Are Federal Climate-Resilience Investments Meeting the Need?

A Review of Recent Federal Resiliency Funding

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KEY FINDINGS

Funding from federal climate-resilience programs was concentrated **in the western US, particularly the Great Plains and the Southwest.**

Climate-resilience programs distributed **38 percent of funding** to **disadvantaged counties** and **48 percent of funding** to **counties with low incomes**.

Funding was concentrated in counties with **higher levels of environment-related administrative capacity**, suggesting that funding may reinforce local capacity.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the US government has increasingly sought to protect natural resources, remediate pollution, and protect communities facing environmental harm.[1] As climate change accelerates and communities face increased risks from natural disasters, new federal initiatives have emerged to address both adaptation and mitigation strategies.[2] But are these investments distributed in a way that meets communities' needs?

In this summary we investigate the distribution of federal investments from the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act focused on climate resilience and mitigation.

SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR CLIMATE-RESILIENCE PROGRAMS

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act created new programs and expanded funding for existing competitive programs that invest in various climate-resilience initiatives, including infrastructure resilience, flood mitigation, and wildfire prevention.

TABLE 1

Federal Climate-Resilience Programs

Amount awarded in millions of dollars, fiscal years 2022 and 2023

Department	Program name	Amount
FEMA	Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities	$1,782
USDA	Urban and Community Forestry Grants	$732
FEMA	Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program	$634
USDA	Community Wildfire Defense Program	$421
USDA	Regional Conservation Partnership Program	$378
NOAA	Climate-Ready Coasts	$320
	Total	**$6,543**

Source: Authors' analysis of award announcements as of June 2024.
Notes: USDA = US Department of Agriculture; FEMA = Federal Emergency Management Agency; NOAA = National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Includes most major competitive climate programs focused on resilience that received Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act or Inflation Reduction Act funding for fiscal years 2022 and 2023. Does not include formula programs related to climate resilience. For more information on the included programs, see Yonah Freemark, Amanda Hermans, Gabe Samuels, Tomi Rajninger, Sam Lieberman, and Teddy Maginn, *Are Federal Infrastructure Investments Meeting the Need? Methodology Appendices*, (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2025).

WHERE WAS FEDERAL RESILIENCE FUNDING DISTRIBUTED?

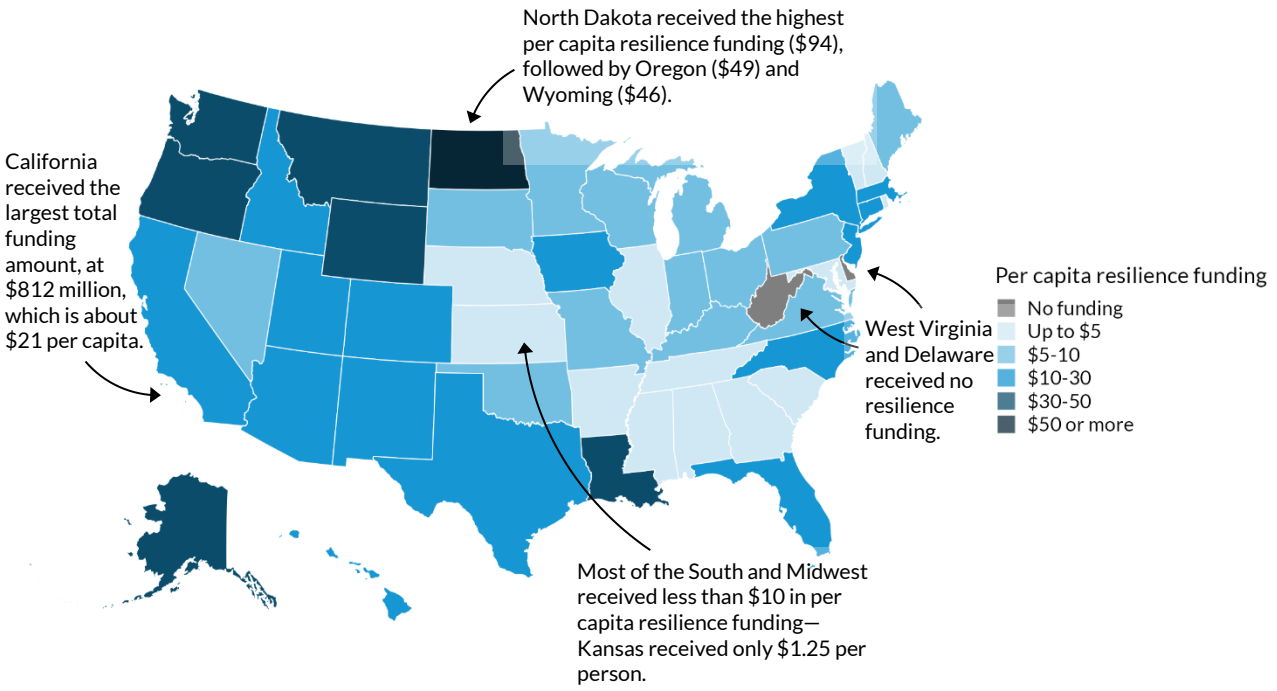
Among the major climate-resilience programs, spending was largely concentrated in the western half of the country—particularly in the Great Plains and Southwest. California received the largest total amount of funding, at $812 million ($21 per capita), followed by Texas ($357 million, $13 per capita). Meanwhile, much of the Midwest and Southeast received less than $10 per capita, and both West Virginia and Delaware received no funding.

The heavy focus on the West may make sense for some climate-resilience programs, such as the US Department of Agriculture's Community Wildfire Defense program, since these areas have experienced higher risk of drought and wildfires.[3] But other regions still have environmental needs. Many parts of the Midwest and Southeast are exposed to high risks of extreme rainfall and heat stress.[4] The Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, the largest climate-resilience program we examine, is intended to help communities plan for proactive investments before disaster strikes—and therefore should be relevant to communities nationwide. In fact, previous analysis has found that demand for the program's funding has exceeded its availability.[5] The lack of funding in some regions could be a result of few applications or applications that did not meet federal goals—research has also found that places with lower bureaucratic capacity may struggle to apply for the BRIC program.[6]

FIGURE 1

Western States Received More Per Capita Climate-Resilience Funding Than Other Regions

Most midwestern and southern states received less than $10 per capita in fiscal years 2022 and 2023



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Source: Authors' analysis of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 award announcements.
Notes: Includes funding from six competitive resilience programs: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities; Urban and Community Forestry Grants; Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program; Community Wildfire Defense Program; Regional Conservation Partnership Program; and Climate-Ready Coasts.

At the county level, only 623 counties received any funding from these programs during fiscal years 2022 and 2023—less than a quarter of all counties (table 2). Those counties accounted for 60 percent of the nation's population. More urban counties received funding than rural counties, though the supported rural counties received larger average amounts of funding per capita ($269) than the assisted urban counties ($51).

TABLE 2

What Types of Counties Received Climate-Resilience Funding?

2020 characteristics of median winning and nonwinning counties, fiscal years 2022 and 2023

		Number of counties	People of color	Median household income	Poverty rate
Urban	**Winning**	**401**	32.1%	$61,102	13.0%
	Nonwinning	807	23.6%	$54,511	13.6%
Rural	**Winning**	**222**	15.9%	$48,796	15.0%
	Nonwinning	1,792	11.7%	$50,968	14.0%

Sources: Authors' analysis of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 award announcements and 2016–20 five-year American Community Survey estimates.
Notes: Includes funding from six competitive environmental programs: Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities; Urban and Community Forestry Grants; Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program; Community Wildfire Defense Program; Regional Conservation Partnership Program; and Climate-Ready Coasts.

ARE CLIMATE-RESILIENCE PROGRAMS MEETING COMMUNITIES' NEEDS?

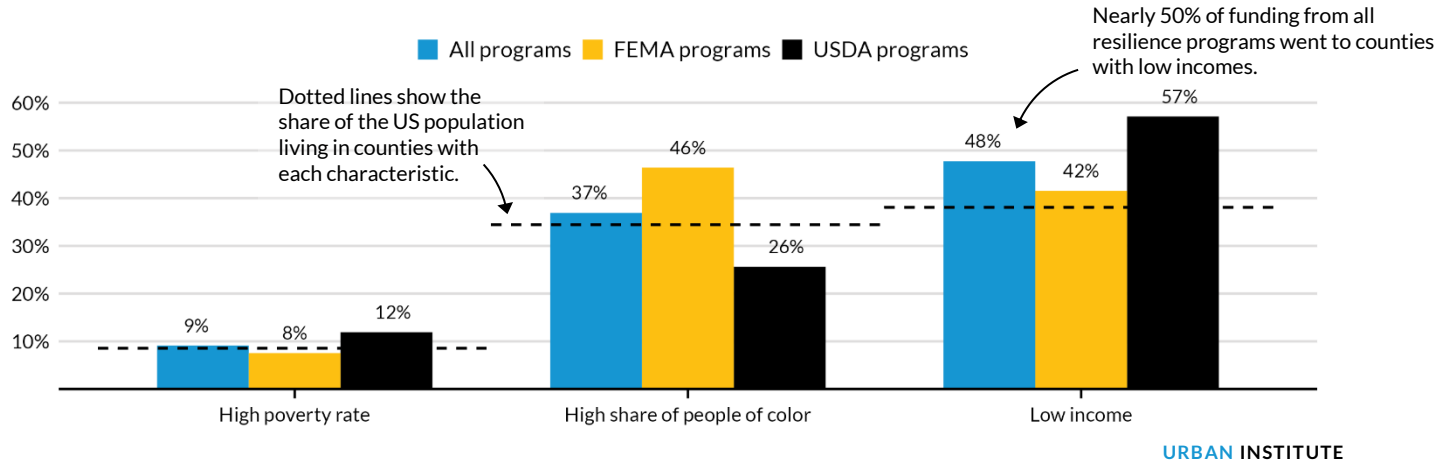
Next, we investigate the extent to which resilience programs supported communities that are more likely to be historically underserved, such as those with low incomes and high shares of people of color. These communities are more vulnerable to climate risk (Berberian et al. 2022; Mattiuzzi and Hodge 2024).[7] In both urban and rural areas, counties that won funding had higher shares of people of color on average than nonwinning counties (table 2). But counties with higher incomes were more likely to win in urban areas. USDA funding was oriented toward counties with lower incomes; FEMA funding was concentrated in counties with higher shares of people of color (figure 2).

Overall, the level of funding that resilience programs sent to these types of communities is disproportionately larger than their national population share might suggest. For example, 38 percent of the US population lives in counties with low incomes, but resilience programs sent 48 percent of their funding to counties with low incomes, suggesting that federal policymakers are targeting places with lower levels of existing climate resilience.

FIGURE 2

Climate-Resilience Programs Assisted Counties with High Poverty, More People of Color, and Lower Incomes

Share of climate-resilience funding going to counties with each characteristic, fiscal years 2022 and 2023



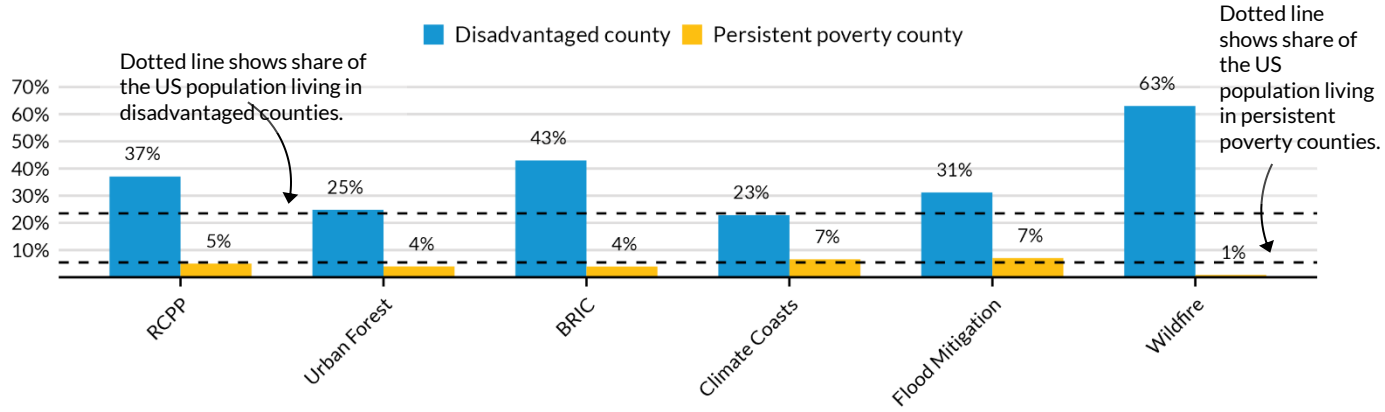
Sources: Authors' analysis of fiscal years 2022 and 2023 award announcements and 2016–20 five-year American Community Survey estimates.
Notes: The dotted lines represent the share of the US population living in each type of county. Includes funding from six competitive resilience programs. FEMA programs include Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program; USDA programs include Urban and Community Forestry Grants, Community Wildfire Defense Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The Climate-Ready Coasts program is included in the all-programs figures. High poverty rate counties = poverty rates above 20 percent. High share of people of color = greater than 50 percent of residents are people of color (Hispanic or nonwhite). Low income = median incomes under $60,000.

We also examined the share of funding going to persistent poverty counties—which are those that have experienced high poverty levels for more than 30 years—and disadvantaged counties. Our definition of disadvantaged is based on the definition used by the Biden administration to prioritize investment at the time this funding was awarded. It considers several indicators of historic underinvestment and environmental burden.[8] Most of the programs we studied directed more than a quarter of funds to disadvantaged counties, with the Wildfire Defense Program distributing more than 60 percent of funding to these places. Overall, the six programs combined sent 38 percent of funding to disadvantaged counties. In comparison, most programs sent less than 10 percent of funding to persistent poverty counties. For reference, 23.5 percent of the country's population lives in disadvantaged counties, while 5.5 percent of the country's population lives in persistent poverty counties.

FIGURE 3

Most Climate-Resilience Programs Distributed More Than 25 Percent of Funding to Disadvantaged Counties

Share of program funding going to each type of county, fiscal years 2022 and 2023



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Sources: Authors' analysis of 2022 and 2023 program award announcements, White House Council on Environmental Quality Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool data, and US Department of Transportation persistent poverty county data.
Notes: The dotted lines represent the share of the US population living in each type of county. Includes funding from six competitive resilience programs. RCPP = Regional Conservation Partnership Program; Urban Forest = Urban and Community Forestry Grants; BRIC = Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities; Climate Coasts = Climate-Ready Coasts; Flood Mitigation = Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program; Wildfire = Wildfire Defense Program. Persistent poverty counties have had a poverty rate of 20 percent or higher for three decades. Disadvantaged counties have more than 50 percent of their census tracts designated disadvantaged, or more than 50 percent of the county population living in disadvantaged tracts, by federal definition. For more detail, see Yonah Freemark, Amanda Hermans, Gabe Samuels, Tomi Rajninger, Sam Lieberman, and Teddy Maginn, *Are Federal Infrastructure Investments Meeting the Need? Methodology Appendices*, (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2025).

Next, we ranked and then divided all US counties into quintiles based on six demographic and climate-related metrics (e.g., median household income). In figure 4, we compare per capita resilience spending for the three largest climate-resilience programs, as well as all studied programs, in each quintile (e.g., the per capita resilience spending for the 20 percent of counties with the lowest median household incomes). We find the following:

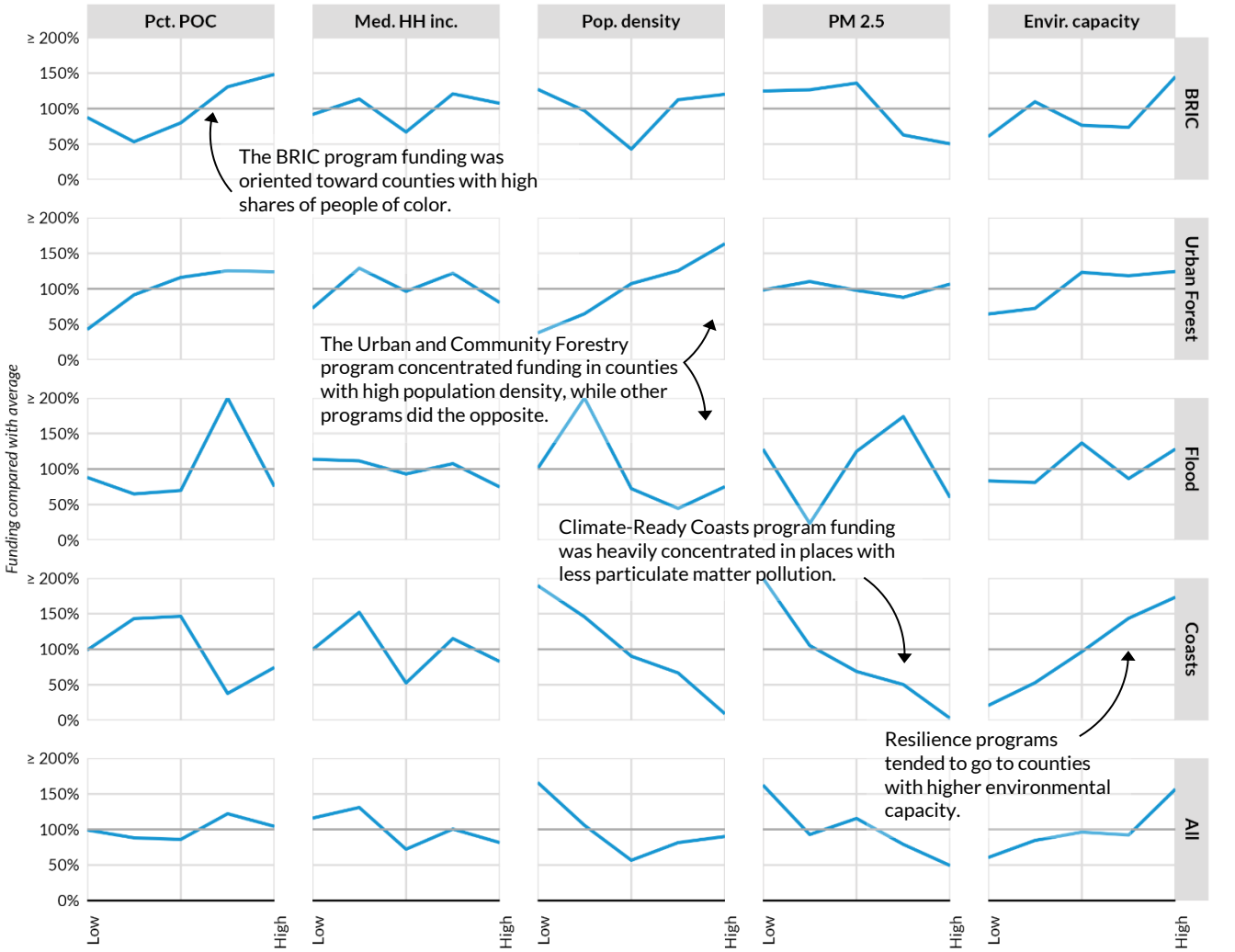
- For climate programs overall, larger-than-average shares of funding went to counties with lower population densities, signifying a focus on rural communities. The exception was the Urban and Community Forestry Grants program, which, as might be expected, sent more money to places with higher population density.
- Some climate-resilience programs, such as BRIC and the Urban and Community Forestry Grants program, tended to give larger-than-average funding to counties with higher shares of people of color.
- All climate programs tended to fund counties with lower levels of particulate matter pollution, suggesting that funding may not be targeting places with higher environmental burdens.

- Funding tended to go to counties with more environmental staff capacity. This may suggest that some level of bureaucratic capacity is necessary to access these funds because of the effort needed to write and submit a competitive application.[9] It could also be a sign that funding reinforced existing capacity disparities.

FIGURE 4

Comparing Climate-Resilience Spending with County Characteristics

Per capita funding for federal resilience programs, per county, fiscal years 2022 and 2023



Sources: Authors' analysis of 2022 and 2023 program award announcements and data from the US Census of Governments, the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, and 2016–20 five-year American Community Survey estimates.
Notes: BRIC = Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities; Urban Forest = Urban and Community Forestry Grants; Flood = Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) Grant Program; Coasts = Climate-Ready Coasts Program; All = all six competitive programs. Pct. POC = share of population who are Hispanic or nonwhite; Med. HH Inc. = median household income; Pop. Density = population density; PM 2.5 = annual average concentration of inhalable particles that are 2.5 micrometers or smaller, in micrograms per cubic meter; Envir. Capacity = full-time equivalent government personnel working in environmental positions, per capita.

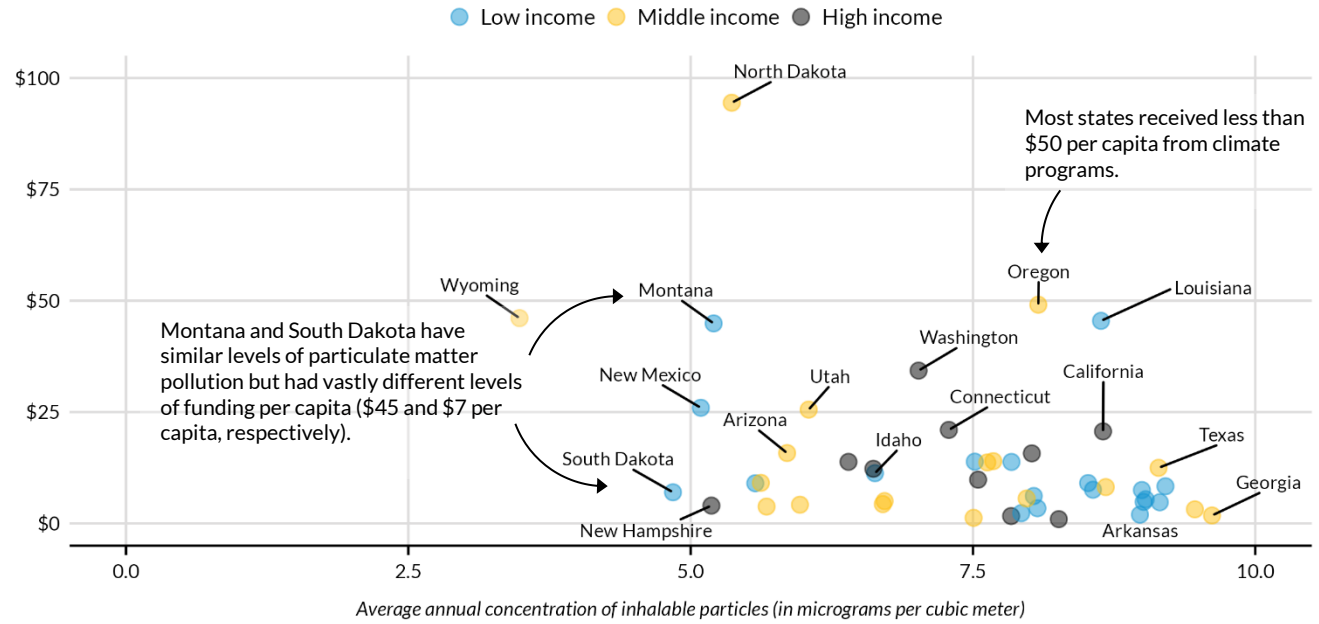
Many western states, such as Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, and Wyoming, received relatively high amounts of climate-resilience funding per capita, but experienced varied levels of particulate matter pollution (figure 5). This pattern could instead be driven by other factors like fire risk, which we do not measure here. The states that received the highest levels of resilience program funding also tended to have low-to-moderate resident incomes.

There does not seem to be a strong relationship between resilience funding levels and pollution, as measured by the concentration in the air of inhalable particles that are 2.5 micrometers or smaller (typically referred to as PM2.5). While pollution is just one measure of environmental harm, this may indicate that funding decisions for these programs may not be targeted in a way that can help states, especially those with lower incomes, address environmental burdens. More research is needed to better understand how these investment patterns relate to other environmental risk factors, such as wildfire or flood risk.

FIGURE 5

Many Lower- and Middle-Income States Received More Climate-Resilience Funding Per Capita

State per capita resilience funding, fiscal years 2022 and 2023



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Sources: Authors' analysis of 2022 and 2023 program award announcements, data from the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, and 2016–20 five-year American Community Survey estimates.
Notes: Alaska and Hawaii are not shown because PM 2.5 data was not available. PM 2.5 = annual average concentration of inhalable particles that are 2.5 micrometers or smaller, in micrograms per cubic meter. Includes funding from six competitive resilience programs, including Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant Program; Climate-Ready Coasts, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities, Urban and Community Forestry Grants, Community Wildfire Defense Program, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal climate-resilience programs generally supported counties that may have faced historic disinvestment, such as those with higher shares of people of color and lower incomes. But funding was concentrated in a handful of western states, meaning many midwestern and southeastern communities may not be receiving necessary funding for climate resilience and mitigation. And funding disproportionately went to counties with higher environment-related government staff capacity, indicating that places may need administrative support to successfully apply for and win these grants.

- Federal agencies that oversee climate-resilience programs should ensure that funding opportunities are reaching more areas of the country, especially those with low incomes and more environmental burdens. As climate change and the risk of natural disasters increases, these places may be particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and have acute need for improvements due to historic disinvestment.

- Substantial obstacles remain for places with low bureaucratic capacity, which may not have the resources necessary to invest in project applications. As a result, many areas of the country may be functionally excluded from the opportunity to win much needed competitive funds for climate resilience and mitigation. We recommend that federal agencies expand support for and reduce the burden of applying for these programs.

NOTES

[1] "History of the Clean Water Act," US Environmental Protection Agency, updated June 12, 2024, https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/history-clean-water-act.

[2] Josh Bivens, "The Inflation Reduction Act Finally Gave the U.S. a Real Climate Change Policy," August 14, 2023, https://www.epi.org/blog/the-inflation-reduction-act-finally-gave-the-u-s-a-real-climate-change-policy/.

[3] Allison Stevens, "The U.S. Drought Vulnerability Rankings Are in: How Does Your State Compare?" September 17, 2020, https://www.climate.gov/news-features/featured-images/us-drought-vulnerability-rankings-are-how-does-your-state-compare; "Wildfire," FEMA National Risk Index, accessed November 19, 2024, https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/wildfire.

[4] Ari Pinkus, "Mapping Climate Risks by County and Community," February 17, 2021, https://www.americancommunities.org/mapping-climate-risks-by-county-and-community/.

[5] Kristin Smith, "Rising Demand for FEMA's BRIC Program Far Exceeds Available Funding," Headwater Economics, July 30, 2024, https://headwaterseconomics.org/natural-hazards/rising-demand-for-femas-bric-program-far-exceeds-available-funding.

[6] Farinaz Motlagh, "Access to BRIC Funding May Depend on Where You Live," NRDC, April 18, 2024, https://www.nrdc.org/bio/farinaz-motlagh/access-bric-funding-may-depend-where-you-live.

[7] US Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change on Socially Vulnerable Populations in the United States," EPA, September 2, 2021, https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-report-shows-disproportionate-impacts-climate-change-socially-vulnerable; Chase Sawyer and Joey Marshall, "Community Resilience Estimates Show That 23.4% of People in Counties with High Income Inequality Are Socially Vulnerable to Disasters," United State Census Bureau, February 20, 2024.

[8] The federal Justice40 Initiative directed that 40 percent of benefits from covered programs accrue to disadvantaged communities. Four of the six programs analyzed—the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Urban and Community Forestry Grants, the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, and the Flood Mitigation Assistance Grant program—were covered under Justice40 during the Biden Administration when these funds were distributed. The Trump administration does not use this definition of disadvantaged. For more details on the definition of disadvantaged county and persistent poverty county, see Yonah Freemark, Amanda Hermans, Gabe Samuels, Tomi Rajninger, Sam Lieberman, and Teddy Maginn, *Are Federal Infrastructure Investments Meeting the Need? Methodology Appendices*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2025.

[9] Amanda Hermans and Tomi Rajninger, "Local Governments with More Staff and Bigger Budgets Are More Likely to Win Federal Infrastructure Grants," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, May 6, 2024, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/local-governments-more-staff-and-bigger-budgets-are-more-likely-win-federal.

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