



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Full Committee Hearing:

Sweltering in Place: COVID-19, Extreme Heat, and Environmental Justice

Tuesday, July 14, 2020

Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome everyone to this virtual hearing to discuss the intersection of COVID-19, extreme heat, and environmental justice. I would also like to thank our esteemed witnesses for participating in this very important hearing – I know your time is in high demand during this period of intersecting crises, and we appreciate you being here.

There is no better time to discuss these important and intersecting issues than right now. The COVID-19 pandemic has not treated everyone the same: the death rate for African American, Hispanic, and Native American people is much higher than for white people in all age categories. A Washington Post analysis found that majority-African American counties have six times the death rate of majority-white counties.

The trends for exposure to extreme heat and other environmental harms mirror those of COVID-19. Extreme heat is especially problematic in cities, where urban heat islands form, making some neighborhoods much hotter than others. Urban heat islands occur primarily in neighborhoods of color and low-income areas, where there are often less trees, more concrete, less access to air conditioning, and are located closer to highways and factories.

These disparities hold true for many other issues. People of color and low-income communities are hit first, worst, and hardest by many disasters and diseases. Disparities between African Americans and whites in COVID-19 mortality rates, as well as exposure to environmental harms, are the result of the legacy of historic redlining and discriminatory housing practices. African Americans were systematically denied equal access to housing. To this day, historically redlined neighborhoods are on average 5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than non-redlined neighborhoods in the same city – sometimes this temperature difference can be as high as 12 degrees.

My home state of Texas is no stranger to extreme heat nor other severe weather or environmental threats. In recent years, Texans have dealt with toxic emissions from oil refineries in Port Arthur, devastating hurricanes and associated flooding in Houston, and destructive tornadoes in Dallas. Now COVID-19 is devastating our great state: communities of color and low-income communities are on the frontlines, fighting for their lives against environmental hazards, disease, and social injustice as well.

This week, nearly two-thirds of the country is facing warmer than normal temperatures, with 40% of the lower 48 states having a moderate risk of extreme and dangerous heat. According to NOAA's Climate Prediction Center, the Texas panhandle will experience some of the worst prolonged heat, with temperatures around 110 degrees.

While it is important that agencies like NOAA and EPA collect data and conduct research on extreme weather and environmental pollution, it is not enough. The scope of ongoing Federal research on issues such as extreme heat and environmental justice must expand to better understand the impacts of environmental and public health risk on vulnerable communities.

That is why we are very fortunate to have the opportunity to speak with such an esteemed panel today. I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses about how the impacts of social injustice, COVID-19, and the climate crisis on vulnerable communities are interconnected, and the role that science and research can play in closing the gaps in environmental and health disparities for these communities.