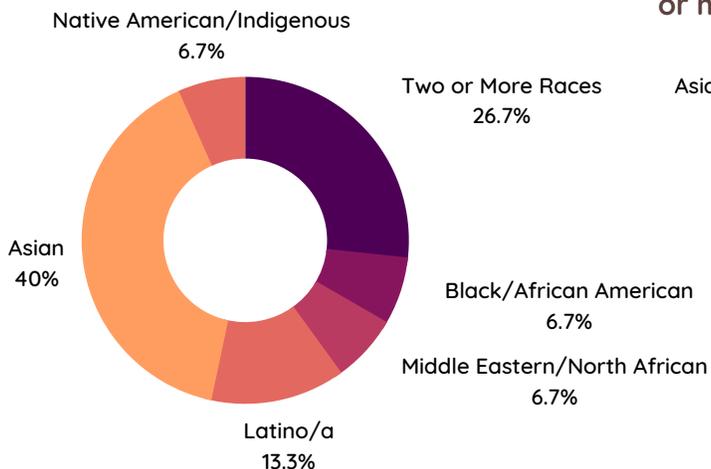
This project attempted to provide a sample of perspectives from community leaders and/or organizers working with frontline communities in Pierce and King counties, and is not necessarily representative of other communities and regions in Washington state. The intention of these interviews was to reach a broad cross-section of interviewees from different communities, as opposed to an in-depth focus on one community, and so the results are fairly generalized.

Additionally, out of respect for social distancing recommendations related to COVID-19 and for the health and safety of interviewees, all interviews took place virtually, using Zoom (see pg. 31). This, in combination with conducting our interviews in English, may have limited accessibility and participation for some potential interviewees, thus skewing our sample.

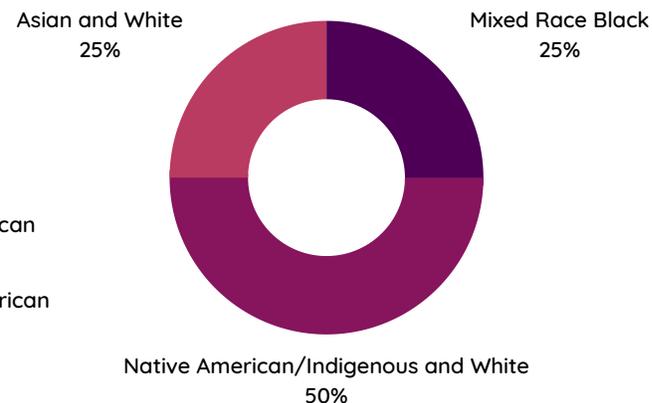
There are certain areas of climate resilience that we believe deserve their own study, for example, the intersection of climate resilience and factors such as rural vs. urban, disability, LGBTQ+, youth, and experiences of houselessness (see pg. 32). While several of these topics are touched on in our study, we did not ask detailed demographic information about these intersecting identities from our interviewees and did not ask specific questions pertaining to these areas of intersectionality.

INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS

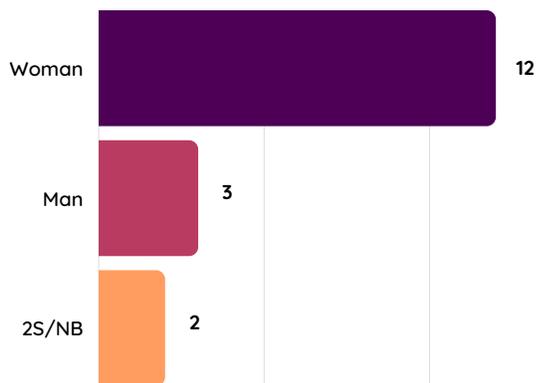
BY RACIAL IDENTITY:



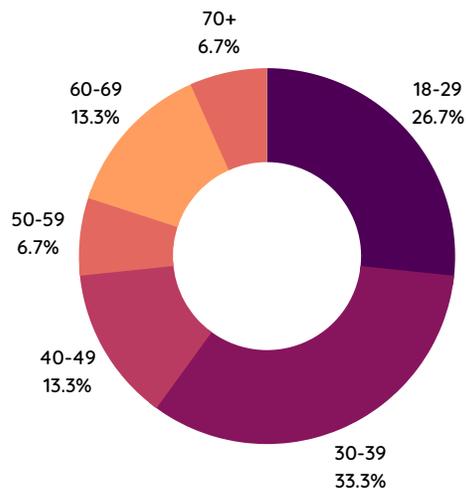
Of interviewees who identified as two or more races:



BY GENDER IDENTITY:



BY AGE:



*Two people who identified as women also identified as two-spirit or gender non-binary

BY COUNTY OF RESIDENCE:



ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED

ORGANIZATION NAME	SERVICE AREA	POPULATIONS SERVED	KEY AREAS OF WORK
Black Farmers Collective/ Yes Farm	Seattle	Black/African American, Low-income, Immigrant	Food sovereignty, outreach, education
Chinatown/ International District Coalition	Seattle	AAPI, Immigrant, Low-income	Gentrification, environment, health, outreach, advocacy
Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition	Seattle/King County	BIPOC, Low-income, Youth, Immigrant	Environment, education, youth corps, outreach, advocacy
ECOSS	Seattle	Latinx, Immigrant, Low-income	Environment, outreach, education, technical assistance
FEEST Seattle	Seattle/King County	BIPOC, Low-income, Youth, Immigrant	Food Sovereignty, advocacy, youth leadership development
IDIC Filipino Senior and Family Services	Seattle/King County	Filipino Elders, Immigrant	Social services, cultural center, food bank, meals
Korean Women's Association	Pierce County, state-wide	AAPI, Elders, Immigrant, Low-income	Social services, housing, community health
La Resistencia	Tacoma	Immigrant, Incarcerated	Immigration, outreach, advocacy, education
Mother Africa	King County	African, Women, Immigrant, Youth, Low-income	Social services, outreach, community health, environment
Na'ah Illahee Fund	Pacific Northwest	Indigenous/Native American, Women, Youth	Grantmaking, land trust, food sovereignty, advocacy, education
Native Kut	Pacific Northwest	Indigenous/Native American	Media, consulting, environment
Tenants Union of Washington State	State-wide	Renters, Low-income	Housing, advocacy, outreach, education
Young Women Empowered (Y-WE)	Seattle, King County	Women, Youth, BIPOC, Low-income, Immigrant	Leadership development, mentoring, environment

RESULTS

Over the course of the fifteen interviews, we asked interviewees to describe climate adaptation and resilience, including what a "climate resilient community" looks like and how their communities fit that description. We also asked interviewees to discuss resources or actions needed to achieve that vision and potential barriers.

Some of the results of these questions are highlighted and organized into themes in the following section:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "PREPARED" FOR OR "ADAPTED" TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

ACCEPTANCE

"I think having the courage to face it, to not put your head in a hole."

EDUCATION

"Mostly the lack of knowledge behind climate change is what is my fear, because many of our community if you come and ask them, they won't know what that means. They won't know how to react to it, they wouldn't even know the impacts of it. This just means that we won't know how to act when anything happens."

SAFETY NETS

"I think for a lot of our immigrant communities, they don't have a footing to be able to have the resilience to be able to deal with any unforeseen issues that will come from climate change."

EQUITY

"I just think that if the United States, like, society, Western society, is comfortable with other people's suffering, like, we're not prepared."

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY, IN WHAT WAYS IS IT A HEALTHY, “CLIMATE-RESILIENT” COMMUNITY?

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND MUTUAL AID

“So I think that, like, we have sort of the basic structure of organizing, and relationship building, and community care, and mutual aid.”

SURVIVAL

“I mean the fact that we’re even alive, you know, the fact that we’re- we’re continuing to, like, take up space and sometimes even demand space.”

IN WHAT WAYS IS IT NOT?

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

“I think because of the community that we serve, is hard to be a healthy resilient community just because of the limited resources that we have”

NEED FOR HEALING

“So we’re struggling in every part trying to gather up and gather us together and take care of one another. That’s the bad parts.”



Seattle P-Patch community garden, photo credit: Getty Images

OVER THE NEXT 20-25 YEARS, WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO SEE DONE TO MAKE YOUR COMMUNITY MORE “CLIMATE-RESILIENT”?

“I was saying before, as far as like people cultivating their own food and all that kind of stuff. That’s what it is here for. So we need to do to the earth when it was created to do, we need to let the ecosystem be the ecosystem instead of us messing it all up, doing all the other stuff that we are doing.”

“We do a really good job in educating every single person in the community about climate change and climate resilience.”

“We try to work, at that sweet spot of also eliminating pollution, but creating a more resilient society that is able to adapt, equitably adapt, to the changes in our climate.

“That our Native youth are really- have got it figured out, doing good things, and they’re- they’re living by their Native values of family and taking care of the planet.”

WHAT MIGHT GET IN THE WAY OF THAT VISION?

“As long as there are people in power who hide behind this progressive notion and don’t acknowledge the deeper things, such as those systems of power, privilege, and oppression, it’s not going to make the field feel more accessible to young people of color.”

“I think as people, we need to start rethinking how decisions are made and how resources are allocated. And I think that’s the root of the problem.”

“I think that there is a lot of really great relationships happening, and relationship building, and in other spaces, it’s like there’s a lot of really, like, blatant racism, and whether or not we think were complicit, we benefit from it.”

“I think it is the folks who are complicit, who are not speaking up, who are staying silent, because there’s nothing at stake for them.”

DISCUSSION

The overall sentiment expressed by interviewees was that our approach to building climate resilience must be holistic, intersectional, and center on equity for frontline communities. Over the course of this project, ten themes emerged describing how climate change is impacting frontline communities and factors that drive or hinder climate resilience.

Theme 1

MEETING BASIC NEEDS WOULD GREATLY INCREASE CLIMATE RESILIENCE FOR FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

“So if I don't have a food to feed my kids and a roof over my head, how even can I think about the climate?”

Overwhelmingly, interviewees felt that investments in meeting peoples' basic needs were critical for building climate resilience. When thinking about resilience as a community's ability to absorb or “bounce back” from shocks associated with climate change, access to healthy food, affordable housing, livable income, quality healthcare, and other essential services were cited as contributing to peoples' overall ability to weather setbacks.

Interviewees noted a disparity in access to resources to meet basic needs between predominantly white, affluent neighborhoods and lower-income communities of color, mentioning examples such as the relatively little green space and tree canopy coverage in the Chinatown-International District compared to higher-income neighborhoods,

Additionally, several people felt that until peoples' basic needs were met, they would have limited capacity to think about climate change and building climate resilience – though others noted that action to address these gaps in access can happen at the same time as energy- and climate-specific action, emphasizing, for example, job creation in the clean energy sector and prioritizing hiring from frontline communities.

“People are housed and can afford housing. People are nourished by their food and can afford it. It's that work feels meaningful and it's not a drab every day.”

Theme 2

PEOPLE IN FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES ARE FEELING SIGNIFICANT CLIMATE GRIEF AND/OR ANXIETY

“I also am concerned about just, like, even future generations of youth of color. I imagine... what if there’s one day they don’t know what snow is? Or like they can’t swim in the ocean because it’s so polluted.”

Climate grief is a sense of mourning or loss associated with the destruction of natural places and climate change. Climate grief is related to eco-anxiety, which includes feelings of helplessness over the environmental degradation, as well as lack of agency over preparation and adaptation strategies to climate and environmental change.

In almost every interview, people expressed feelings of grief or fear about a future impacted by climate change. Important to note here is the context in which these interviews took place, within several months of a historic wildfire season that blanketed our region with hazardous levels of smoke. Many people expressed feelings of anxiety or horror at this experience, with some people referencing ash falling from the sky or washing window screens and rinsing away water black with smoke residue.

Many interviewees felt that they already noticed the effects of climate change and felt astonishment at how quickly it was happening. There may be some sampling bias; it is likely that people who agreed to an interview were already involved in environmental organizing, or wanted to participate because they felt strongly about this topic.

Significantly, climate grief was noted as especially strong in relation to young people, who may not have the resources to process these feelings or who may not ever know certain aspects of our natural world, and for Indigenous peoples who are experiencing the continued destruction of ancestral homelands and ways of living.

"You know, there's always that fear, that climate... what do you call that when you get... that weariness you get about worrying about if we're going to make it, if human beings are going to make it."

"It's like the buffalo dying. We're watching the salmon diminishing. We're watching how we steam ahead, especially out here in Tacoma."

Theme 3

FOR MANY BIPOC COMMUNITIES, NOT ONLY IS THEIR CONTINUED SURVIVAL EVIDENCE OF RESILIENCE, BUT SO IS THEIR ORGANIZING AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS. HEALING WITHIN COMMUNITIES IS NEEDED FOR FOSTERING RESILIENCE MOVING FORWARD

“And we need as much sort of, like, trust and relationship-building as possible, so I think that is sort of my main thing, is that we also need to address the healing that needs to be done, and that’s just like one part of the solution, but I think it’s a huge part.”

For many interviewees, the continued survival of their communities was evidence in itself of their resilience, including the continuation of language, culture, food, joy, and passing down of knowledge between generations. While the experiences of communities differ greatly in specifics, there is a shared thread of violence, both historical and current day, within racist systems.

Many interviewees felt pride in their communities’ acts of resistance and advocacy, and viewed past and current activism as evidence of resilience, but noted weariness from constant stress and vigilance. Many people also referenced the need for healing within their own communities, as well as tangible actions by government, such as formal apology, truth and reconciliation, or reparations.

Strong intergenerational relationships were also mentioned, both within and outside of the family, as a way of both watching out for those who may be most vulnerable- the very young and very old- and sharing traditions and culture that can build a sense of belonging and identity. Several people noted the need for spaces and places to be together with people who shared similar identities, whether it be by age cohort, racial or ethnic identity, language, or immigration status, to be joyful and build strong connections that can help communities weather shocks such as those caused by climate change.

"Resilience to me is adaptation and being able to make something out of nothing. And our communities have already been known to do that."

Theme 4

MUTUAL AID AND SOCIAL NETWORKS HELP BRIDGE GAPS IN RESOURCES, ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

“The way we network to find resources to help each other. It’s kind of like this huge social web of ‘somebody who knows somebody who can help you,’ you know, and I think that, I see that as one of our very strong resilient points in our community. It never stops amazing me.”

Several interviewees referenced mutual aid and community care through extended social networks as key examples of how their communities are resilient in the face of climate change and other stressors. Communities use mutual aid to navigate limited access to resources and support families and individuals within their communities without relying on traditional charity models, which can emphasize hierarchy and power imbalances.

These networks were often talked about in reference to crises like wildfire smoke or the COVID-19 pandemic, as communities have come together to provide food, supplies, and other assistance to those impacted. Interviewees often spoke about willingness to support and help each other as central to how their communities are resilient.

Social cohesion and strong social support were also mentioned as important to healthy, resilient communities, whether it be through friends or extended family. Some interviewees spoke about the particular significance of social networks for recent immigrants and refugees, who may rely on these networks to help them navigate getting established in a new place, practice culture, speak their languages, or provide emotional support, especially if they are separated from their families.

“Obviously, we’ve been cut off from a lot of resources. So we’ve been out here providing mutual aid anyway and passing down that knowledge anyway.”

“I observed groups reaching out to each other to provide air filters during COVID. They distributed food and different gift cards to go buy a basic amenities. So I would say they’re resilient in that they are prepared to and willing to support one another as we take on this threat.”

Theme 5

GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT THREATEN THE ABILITY TO FORM CONNECTIONS TO A PLACE AND COMMUNITY, WHICH ARE ESSENTIAL FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

“I think for me, coming from a place that had very different values systems and really its own culture and its own sense of place, I feel like I see the need to have communities actually be able to be rooted in place and not having to focus on things like anti-displacement all the time.”

“Communities of color can stay together and aren't gentrified out, that also comes to mind.”

Many interviewees referenced gentrification and displacement as forces that threaten communities - not only in terms of access to resources but also as forces uprooting people from their communities and the social networks mentioned under the previous theme. Factors such as lack of affordable housing, legacies of discriminatory policies such as redlining and the resulting racial wealth gap, regressive taxation, policies that favor new development, and rising inequality were cited as contributing to displacement of communities of color and low-income communities, particularly in Seattle and King County, and increasingly, Pierce County.

For many people, a sense of connection to place was associated with willingness to fight against the degradation of its environment or predatory development. Constant threat of displacement interrupts that relationship and the economic and emotional stressors of rising housing costs and costs of living were noted as interfering with peoples' abilities to meet basic needs.

Many interviewees also mentioned the additional stressor of climate migration, including the need to plan for an influx of both wealthier people moving from more climate-impacted areas and people displaced by climate-related disasters across the region and globe.

“It's hard enough for communities right now when everyone's being gentrified out of their homes. And climate change is only going to make that worse. I think when wealthier folks start moving north, people are going to be getting priced out of their homes and aren't going to have anywhere to go.”

"I'm concerned that when young people don't get to access spaces like that, or have experiences of wonder, or awe of nature, or in natural places, and feel like taking care of by land and Mother Earth, that it becomes much harder to face racism and sexism and all those things."

Theme 6

CONNECTION TO THE EARTH IS IMPORTANT FOR OVERALL WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE, BUT ACCESS TO NATURE IS NOT EQUITABLY DISTRIBUTED

"I think going forward, climate resilience looks like the Black community, and communities of color in general, just having access to green spaces and having access to food that is healthy and helps address those health disparities."

There is substantial evidence supporting the physical and mental health benefits of access to green space and nature, as well as the community benefits of improved air quality, reduced ambient heat, reduced noise, and reduced crime. Access to nature, however, is not equitably distributed, and low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods with high proportions of people of color typically have less tree coverage than predominantly white, affluent neighborhoods. Interviewees referenced both physical distance from natural spaces, and fear for safety or of racial profiling as barriers to spending time in nature, as well as lack of positive representation of people of color enjoying natural spaces.

Interviewees described feeling connection to the earth by spending time in nature, practicing culture, and growing food. Several interviewees described the ability to spend time in natural spaces and feelings of connection to land as especially important for young people of color, supporting healthy emotional development and helping them manage stress.

The connection between access to nature and access to fresh, organic food was made by several interviewees, who underscored the need to foster a deeper connection between land, food, and health, and investing in sustainable local food systems as an important part of climate resilience. Interviewees pointed to the importance of community gardens and P-Patches, community farms, neighborhood plots, and other spaces to grow food as an alternative to buying it.

Theme 7

LINGUISTICALLY- AND CULTURALLY-RELEVANT EDUCATION AND PLANNING ARE ESSENTIAL FOR BUILDING AWARENESS AND RESILIENCE IN FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

“When I think about a climate resilient community, I think about awareness. I think about everybody knowing exactly what’s going on and how to help and prevent in the micro level, this meaning, like, how individually you can make changes in your own community.”

Many interviewees referenced a lack of awareness of the impacts of climate change, and of how to mitigate these impacts, in combination with the need to meet basic needs diverting attention from climate change, as interfering with a community’s ability to plan and prepare.

Several people mentioned the need to translate information and resources into languages spoken by their communities, as well as the need for that information to be culturally relevant. A few interviewees worked in outreach/educator roles and said that they often also helped interpret overly-academic or jargon-filled policy messages for their communities. Important to note here is the need to meet community members where they are at, and that climate change is not universally accepted or understood in the same terms as Western science. Several interviewees mentioned the need to uphold Indigenous and non-Western perspectives on sustainability, and to integrate creative communication methods such as murals or community theater.

Involving youth and starting education at a young age were brought up by several interviewees, as well as the importance of modeling healthy behavior for children. Overall, many interviewees felt that communities of color were being left out of conversations on sustainability and planning for climate change, which has historically been a predominantly white field, and that greater priority needs to be given to involving frontline communities at all levels of decision-making.

“I can translate into several languages and then send it to the ethnic media. A lot of people are concerned about that and they can do just a little one thing at home, then we can change. One step. Just little thing, come together, will change some for future.”

Theme 8

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND EXCLUSION ARE LEADING TO MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLY ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE UNDER FRONTLINE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

"I think that there needs to be a stronger participation, or voice, or access, and representation of people of color."

"You don't see Native Americans represented in those spaces to the extent that we've paid the price for those institutions to exist and it just creates a real challenge."

Almost all interviewees cited adherence to a status quo of institutional racism, gatekeeping, and exclusion of people of color from meaningfully participating in decision-making around climate change as a primary barrier to building climate resilience. Several interviewees stated that when no or only a few people of color are given a seat at decision-making tables, it created bias in solutions being considered, or felt tokenizing or unrepresentative, and as a result, little progress has been made in equitably addressing climate change within the short time frame that we have. In particular, we are missing opportunities to partner with tribes, who, as the original inhabitants of this region, bring intimate knowledge of local landscapes and ecosystems, and have a long history at the forefront of progressive environmental policy in this region.

Many interviewees noted that communities of color are being left behind or are actively being harmed by policy decisions because of apprehension and hesitancy around anti-racism by predominantly white nonprofits and institutions. These same organizations were noted as needing to address the "green ceiling" of racially-biased hiring practices and work cultures that keeps many people of color from entering and rising up in the environmental field. Several interviewees described feeling discouragement from poor representation of people of color as leaders in the environmental field, but stated feelings of pride at taking up space and creating space for others to follow.

Several interviewees highlighted the need for government organizations to invest in building meaningful relationships with communities of color. They emphasized that we are missing opportunities for creative, holistic pathways for adapting to climate change that are rooted in intimate knowledge of these communities and places, and that excluding people of color is perpetuating harmful systems of power.

Theme 9

ANY APPROACH TO BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCE MUST CENTER THOSE MOST VULNERABLE

“I’m kind of a little bit of the person that thinks trying to invest in young people, formerly incarcerated, and single parents is really important.”

For many interviewees, there was no “one size fits all” pathway to building climate resilience, but rather a call for a shift in perspective and values to center the priorities of the people most vulnerable to climate impacts within frontline communities.

In particular, several interviewees highlighted the need to consider people who are being incarcerated or detained, such as people at the Northwest Detention Center, who due to environmental exposures and a lack of decision-making authority over the conditions of their detention, are at high risk of environmental and climate impacts like fire or health problems from toxic soil. Similarly, several people described the need to invest in immigrant and refugee communities, who often lack economic and social safety nets, in addition to experiencing the stressors of starting new in a different country.

Many people mentioned feelings of anger or frustration at the unfairness of climate change, in that there is little accountability for those who have contributed the most to it while those who experience its impacts most directly often have done the least to cause it. Additionally, several people expressed the need to seek out and center the voices of people who may lack the right to vote but will bear consequences of climate change, including youth, people being incarcerated, and immigrants.

“What concerns me about climate change is the unfairness of the policy, I mean, broadly. Just that the people who are the most responsible for the problem generally are those who are the least likely to bear its consequences.”

“I think about the people who are in the Detention Center, who are helpless. If a fire breaks out, they’re going to be sitting ducks. So that’s what I am really, passionately worried about.”

“And my big one is always bringing youth, always, I think the key factor is youth. I say this because many of our youth and children bring back the knowledge to the families and hopefully those can make changes.”

Theme 10

WE NEED TO PRIORITIZE AND INVEST IN YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR AS LEADERS AND DECISION-MAKERS

“Our young people who are going to be our future decision makers and future organizers already know what they want and already know what they need.”

Throughout almost all of the interviews was the theme of investing in young people, especially young people of color, as our hope for the future. This looked like many different things, including integrating environmental and climate education into school curriculum starting early, modeling healthy and sustainable behavior at home, mentoring young people in the environmental and policy-making fields, training young people in political analysis and organizing, creating opportunities for young people to serve in leadership positions or on boards at nonprofits, bringing young people out hiking and spending time in nature, or supporting their calls to action.

Across the board, people felt that young people brought energy, creativity, joy, and hope, and that planting the seeds now would bring fruit later. It’s possible because several interviewees worked exclusively with youth, there was some sampling bias, however, this theme was consistent enough to include as one of our strongest takeaways from the project.

“Like there's things that are going to change and happen that may not be in our lifetimes. But if we give them the right tools and they can fight and use them to make everything better as much as they can, you know.”

"I mean to start is just it's powerful to see just how capable, and creative, and resilient, and innovative young people are when they're actually prioritized and when they're given a safe place to create, and a brave space to challenge a lot of the ideas that they've been brought up with."

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

"I think COVID is such a perfect example of showing the world what happens when a disaster takes place."

It is impossible to separate the context of this project from a discussion of its results; at the time of the interviews, between October and December 2020, the United States was in the middle of a surge in new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths attributed to SARS-COV2, or COVID-19. In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, BIPOC and low-income communities in Washington experienced disproportionate burden, both directly and indirectly, in the form of heightened caseloads and mortality, and economic and social impacts from the pandemic.

Several interviewees commented that the COVID-19 pandemic was either a "wake-up call" or a "preview" of how climate change may affect their communities, and stressed the need to learn from this experience to better prepare for the future. Some noted pride in their community for organizing mutual aid and community care networks to take care of vulnerable community members. Others felt deep disappointment with inequities in the government's response.

At the time of writing this report, the COVID-19 pandemic continues and vaccine distribution is currently underway. As researchers, we are especially grateful to our interviewees for sharing space with us during an incredibly difficult and uncertain time, and hope that these findings prove useful in informing responses that can reduce further burden to frontline communities from climate change.



View of downtown Seattle from Beacon Hill, photo credit: Getty Images Signature

AREAS FOR CONTINUED RESEARCH

This project is intended to be one of many lines of communication between frontline community members and academic and policymaker audiences, and the following represent potential areas for further study on the topic of climate resilience.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON CLIMATE RESILIENCE

How do young people balance feelings of climate grief with hope for the future? How might community-based participatory research methods be used to engage and build capacity for young people to take action for climate resilience?

HOUSELESSNESS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

How do experiences of houselessness intersect with climate resilience? What potential interventions can be used to mitigate climate impacts for unhoused populations? What capacities need to be built on local, state, and regional scales?

DISABILITY AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Within frontline communities, how does the experience of disability intersect with climate resilience? To what extent are these perspectives included? How can interventions be developed or adapted to better serve people with disabilities?

CLIMATE RESILIENCE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

To what extent do climate resilience policies and interventions serve rural communities? What specific barriers and opportunities exist? What relationships exist between rural communities and local tribal governments?

This list is by no means exhaustive, but underscores the need to explore other dimensions of intersectionality in continued dialogue around the topic of climate resilience. Additional studies should also consider the use of community-based participatory research methods and other non-traditional research methods to engage community members (pg. 10).

CONCLUSION

Climate resilience is a highly personal and subjective concept and it's imperative that we center and uphold the perspectives of frontline communities in defining climate resilience. Throughout this project, we interviewed fifteen community organizers and/or leaders from frontline communities about what climate resilience looks like for their communities and what barriers and facilitators exist for fostering climate resilience. From these interviews, we found ten main themes, ranging from meeting basic needs in the community to investing in young peoples' success and leadership. All of these themes pointed to a need for a holistic, intersectional, and equity-driven approach to addressing climate resilience for frontline communities.

It is our aim as researchers that this report will be used to help ground understanding of climate resilience and inform future policy and program decision-making. We also hope that this is one of many conversations about climate resilience with frontline community members and that this can act as a foundation for further partnership and engagement moving forward.

"When you feel like you belong somewhere, that makes you feel more inspired to take part and it also prepares you to face challenges in a different way, because you know that you're not forgotten. You know that you're important. And you know that you're vital to the ecosystem."



Salish Sea waters, photo credit: Getty Images

ADDITIONAL LOCAL RESOURCES

Front and Centered

- [Accelerating a Just Transition in Washington State: Climate Justice Strategies from the Frontlines](#)
- [Community Report on Environmental Justice](#)
- [2017 Listening Sessions on Pollution, Climate Impacts, and Puget Sound](#)
- [Unfair Share Report](#)

Got Green

- [Breaking the Green Ceiling: Investing in Young Workers of Color, Paid Environmental Internships, Career Pathways](#)
- [Our People, Our Planet, Our Power Report](#)

Puget Sound Sage

- [Powering the Transition: Community Priorities for a Renewable and Equitable Future](#)

City of Tacoma

- [Climate Action Planning Phase 1: Community Engagement Report](#)
- [Tacoma Climate Change Resilience Study](#)

King County

- [2020 Strategic Climate Action Plan, Section 2: Sustainable & Resilient Frontline Communities](#)
- [Public Health Seattle-King County Blueprint for Addressing Climate Change and Health](#)

Washington Environmental Justice Task Force

- [Recommendations for Prioritizing EJ in Washington State Government](#)

University of Washington Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences

- [The Washington State Environmental Health Disparities Map: Development of a Community-Responsive Cumulative Impacts Assessment Tool](#)

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