

**COMMENTARY**

# How To Create Anti-Racist Energy Policies

September 23, 2020

By [Shalanda H. Baker](#)

A crowd of climate activists marching behind a banner. A coalition of climate, Indigenous and racial justice groups gathered at Columbus Circle to kick off Climate Week with the Climate Justice Through Racial Justice march, Sept. 20, 2020. (Photo by Erik McGregor/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Once you begin to see injustice, you cannot unsee it.

The pandemic has exposed longstanding inequality in our society and revealed how many Americans are one mishap away from losing basic necessities such as food, housing and health care.

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The pandemic has also revealed the many burdens communities of color routinely bear as a result of the structure and design of our nation's energy system. That system disproportionately extracts wealth from the lowest-income Americans, who also tend to live in communities with the poorest air quality and are at a higher risk of the complications of COVID-19. These are the same communities that will be hit [first and hardest](#) by climate change.

The time for reckoning with the racialized violence embedded within the current energy system is long overdue. Now is the time to advance anti-racist energy policy. Now is the time for energy justice.

Our system of paying for energy — electricity, natural gas and other fuels — is unfair. The system inequitably burdens people who live in poor and low-income communities, who struggle to pay their utility bills. The poorest families in this country pay far more of their income for energy costs -- [upwards of 30%](#) -- while higher-income families pay about [3% or less](#). It should come as no surprise that the households paying the highest portion of their income for energy and confronted with difficult decisions about how to pay their utility bills are also disproportionately Black, Latinx and Indigenous. Lower-income families already tend to [use less energy](#).

## Communities of color are disproportionately subsidizing an energy system that is killing them.

Of the 36 U.S. states and territories that originally enacted moratoria to prevent utility shutoffs during the pandemic, 18 states and territories have allowed those moratoria to lapse, according to our data at the [Initiative for Energy Justice](#). Five more states face imminent expirations. Millions of Americans are on the verge of having their utilities disconnected due to the current pandemic.

But the struggle to meet basic energy needs predates the current crisis. A [2015 analysis](#) revealed that 31% of all Americans regularly face some sort of energy insecurity, which includes the lack of ability to pay for energy. This [figure jumped](#) to 45% for Latinx respondents and 52% for Black respondents and was still greater for Native American and Indigenous people, who experienced energy insecurity at a rate of 54%. A staggering 75% of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander respondents experienced energy insecurity, a rate more than twice the national average. Yet white respondents experienced energy insecurity only 28% of the time.

The legacy of environmental racism also means that Black people are [more likely](#) to live near coal-fired power plants than other people, and Black, Latinx and Indigenous people routinely [absorb more](#) of the toxic byproducts of our fossil-fuel-based energy system. The same communities are less likely to have access to local, clean energy.

During the pandemic, these environmental injustices create a deadlier set of health risks. As researchers at Harvard Chan School of Public Health [recently found](#), long-term exposure to air pollution can increase the risk of dying from COVID-19.

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# **We need a national policy to end utility shutoffs until we have a vaccine or therapeutic treatment to combat COVID-19.**

These data show an unjust energy divide. Communities of color are disproportionately subsidizing an energy system that is killing them.

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The mass protests in the name of Black lives and the urgency of the pandemic make clear that we must reform the energy system, itself a root cause of the harm facing communities of color. Our 2020 national reckoning on race and justice must extend into the urgent debates of climate change. Advocates fighting for climate solutions should also demand energy policy changes to lift the multiplicity of burdens shouldered by communities of color.

We need a [national policy](#) to end utility shutoffs until we have a vaccine or therapeutic treatment to combat COVID-19. We need to cap energy burden, now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and always. This permanent cap on household energy expenditures would limit the amount a household pays for electricity at 6% of overall household income. If that household is within an environmental justice community with lower air quality, the cap would be lower, and not exceed 2% of overall household income.

Policymakers must prioritize investments in clean, local energy in communities of color, especially communities on the frontlines of climate change and environmental harm. The next federal disaster relief bill should include provisions that incentivize states to prioritize local, clean energy development in environmental justice communities, providing pathways local ownership of clean energy assets. Any eventual federal or state Green New Deal must include similar provisions.

This is an anti-racist approach to energy policy. It reflects the indirect and involuntary subsidy already paid by Black and Latinx bodies because of a badly flawed energy system.

These policy recommendations are not only anti-racist and just, they are also practical and possible.

In the same way that state-sanctioned police brutality is neither a natural nor inevitable part of life, the structural violence advanced against Black and Latinx bodies via the energy system reflects the sum of thousands of policy decisions concerning utility profit margins, the location of fossil-fuel-burning facilities and an electric utility's right to — quite literally — turn out the lights. We must march for energy justice as we march for Black lives because the same toxicity that pervades our criminal justice system pervades the energy system. Black, Latinx and Indigenous bodies suffer. They can't breathe.

*This story is part of [Covering Climate Now](#), a global journalism collaboration of more than 400 news outlets committed to better coverage of the climate crisis. This Sept. 21-28 [collaborative week](#) focuses on the intersection of climate change and politics.*

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