



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
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June 22, 2020

The Honorable Paul Tonko
Chair
House Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
2369 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Shimkus
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
2217 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Tonko and Ranking Member Shimkus:

The American Psychological Association (APA) thanks you and the Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change for holding the hearing on June 9, 2020, on “Pollution and Pandemics: COVID-19’s Disproportionate Impact on Environmental Justice Communities.” The hearing brought to light a number of issues of broad concern to psychological scientists and clinicians, including the vulnerabilities of low socio-economic status and minority communities, which are more likely to be in areas with poor air quality, greater water pollution, and sparse healthcare coverage.

The APA agrees that systemic racism has led to harmful environmental exposure for these communities, which in turn have increased health disparities and exacerbated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We further agree that the Environmental Protection Agency should expand its portfolio of research on health disparities to better understand the connections among pollution, unsafe transportation systems, and climate change for environmental justice communities. The hearing also highlighted another of APA’s highest priorities: improving telehealth access to mental health services through expanded broadband infrastructure.

When one thinks about climate change during a pandemic, mental health might not be the first thing that comes to mind. Americans are beginning to gain a better understanding of climate change and its health impacts: vector-borne, foodborne, and waterborne diseases; worsening asthma and allergies; heat-related stress; and illness and injury related to storms, floods, and droughts. But the connections with mental health are not often part of the discussion.

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The tolls of climate change on our mental health are far reaching. They include stress, depression, and anxiety; strained social and community relationships; and increases in aggression and violence. Moreover, the psychological responses to climate change – such as conflict avoidance, fatalism, fear, and helplessness – keep us, and our nation, from addressing the core causes of and solutions for climate change, and from building psychological and community resilience in the face of climate change and related pandemics and natural disasters.

The APA is highly engaged in efforts to address climate change and its consequences. With ecoAmerica, APA produced a report on [*Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance*](#) that reviews the evidence in this area and offers solutions to be implemented by health and medical professionals, community and elected leaders, and the public. This [article](#) in APA's *Monitor on Psychology* describes the varied roles that psychologists are playing to combat climate change at the local, national, and international levels.

Also, APA recently conducted a [survey](#) that showed that more than half of U.S. adults say that climate change is the most important issue facing society today and that they have begun to make changes, or are willing to make changes, in their personal behaviors to reduce climate change. Thus, our society has an opportunity to implement meaningful public policy reforms related to climate change.

To chart the next stage of work on the psychological, behavioral, and mental health dimensions of climate change, APA is establishing a task force of experts that will begin its work this fall. We look forward to keeping you informed of the task force's activities and recommendations.

The APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, and works to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives. Our membership includes more than 121,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students.

Again, we thank you for holding the hearing on COVID-19's disproportionate impact on environmental justice communities and for considering the mental health and psychological aspects of climate change. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact Joseph Keller, PhD, of APA's Science Directorate. Dr. Keller can be reached by phone at 443-841-9900 or by email at jkeller@apa.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JL Diaz-Granados', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jaime L. Diaz-Granados, PhD
Acting Chief Scientific Officer and Deputy Chief Executive Officer