

## OPINION

# Attack climate change for communities of color

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Heat is the deadliest impact of climate change. This is especially true for New Yorkers of color. Between 2000 and 2012, nearly half of New York City's heat-related deaths were among Black New Yorkers, despite the fact that they comprised less than 25% of the population during that time. And [this summer](#) is no exception, with recurrent record highs and reports of extreme heat across the country. [NASA reported](#) June 2021 was the hottest June since at least the 1880s.

There is a reason for this deadly disparity. In many low-income communities and communities of color, in New York and around the nation, redlining and chronic disinvestment have made these underserved neighborhoods easy prey for polluters, creating environmental and economic sacrifice zones that have led to residents being far more vulnerable to both COVID-19 and climate change. This is why it's not surprising that [studies](#) have shown that people of color are more concerned about the climate crisis, despite producing less of the emissions that contribute to the crisis.

One such community, East Harlem, is no stranger to extreme heat. According to "[A Vision Plan for a Resilient East Harlem](#)," released by New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation and the Mayor's Office of Resiliency in December 2019, the average surface temperature in East Harlem in August is more than two degrees higher than that of the city overall. A recent piece in The Verge illustrates this phenomenon, with a New York [map depicting heat-vulnerable communities](#). It found that average land surface temperatures reached as high as 110 degrees Fahrenheit, 20 degrees hotter than readings taken in the affluent Upper East Side, when air temperatures at the nearest NOAA weather station in Central Park only reached a high of 77 degrees.

Following the recent approval of federal funding for [the second phase of the Second Ave. subway extension](#) project, East Harlem finds itself caught between two potentially cataclysmic forces: climate change and gentrification. And without a community-oriented framework to address these challenges, residents will likely continue to suffer from the heat until gentrification forces them out.

That is why WE ACT for Environmental Justice brought together more than 40 East Harlem-based community organizations, elected officials and city and state agencies to develop the [East 125th Street Community Visioning Action Plan](#). The plan offers a roadmap to transform East Harlem's under-resourced 125th St. corridor into a thriving economic hub and cultural destination on par with the famed Central and West Harlem portions of the thoroughfare.

The plan includes transforming East Harlem into an "Eco District" by investing in solutions that address the environmental challenges residents currently face while protecting the community from gentrification. With city, state and federal funding incentives, including funds from the Biden administration's [Justice40 initiative](#), we can make East Harlem a more environmentally and economically sustainable area while preserving the community's history, culture and residents.

For example, investing in solar panels and green roofs along with building retrofits and electrification will improve energy efficiency, energy independence and air quality while reducing heat. The introduction of street trees will also help mitigate the heat and air pollution, along with the creation of additional park space like the long-awaited Hudson River Waterfront Greenway, from E. 125th to 132nd Sts., which would act as a heat sink.

As we move further into the summer of 2021, communities all across New York City — and especially communities like East Harlem — will continue to face the devastating impacts of the climate crisis, including deadly heatwaves. The key to addressing these challenges is held by the people directly impacted by them. They know their communities, so it is essential for them to be involved in developing the solutions.

Let's not repeat the tragedy of COVID-19 with the climate crisis. Our city needs its essential workers, the folks who live in places like East Harlem. We cannot afford to watch them wither under heatwaves or be pushed out by gentrification. New York City must invest in these long-neglected, once-redlined communities, to make them more environmentally and economically sustainable. We can no longer let race, economic status or zip codes determine who lives and who dies in our city.

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