



Resilient Midwestern Cities

Improving Equity in a Changing Climate

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Introduction and summary

The Midwest is known as America’s heartland and breadbasket, home to the Great Lakes. Despite the constancy of these iconic images, however, cities across the nation’s central region are adjusting to a new normal: more frequent and intense storms; heavy downpours; heat waves; and cold snaps. These dangerous effects of climate change hit hardest in low-income communities and communities of color, where residents confront daily the symptoms of historic inequities. These symptoms include economic instability as well as poor-quality housing, which is ill-equipped to weather safely severe storms, extended periods of stifling heat, and freezing temperatures.

Faced with growing risks of flooding, heat-related deaths, and poor air and water quality; skyrocketing energy bills; and costly damage to homes and infrastructure, some Midwestern city officials and community advocates are taking steps to improve their cities’ resilience to the effects of climate change. For example, cities such as Ann Arbor, Michigan; Chicago; Cleveland; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Toledo, Ohio, are implementing strategies such as installing green infrastructure; upgrading aging water, electric grid, and public transportation infrastructure; supporting home energy efficiency and weatherization; and strengthening community engagement and social cohesion. For many cities, building community resilience to climate change and other shocks is simply effective and efficient planning to meet community-specific needs.

Still, the financial burden of reducing climate change risks can be crushing for cash-strapped cities already struggling to modernize crumbling infrastructure and to improve the quality of city services. Under the strain of tight budgets, urban sustainability and resilience programs in the region are often underfunded, and they are sometimes designed by city and state officials without adequate input from community members or advocates.

This report includes case studies on how five cities—Ann Arbor, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Paul, and Toledo—are building resilience to climate change in low-income areas. These case studies reveal that reducing the risks of climate change in the region’s disadvantaged areas will require cooperation among many groups.

Midwestern city officials, state and federal policymakers, and community groups must work together to build upon ongoing social justice efforts to improve access to quality housing, infrastructure, and jobs; to promote equity and inclusivity; and to build trust between community members and government officials. These leaders also must connect resilience initiatives to related environmental justice initiatives and other community priorities, such as protecting public health and safety, improving air and water quality, and preserving local culture and history. Based on the findings from these case studies, this report recommends that policymakers:

- Ensure meaningful community engagement in designing resilience programs, partnerships, and policies, and improve public awareness of climate change risks and effects
- Assess the vulnerability of low-income communities to climate change and other environmental threats
- Improve the energy efficiency and weatherization of homes to reduce energy costs and carbon pollution
- Expand access to distributed solar energy in low-income communities in order to lower energy bills and carbon pollution levels
- Improve access to public transportation and bike-share programs to increase mobility and cut carbon pollution
- Plant more trees, community gardens, and other green infrastructure to reduce flood, urban heat island, and water pollution risks
- Strengthen social cohesion and networks to increase support during extreme weather events
- Leverage Community Development Block Grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to invest in resilient and equitable communities
- Recognize and support resilience and social justice leadership

By supporting these principles and actions—as well as efforts to curb lead contamination, improve emergency management services, and create green jobs in low-income communities and communities of color—policymakers and community leaders can help ensure a safe, healthy, and prosperous future for all people living in the Midwest region.

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