Climate Vulnerability and the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) Regulations

Summary
Congress originally intended for the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) to help redress harms caused by redlining. Recent research shows that formerly redlined areas are increasingly vulnerable to climate impacts, due in part to decades of disinvestment. Thus, a climate vulnerability lens and appropriate incentives would improve CRA regulation efficacy and account for emerging risks and reinvestment needs. Using climate vulnerability indicators in tandem with traditional economic indicators to guide reinvestment would better target resources, encourage investment in communities where climate vulnerability is high, and allow for harmonization between CRA regulation, related efforts on climate risk, and other federal climate investment initiatives.

Background
Climate change is a risk multiplier that exacerbates racial and economic inequality, and it is progressing at an alarming rate. Acute and increasingly frequent climate-related disasters, such as wildfires and hurricanes, as well as chronic issues such as heat stress, sea level rise, and drought, disproportionately impact low- and moderate-income (LMI) communities and communities of color.

Black communities, in particular, are more vulnerable to climate-related impacts as a result of racist housing policies and lending practices and resultant environmental injustices. Among these practices is “redlining” where access to capital was restricted from neighborhoods deemed “hazardous” to property values due to a high percentage of Black residents. These same communities have experienced continued decades of disinvestment in critical infrastructure, resulting in a lack of dedicated greenspaces, trees, and flood control mechanisms, along with the siting of environmentally-toxic land uses, all of which now heighten the physical risks these communities face from climate change.

According to a study from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, low-income communities and communities of color in the United States have challenges accessing insurance and credit, both critical financial tools for resilience. Further, higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and debt, and the lowest rates of homeownership – the largest source of wealth for families – challenge these communities’ financial capacity to withstand and adapt to these risks. Even if given the opportunity to own a home, Black homeowners find their homes to be undervalued by approximately $48,000 per home, further limiting the ability to financially withstand climate disasters. Finally, population loss related to climate migration decreases community coherence to respond.

Given the throughline between redlining and climate vulnerability, regulators should incentivize banks to build relationships with and drive investments to LMI communities that are also most climate vulnerable.

Defining Climate Vulnerability

Appropriate definitions of climate vulnerability would clearly outline the connection between redlining, the need for reinvestment, environmental burden, and worsening climate impacts. Such a definition is helpful for educating banks on these linkages and encouraging them to think more intersectionally about their CRA-related outreach and subsequent investments.

The following definition for climate vulnerable would be appropriate, based on existing definitions:

Individuals and communities which experience heightened risk and increased sensitivity to climate change and have less capacity and fewer resources to cope with, adapt to, or recover from climate impacts. These disproportionate effects are caused by physical (built and environmental), social, political, and/or economic factor(s), which are exacerbated by climate impacts.

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The agencies could define climate vulnerable themselves or adopt any subsequent definition put forth by agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

**Data Tools to Identify Climate Vulnerable Communities**

Utilizing tools that identify climate vulnerability can help direct funds to communities most in need of CRA-related investment and communities of color most impacted by historic discrimination.

For example, in California the CalEnviroScreen tool has been used to direct climate investments. This tool utilizes environmental, health, and socioeconomic information to calculate a score for every census tract in California. This is done by compiling data on 21 different indicators across the following categories: (1) Exposure; (2) Environmental Effect; (3) Sensitive Population; and (4) Socioeconomic Factors. The scores take into account the critical component of the “cumulative impact” that communities face.\(^\text{11}\)

An analysis from the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) highlights the disproportionate environmental impact faced by communities of color.\(^\text{12}\) A notable finding in the analysis shows that the 10% of census tracts that scored the lowest on CalEnviroScreen (i.e. least impacted by environmental and socioeconomic burden) were 33% people of color and 67% white. Alternatively, the census tracts scoring in the top 10% of the tool (i.e. most impacted by environmental and socioeconomic burden) were 91% people of color and only 9% white. Overall, the analysis found that Latinos and African Americans disproportionately resided in highly impacted communities. This analysis clearly demonstrates what we know to be true – when taking an intersectional and cumulative approach to defining climate vulnerability, communities of color stand out as disproportionately impacted.

Unfortunately, at present there is not a singular federal tool to help identify climate vulnerability in a consistent manner across the country. There are, however, a number of tools that the agencies could share with financial institutions to inform their CRA activities.

One of the best tools currently available is the **Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST)** from Justice40 which could assist banks in targeting resources. The recently finalized version of the tool takes into account critical indicators that were left out of the draft version, including incorporating Tribal Nations and data regarding historic redlining practices.\(^\text{13}\) The tool


also displays demographic information for each census tract.

Other federal tools are also available that can help illuminate environmental and socioeconomic burden in communities, such as:

1. The Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) **Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool (EJScreen)** which has recently released an updated 2.0 version;  
2. Department of Energy’s **Energy Justice Mapping Tool**;
3. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Environmental Justice alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry’s (ATSDR) **Environmental Justice Index**;
4. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) **Cumulative Resilience Screening Index (CRSI)**;
5. **Climate Vulnerability Metric** prepared by researchers at UC Santa Barbara and the Rhodium Group which is specific to California at the moment, but will be applied nationally in the future, and the
6. **US Climate Resilience Toolkit**, which lists a number of tools that are more local and specific in nature.

**Climate Vulnerability as a Factor in CRA Exams**

Using the above mentioned tools and an appropriate definition for climate vulnerability, banks could be rewarded for their proactive investment in climate vulnerable communities. While these options do not penalize banks in any way, they offer important incentives to increase relationships and business in communities most likely to face climate impacts and in need of resources.

**Option 1: Whole-Portfolio Baseline and Evaluation** As part of their next CRA exam, the agencies could evaluate a bank’s entire portfolio of CRA-eligible investments and develop a baseline metric for how much of the bank’s portfolio is benefitting climate vulnerable communities. They could award points if at least 40% of the totality of investments is flowing to...

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14 “EJScreen: Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool.” Environmental Protection Agency.  
https://www.epa.gov/ejscreen

https://energyjustice.ees.anl.gov/

16 “Environmental Justice Index.” Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.  

https://cfpub.epa.gov/si/si_public_record_report.cfm?dirEntryId=350154&Lab=CEMM

18 “Unequal climate impacts to the State of California: Developing a Climate Vulnerability Metric.” Environmental Markets Lab UCSB, Rhodium Group,  

climate vulnerable communities. At the subsequent CRA exam, they could evaluate the bank’s CRA-eligible investments against the established baseline of funds going to climate vulnerable communities, and reward points for any demonstrated increase in investment. If a bank has a small footprint and not a large amount of climate vulnerable communities, then it should still be able to demonstrate an increase in investments to those communities over time because climate change impacts and thus those that are climate vulnerable will grow with time.20

Option 2: Tie Disaster Preparedness and Climate Resilience Investments to Climate Vulnerable Communities The agencies could reward points if a bank is able to demonstrate that 100% of their investments eligible under the new proposed disaster preparedness and climate resilience definition are located in and benefit climate vulnerable communities. For a bank’s first CRA exam post-adoption of updated CRA regulations, the agencies would only need to consider investments made since the adoption of those updated CRA regulations.

Harmonizing reinvestment criteria with Climate Risk Supervisory Guidance
As banks begin to manage their own climate-related risks by reducing lending in areas most susceptible to chronic or acute climate disasters, such as in flood- or wildfire-prone areas, this so-called “bluelining” is leaving communities with even fewer resources to meet the ever-worsening impacts of climate change.21 The closing of banking branches in LMI census tracts, as well as in middle and upper income tracts that are adjacent and may serve those communities, is one element evaluated under the CRA exam process.22 Bank examiners should be required to record when bank branch closures are at least in part due to climate-related impacts, and to report that information to their respective agency’s office of climate risk or climate committees, and the Financial Stability Oversight Council’s Climate-Related Financial Risk Advisory Committee.23

The CRA is intended to be consistent with safe and sound banking operations and does not encourage the extension of unsafe or unsound credit.24 This is precisely why it is important for the agencies to align final CRA regulations with supervision and guidance efforts to mitigate climate risk, which can alleviate such concerns by banks ahead of their perceived need to

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withdraw services or otherwise make access to fair credit and services unattainable through higher costs.

Already there are signs of credit rationing in areas where climate change is exacerbating flood risk, and notably, mortgage availability is shifting towards wealthier borrowers.\textsuperscript{25} Climate change impacts will continue to expand in scope and severity with time, causing a shift in the kinds of investments and financial services communities need in order to be prepared and protected. With this reality in mind, the banking system must meet the changing credit needs of LMI communities and communities of color, rather than withdrawing, so that those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change can access necessary, fair, and affordable capital and services to meet their financial needs.

\textit{Coordination with Critical Federal Initiatives on Climate and Finance}

It is critical that the agencies align efforts related to assuring benefits and access to capital to climate vulnerable communities with other key federal initiatives. These include the White House Council on Environmental Quality and their oversight of the \textbf{Justice40 Initiative}, which aims to invest 40\% of certain Federal infrastructure dollars into disadvantaged communities\textsuperscript{26}, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency’s implementation of various Inflation Reduction Act programs, most notably the \textbf{Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund}\textsuperscript{27}, and the Department of Energy’s implementation of the \textbf{Energy Infrastructure Reinvestment Program}.\textsuperscript{28} Banks have a crucial role to play in providing necessary capital and financial services to ensure infrastructure projects are successful, and aligning climate-related efforts in the CRA regulations with the above mentioned programs will facilitate smoother financing of critical resilience projects. Agency staff should closely follow the implementation of these new climate initiatives and offer insight and expertise related to how financial institutions can be aligned and supportive.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In revising the CRA regulations it is critical that the agencies better address the challenges of communities of color, in addition to LMI communities, as originally intended under the CRA. As these communities are also more likely to be climate vulnerable, they should have access to safe and affordable investments in climate resilience as they are most likely to be impacted by the ongoing climate crisis. The agencies should take deliberate steps to incentivize banks to proactively invest in these communities and participate in broader, whole-of-government efforts to do the same.


\textsuperscript{26}“Justice40 A Whole-Of-Government Initiative.” \textit{The White House}. \url{https://www.whitehouse.gov/environmentaljustice/justice40/}


\textsuperscript{28}“Energy Infrastructure Reinvestment Program.” \textit{Department of Energy Loans Program Office}. \url{https://www.energy.gov/lpo/energy-infrastructure-reinvestment}
Resources

Mapping Racial Segregation in the U.S.
● The Othering and Belonging Institute’s Segregation Mapping Tool and tutorial
● Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, by Virginia Tech, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Richmond

Redlining and Climate-Related Impacts
● Redlining and Air Pollution
  ○ March 2022 UC Berkeley study on redlining and air pollution disparities: Historical Redlining Is Associated with Present-Day Air Pollution Disparities in U.S. Cities
    ■ Communities of color in the United States are systematically exposed to higher levels of air pollution. This study explores how redlining, a discriminatory mortgage appraisal practice from the 1930s by the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), relates to present-day intraurban air pollution disparities in 202 U.S. cities.

● Redlining and Extreme Heat
  ○ 2020 study on redlining and extreme heat in urban areas: The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas
    ■ Researchers explore the relationship between “redlining”, or the historical practice of refusing home loans or insurance to whole neighborhoods based on a racially motivated perception of safety for investment, with present-day summertime intra-urban land surface temperature anomalies. Nationally, land surface temperatures in redlined areas are approximately 2.6 °C warmer than in non-redlined areas.
  ○ How Decades of Racist Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering
  ○ Unequal Burden of Urban Heat
  ○ Heat Wave, by Eric Klinenberg

● Redlining and Flooding
  ○ "Assessing Disparities of Urban Flood Risk for Households of Color in Chicago"
    ■ This article explores the disproportionate impact of urban flooding in communities of color, much of it occurring outside the floodplains delineated in the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s flood risk maps.
  ○ Flood exposure and social vulnerability in the United States
  ○ Maps reveal redlined areas face higher flood risks
Maps of historic housing discrimination show how neighborhoods that suffered redlining in the 1930s face a far higher risk of flooding today.

- **A Racist Past, a Flooded Future: Formerly Redlined Areas Have $107 Billion Worth of Homes Facing High Flood Risk—25% More Than Non-Redlined Areas**
  - In dozens of American cities including Sacramento and Chicago, formerly redlined neighborhoods have a larger share of homes endangered by flooding than neighborhoods that weren’t targeted by the racist 1930s housing policy. Many of these at-risk neighborhoods remain predominantly nonwhite.

- **Insuring Catastrophe** by the Center for Public Integrity
  - The need for FEMA reform beyond raising rates to unaffordable levels

- **Underwater: Resilience, racialized housing, and the national flood insurance program in Canarsie, Brooklyn**
  - Uses a case study in Canarsie, Brooklyn that the National Flood Insurance Program, by governing through the mechanism of household finances, stands to reproduce and accelerate existing racial inequalities in the housing market.

- **Climate Change escalates flood risk in redlined communities by 25%**
  - “Compounded by years of underdevelopment and underfunding, redlined areas still contain 58.1% Black, Indigenous, People of Color occupants compared to 40.4% in places deemed desirable by lenders. Among 38 of the largest metro areas analyzed, $107 billion worth of redlined housing stock faces high flood risk versus $85 billion worth of greenlined — a 25% difference. Because Black and Hispanic homeowners have less equity built up on average, they’re twice as likely to become delinquent on their mortgages due to storm damage as white borrowers."

- **Racist Zoning Practices Are So Prevalent, ‘You Can Even See It in the Flood Data’**
  - A recent study used a socio-hydrological model, plugging in local data from each region on highest yearly streamflow (the peak speed at which water moves through rivers and streams), flood insurance loss claims, active insurance policy records, and population density. Knighton and the team aren’t sure exactly what historical factors have resulted in more people of color residing near erratic bodies of water, or how to separate hydrology and the socioeconomic trappings of race. In other words, it’s not clear how much risk comes from the rivers themselves, and how much of it comes from the fact that neighborhoods of color are less likely to have access to flood-protection infrastructure, personal funds for buying insurance, and information about the threat of flooding. “It is very
difficult to tease apart the two factors,” he said. “My guess is that socioeconomics dominate flood preparedness. If populations have limited ability to leverage federal programs for flood relief, then they are limited in how they can prepare for future floods. If communities have ample resources, then it becomes a risk-based choice.”

- Redlining and Green Space
  - Historically Redlined Neighborhoods Are More Likely to Lack Green Space Today: Study

- Redlining and Local Environmental Health risks
  - National Community Reinvestment Coalition: Redlining and Neighborhood Health
    - Greater historic redlining is related to current neighborhood characteristics, including increased minority presence, higher prevalence of poverty and greater overall social vulnerability.
    - There are statistically significant associations between greater redlining and general indicators of population health including increased prevalence of poor mental health and lower life expectancy at birth.
    - There are statistically significant associations between greater redlining and pre-existing conditions for heightened risk of morbidity in COVID-19 patients like asthma, COPD, diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, kidney disease, obesity and stroke.

Rising Costs or Loss of Financial Services to Communities
- Higher Insurance and Mortgage Rates in Flood Zones
  - Who Bears Flood Risk? Evidence from Mortgage Markets in Florida*
    - “...Banks manage flood risk by rationing credit through lower loan-to-value (LTV) ratios, which reduces negative borrower equity after floods. However, banks only adjust LTVs when flood insurance coverage limits bind, showing that they offload flood risk to the government flood insurer. Increased credit rationing after flood map updates shifts the composition of mortgages towards richer and higher credit quality borrowers....lenders screen for flood risk when they retain residual exposures to it, and that their credit rationing has distributional consequences for who moves into flood zones.”
  - The Adverse Effect of “Mandatory” Flood Insurance on Access to Credit
In our paper, we relate whether individual mortgage applications in a given census tract are accepted by a lender to changes in the degree to which the tract is covered by a flood map. We ultimately seek to quantify the reaction of banks and borrowers to suddenly being in a flood zone—and the insurance requirement that comes with this coverage. We find that the chance of a loan application being accepted by a lender—as well as the size of loans that are accepted—are smaller in regions that experience a growth in the flood-zone coverage. Commensurate with the hypothesis that the costs of flood insurance reduce the ability of marginal households to borrow, we find that the reduction in lending is strongest for households with lower relative income and lower FICO scores, after accounting for the actual occurrences of flooding, the riskiness of a region, and borrower and bank characteristics.

Financial Regulators on this Topic
- Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco
  - Community Development Innovation Review: Strategies to Address Climate Change Risk in Low- and Moderate-income Communities - Volume 14, Issue 1
- NY Times: Bank Regulators Present a Dire Warning of Financial Risks From Climate Change
- Inman: 'Blue-lining' could be the new redlining, Fed branch warns

Other Relevant Articles
- Angela Glover Blackwell and Anita Cozart: How Smart, Targeted Infrastructure Investment Can Pave the Way for an Equitable Nation
- Environmental Racism: How Historic Redlining Continues to Affect Communities
- Redlined US homes face higher flood risks from climate change, new study finds
- Hurricane Harvey hit low-income communities hardest
- As Rising Heat Bakes U.S. Cities, The Poor Often Feel It Most