



# Social Cohesion

## The Secret Weapon in the Fight for Equitable Climate Resilience

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# Introduction and summary

In July 1995, Chicago experienced the deadliest weather event in the city’s history: a sustained heat wave that included a heat index—a measure of the heat experienced by a typical individual—of 120 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>1</sup> The extreme weather of that summer 20 years ago led to at least 465 heat-related deaths over a roughly two-week period.<sup>2</sup> While all Chicagoans felt the heat, they did not suffer equally. The parts of the Windy City with higher concentrations of low-income people, elderly people, and African Americans experienced some of the highest heat-related death rates.<sup>3</sup> Pinpointing the locations of these deaths revealed a map of climate vulnerability that spoke to stark racial divisions and inequality within Chicago.

Weather is often referred to as “the great equalizer,” but as Chicago’s experience shows, extreme weather such as flooding, storms, unusually cold spells, and heat waves disproportionately affect low-income communities. There are several explanations for this disparity. Low-income housing—which is typically older and of poor quality—tends to provide less protection from extreme weather.<sup>4</sup> After destructive weather events, people in low-income communities are not able to recover as quickly or completely as individuals who live in more financially secure communities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, people who choose to leave or are forced to move from a climate-affected area become “climate displaced,” which results in disruptions to their lives and a potential burden to host communities.

Since the Chicago heat wave of 1995, the world’s changing climate has contributed to an increase in the strength and frequency of extreme weather events, with the resulting fallout more likely to be acutely felt by low-income households.<sup>6</sup> In order to curb climate change, a number of cities are testing strategies to cut carbon pollution, such as expanding public transportation, improving energy efficiency, and increasing access to renewable energy. These strategies also have the added benefit of improving public health, particularly in low-income areas where rates of asthma and other environment-related illness are high.<sup>7</sup> Climate change adaptation efforts that are currently underway to fight coastal flooding,<sup>8</sup> reduce excessive heat in urban areas, and limit drought effects<sup>9</sup>—such as planting trees, restoring natural areas, and improving water-use efficiency—can help residents of all income levels.

In addition to these measures, promoting social cohesion—in which a society’s members cooperate to achieve shared well-being—in communities is an additional and overlooked tool for strengthening climate resilience, with particularly good outcomes in low-income communities. Just as the Chicago heat wave displayed the vulnerability of low-income communities during extreme heat events, it also spotlighted the resilience of socially cohesive communities in the face of extreme weather. Researchers found that 3 of the 10 Chicago neighborhoods with the lowest rates of heat-related deaths were low-income, African American communities.<sup>10</sup> The reason that communities with similar demographics fared so differently was high levels of community interaction and organization that decreased isolation among residents. Put differently, socially cohesive communities in which people are engaged in social or civic events enjoyed increased resilience against extreme weather events.

While there is no singularly accepted definition of social cohesion, the concept has been used by social scientists and international government organizations. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development uses this definition:

*A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.*<sup>11</sup>

Sociologist Dick Stanley, who directed research and analysis at the Department of Canadian Heritage for the Canadian government, elaborates that social cohesion includes society’s willingness and capacity to cooperate. He also noted, “Social cohesion should not be confused with social order [or] common values.”<sup>12</sup> Social cohesion is not meant to stratify communities but to increase cooperation. Additionally, societies may lack social cohesion because they do not have the communication, funding, or organizational tools needed to foster cooperative networks in a community.

These definitions can provide important policy context for efforts to develop community resilience against the extreme weather effects of climate change. Social cohesion can help serve as a resilience tool before, during, and after an extreme weather event:

- **Before an extreme weather event:** Mapping low-income, climate-vulnerable communities can target weatherization, energy-efficiency measures, and other resources to prevent the worst impacts of extreme weather. Identifying these communities can also assist government efforts to foster social cohesiveness within those areas in order to improve climate resilience during and after extreme weather.

- **During an extreme weather event:** Residents and organizations in more connected communities can assist with supplies and help prevent displacement while identifying local needs for government officials.
- **After an extreme weather event:** Cohesive communities may have a shorter duration of climate displacement. Cohesive communities participating in voluntary coastal buyback programs may receive greater compensation than individual residents.

For these benefits to be realized, however, government policies must foster community cohesion and incorporate community input in climate resilience and mitigation plans. Of course, social cohesion and other resilience strategies benefit all communities, not just low-income areas. However, since low-income neighborhoods are the most vulnerable to climate change effects, these strategies are particularly beneficial in those communities. Moreover, social cohesion is a vital tool for low-income communities because they typically experience unique housing, economic, and health disadvantages even before extreme weather strikes.

Incorporating social cohesion into climate resilience planning is a difficult task that requires improving the level of interaction and trust between low-income communities and climate resilience planners. It is crucial that resilience plans not only focus on physical infrastructure, but also consider the human element and the long-term health of vulnerable communities. Despite the complexity of the task, building social cohesion is a worthy goal.

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