



A Federal Policy and Climate Migration Briefing for Environmental, Community, and Climate Scholars

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Awareness is growing of the displacement, relocation, and migration taking place within the US because of the effects of climate change, including flooding from sea-level rise and frequent severe weather events, as well as the less recognizable chronic heat, drought, and air-quality changes. Residents have been moving and continue to move away from these acute disasters and chronic environmental changes. They also relocate because of public-sector incentives, infrastructure needs, and land conversions or because the local economic base has been devastated by diminishing population from others' moves. But public recognition of these changes contrasts with the blind spots in federal policy.

With Enterprise Community Partners, the Urban Institute hosted the Stakeholders Summit on Federal Policy for Climate Displacement, Relocation, and Migration on November 18 and 19, 2020, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for federal intervention. Participants addressed gaps in knowledge, with the goal of envisioning a new framework as climate policy evolves under a new presidential administration.

The recommendations for federal policymakers were synthesized in a separate report¹ and are outlined here. However, participating scholars who help design policy and evaluate its effectiveness stressed the importance of evidence in policy development and implementation, especially in the unknown terrain of climate-related displacement. Opportunities for scholars include the following:

- **Producing prolifically.** Scholars must continue to accurately document climate displacement, rigorously evaluate federal policies and programs, and transparently predict future exposure, vulnerability, and decisionmaking behaviors across disciplines. Bodies of work (including those related to immigration, inequity, and environmental justice) must be integrated to better inform federal policy.
- **Analyzing inclusively.** Vulnerable populations are the most in need of climate-related intervention. Yet research involving these communities tends to focus on their vulnerability, rather than their inclusion. Scholars must employ community-based participatory research techniques, be respectful of human subjects, and be aware of privilege.
- **Working collaboratively.** Disciplinary boundaries and professional aspirations must be acknowledged but reconsidered as opportunities for scholarly and scholars' growth. Scholars should collaborate on research agendas and advocate together for an increase in federal research resources, including access to federal data and independent funding.
- **Engaging strategically.** Scholars who want to inform public debate must engage with public policy. This requires familiarity with the details of statutes, regulations, and program rules, as well as how they are created, adopted, and enforced, to inform policymakers' language and vision.

Pathways Forward

The US must respond to climate change's acute and chronic effects with substantial climate action—both mitigation and adaptation. Displacement is one effect that is already occurring (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014; Kumari Rigaud et al. 2018; US Global Change Research Program 2018).² The stakeholders summit sought a new vision for a comprehensive federal policy on climate displacement.³ This vision builds from current statutes and programs across nine aspirational policy areas while keeping the principles of evidence, equity, efficacy, and efficiency in mind. Insights from scholars who study climate displacement, migration, environmental and climate justice, and climate adaptation proved especially crucial. Opportunities for these scholars' involvement in climate migration supports are summarized below across the same "pathways" as are described in the federal policy briefing. Unattributed quotations from this critical stakeholder block of researchers who participated in the summit are interspersed throughout the brief.

1. Triggers and Community Eligibility

What conditions should consistently elicit federal attention, funds, and programs for climate relocation? Summit participants overwhelmingly argued that disaster declarations should not be the trigger for climate adaptation planning and action. Rather, the federal government should fund research to measure the physical exposure of all places to climate effects and assess their social and economic vulnerability—including the legacies of underinvestment, political marginalization, and capacity constraints in local government—to define "at-risk places" eligible for federal intervention and to inform residents. This inquiry should involve indigenous knowledge and citizen science, both to get an accurate picture of local conditions and incubate trust with communities, regardless of qualitative or quantitative research design. However, for scholars, community-based participatory design does introduce bias about perceptions and behaviors among the residents in question.

"One open question is: can people make these choices pre-disaster? It seems unfair in many respects to ask them to make these choices about their life [after a disaster], when everything has just been thrown into chaos. But at the same time, you can imagine that nobody would make the choice to move except in this window, when their house has just been damaged."

2. Individual Needs

What should the range of federal services be for someone facing climate relocation? Most foreseeable federal interventions related to climate relocation focus on households' property and possessions—including titles, insurance, damages, and temporary shelter. This approach limits both the number of services and who is eligible for them. Groups at risk of not accessing services include renters, people with

physical disabilities, households of color that have been historically denied housing choices, and people experiencing homelessness, in addition to some property owners with low incomes. Current disaster services do not meet all needs, nor would they cover relocation. Services from housing and employment to “wraparounds” for health, education, and cultural integration must be offered to affected households clearly, consistently, and accessibly through community-based case managers and then monitored. Evidence is needed to develop the dosage of each service that can help people become whole.

“One of the things that we found was this tension between the basic needs that people are experiencing and then...systemic change that is trying to reimagine and re-envision more just and equitable systems and recovery processes. The gulf is too wide.”

3. Individual Assistance Funding and Eligibility

Which income levels, demographics (including race and ethnicity), and climate-hazard exposures should be prioritized for federal climate relocation assistance to households? The average amount of disaster aid that households receive is much lower than the federal caps, and the assistance rarely accounts for the actual costs of rebuilding or compensates for the disproportionate effects of even slight financial disruptions on lower-income, vulnerable households and the nonmonetizable costs to lives and livelihoods (Martín 2019). These costs are disproportionately borne by people with low incomes, communities of color, and renters (Fothergill and Peek 2004; Ratcliffe et al. 2020). However, the extent of that burden and its distribution are unclear across social and environmental contexts, particularly as migrants move repeatedly or even return to their original communities (Fussell, Sastry, and VanLandingham 2010). If federal service providers must prioritize for eligibility low-income households in concentrated at-risk areas that have low public-sector capacity and progressively scale the total value of individual aid to make climate relocators whole, more research is needed. This is particularly true for the lesser-studied factors that contribute to vulnerability, such as living in a historically segregated neighborhood, having a physical disability, and having an undocumented immigration status.

“It’s about the misalignment of resources and need. At a simple level, it’s making sure that people can access resources. There are very different migration experiences.”

4. Community Decisionmaking

Self-determination and procedural justice are important means and ends in climate adaptation decisions for communities and households (Nelson, Ehrenfeucht, and Laska 2007). Having seats at the

table is as important as outcomes. What kinds of engagement could be implemented to ensure procedural justice in adaptation planning? Summit participants stressed the importance of elevating residents at all stages of policy. Inclusive engagement helps communities understand their challenges and devise solutions. Agencies could advance science communications and media and techniques for engaging with communities to build capacity in underprepared local governments, require that decisions be made by and with residents, and fund local organizers.

“It’s tricky to [have] these conversations if they’re initiated by a perceived outsider. You know you automatically have these issues of distrust that I think are legitimate to overcome.”

5. Needs of Governments That Face Relocating Populations

Federal disaster policy focuses on rebuilding. How should federal programs support community rebuilding alongside relocation, which risks losing population, economic production, and municipal revenue? The federal government can slow losses in highly exposed jurisdictions through creative funding and programming—such as revolving loan funds, bond negotiations, and pilot relocation programs—but funding must also deter at-risk communities from further development of exposed land or unsustainable economic activities. The evidence for understanding how decisions are made and how programs are implemented is mixed (Binder and Greer 2016; Koslov 2016; Mach et al. 2019). Indeed, many of the suggestions for federal services made during the summit—such as comprehensive case management—are untested (Lamba-Nieves and Santiago-Bartolomei 2018).

“We need to really understand the magnitude of climate migration. People mostly move for life, marriage, divorce, they get a new job, they want a new house. It’s important to put environmental migration in perspective as a reason for moving. Let’s quantify it.”

6. Needs of Governments That Receive Migrants

With so little empirical inquiry into the trajectories of displaced people, we lack information about what support and services are needed in the places they go, leaving gaps that need to be filled for policy formulation. Climate-related relocations typically involve moves to existing towns and cities, particularly large ones that are seen as having employment and housing opportunities and may have different demographic contexts from those in the communities that people are leaving. These moves usually happen with minimal and time-limited public aid (Hauer, Evans, and Mishra 2016).⁴ Should

federal aid be directed before and after a disaster to governments whose communities are likely to receive relocating people, and, if so, for what purposes? Transformation requires understanding migration with and without federal aid (Weber and Peek 2012). Possible interventions include tracking households; applying their experience and wisdom to pilot programs; devising governance for regional plans, land and infrastructure cooperatives, and mutual adaptation agreements; adding expertise; and countering xenophobia—but they must all be supported with evidence.

“It’s important to think about their entire post-disaster trajectory. Are people moving and returning? Are they moving because they can’t find an affordable home and they keep getting passed on? And as they move, how do they enter political and civic processes?”

7. Costs and Cost Share

Federal expenditures for hazard mitigation and climate adaptation have not increased significantly in recent years despite evidence of their benefits and the growing need (Kousky 2017; Kousky, Fleming, Berger 2021). What would be an acceptable appropriation for a climate relocation program, and who should pay it? Federal resources can support community viability, neighborhood cohesion, resident livelihood, and vernacular culture, as well as one-way tickets out of harm’s way. The costs can be justified with improvements to cost-benefit analysis tools and mitigated by distributing the burden across government tiers and private-sector actors according to their proportional contribution to the risks.

“Thinking of land use and policy and how local policies drive risk reduction. The standard is that communities are in competition with each other. It is not in most communities’ best interest to limit where development can happen...and there have always been safety nets to let the federal government go in and help. So land use policy doesn’t change dramatically.”

8. Time Frames

Timing is one indicator primed for measurement. Federal buyout and formal relocation programs take a long time to come to fruition, and that creates challenges for people who need to prepare for and plan around such a major transition in their lives (GAO 2020).⁵ But speeding up the process could result in poor planning and worse outcomes. What is reasonable timing for federal aid for households, from eligibility, through consent, and after relocation? Aid must balance speed, quality, and suitability. The government must understand timing (from its own timelines to the deadlines it imposes) and its effect

on service quality, migrants' well-being, and community outcomes. Federally supported and independent research can discover actual—and ideal—timelines for embarking on climate adaptation discussions, arriving at local decisions, and implementing relocation programs to best serve residents.

“It’s increasingly important that we undertake more longitudinal studies with regard to relocations and buyouts that allow us to see the effects over time on relocatees.”

9. Authorities

Governance is one of the most obviously understudied areas of hazard mitigation and climate adaptation, in large part because of the political and ethical decisions around accountability (Birch and Reyes 2018). Although the federal government's role in disaster assistance has expanded, questions persist about what authority the different federal agencies have to provide this aid, as well as what should be the responsibility of state and local governments and of the private sector (Lindsay and Webster 2020). What are the appropriate roles and obligations for the federal government, if any? Ultimately, climate policy should not be equated with disaster policy. Community planning and environmental goals should prescribe migration, but these broad approaches require clear lines of authority, oversight, and leadership in government, combined with capacity building for underresourced local jurisdictions and the promotion of “bottom up” solutions from residents. Public policy can and should be informed by quantifying contributions to risks and benefits and reviewing legal responsibilities and liabilities.

“The arms race is not going to be won by poorer communities. And I worry that relying solely on communities to make these choices also introduces the potential of exacerbating the trends we’ve already seen and doesn’t actually improve self-determination.”

Conclusion

Scholars have led much of the recent discussion on climate migration, particularly as it relates to core issues of equity, land use regulation, fiscal risk, and antiquated policy. Researchers are providing the evidence base from past relocation patterns needed to understand the vulnerabilities and risks of resettlement, the messy processes and transitions associated with it, and the slew of consequences that follow. This evidence base is crucial for forming national policy. Scholars' exposure to policymaking, in turn, can help guide future relocation research agendas.

The summit included academic voices to ensure that relevant and timely evidence contributes to decisionmaking processes and policy goals. Scholars can contribute to federal goals by doing the following:

- **Conducting more pre-event study.** Most data, study, and publication related to climate displacement focus on acute events (i.e., disasters) over risk perception, vulnerability, and the effectiveness of hazard mitigation or climate adaptation interventions. Disasters will not end, and that work should continue. But displacement policies demanded by summit participants require more evidence of pre-disaster conditions and scenarios.
- **Expanding populations and sites of inquiry.** Scholars who participated in the summit noted the preponderance of federal policies that support homeowners and households with financial resources and political capital over more vulnerable populations. The effects that climate displacement is likely to have require reconsidering the populations that are studied. However, current data collection methods—from structured interviews to surveys and beyond—are not designed for, tested with, or implemented with understudied groups. Researchers must overcome language barriers, constraints to respondent availability, and historical distrust.
- **Conducting community-engaged participatory research.** Community and individual self-determination in climate adaptation—and, potentially, relocation—is a key recommendation from the summit, formed in response to calls for equitable interventions. This approach to inquiry takes multiple forms, from collaborative development of research questions, to citizen science and community data collectors, to participatory interpretation and recommendation of findings. All require a respect for resident insights and expanded research budgets and schedules.
- **Increasing interdisciplinary inquiry and knowledge building.** Insights from oral histories, government process tracking, behavioral responses, social networks, cultural productions, and event observations can be as useful for understanding the exposure, vulnerability, and risk portfolios of communities as environmental monitoring or income and demographic censuses. Climate displacement scholars must learn from field scholarship such as gender, race/ethnicity, and queer studies to integrate into their research the intersectional life experiences that determine climate displacement outcomes.
- **Expanding the climate change effects and interventions that are studied.** An ongoing challenge for hazard studies has been the field's emphasis on major disasters (e.g., hurricanes such as Katrina, Sandy, Maria, and Harvey) over the full population of hazard effects. Similarly, scholarship on climate effects has focused almost exclusively on sea-level rise (with a growing interest in heat waves and extreme weather events). Scholars must look at the historical factors, scales of disasters, and scales of problems that inform a continuum of outcomes and a range of policy and policy failures—including counterfactual cases. For some studies, this will include looking at low-exposure places or conditions in places where no public action has been taken.
- **Integrating and elevating community-based groups.** Selecting research topics, collecting data, and communicating findings with local advocates and program providers are valuable for producing relevant and rigorous scholarship. As such, scholars should actively integrate “grasstop” leaders and compensate them.

“We always say that if a bunch of people with PhDs can’t figure out how a [climate relocation policy] process works, what chance do people have in navigating that well?”

Notes

- ¹ See Martín and Williams (2021).
- ² *Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change UNFCCC-Paris COP-21: Recommendations from the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, November 2015, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201511-human-mobility-in-the-context-of-climate-change-unfccc-Paris-COP21.pdf>.
- ³ In this brief, the terms “climate movers,” “displaced,” and “migrants” are used interchangeably, but terms such as “climate refugee” were consciously not used because of their legal implications and associated reference.
- ⁴ In cases of evacuation, mutual aid agreements can help with shelter, although the “host state” can request Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for this temporary assistance. For longer-term displacement, two cases of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery funds’ being used by receiving communities to support newcomers from disasters have been documented; however, in both cases, the receiving communities were eligible for funds only because they had experienced a disaster in the same year.
- ⁵ “Climate Change,” Alaska Institute for Justice, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.akijp.org/policy-and-research/climate-change/>.

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