Credit: NYC DOT

Guide to Expanding Mitigation

MAKING THE CONNECTION TO EQUITY

FEMA

Risk**MAP**
Increasing Resilience Together

When we create projects, programs, and policies in partnership with populations that have historically been underserved, the entire community benefits. If you have ever walked along a sidewalk and used a pedestrian ramp – a small slope that allows for a smooth transition between sidewalk and street – you have benefited from this approach. Originally designed to allow for greater access for people who use wheelchairs, pedestrian ramps make navigating the built environment easier for all. Crossing a busy multilane street with a median for pedestrians in the middle and an extended crossing time makes the street safer. Drivers benefit, but so do pedestrians, from senior citizens to delivery people with packages or parents with small children in tow. We offer here an opening conversation on the subject of equity recognizing an imperfect dialogue in order to further the connections of equity into hazard mitigation.

WHAT IS EQUITY

How do we realize similar benefits in hazard mitigation? By placing equity at the center of all that we do. Although there is no one-size-fits-all definition, equity can generally be understood as a system of policies, practices, interactions, cultures, and resources that are responsive to ALL people. Equity is achieved not only when everyone is provided full access to information and assistance – but when interventions are taken to ensure that ALL are provided with the resources necessary to meaningfully participate, make progress, and benefit from hazard mitigation. The illustration included within this guide highlights how, without equity interventions, equal access is inherently impossible. As human beings, we each have unique needs that must be met to allow our meaningful participation. To realize this vision, we must work in partnership with the "Whole Community."

This *Guide to Expanding Mitigation* shows how community officials can partner with the Whole Community to strive for equity in hazard mitigation, including the planning and project development process. This guide is a starting place for community officials to initiate a conversation about mitigation investments that make communities both more equitable, more resilient, and avoid the situation in which risk reduction measures displace the very people they are intended to protect.

This *Guide to Expanding Mitigation* is part of a series highlighting innovative and emerging partnerships for mitigation.

UNDERSTANDING MORE DEEPLY

The most at-risk members in our community often experience the greatest losses from disasters. These community members may lack trusted relationships with government officials and as such, can be routinely left out of planning and preparedness activities or have little access to information about what to do or lack the ability to take action in an emergency. This correlation highlights the importance of taking a Whole Community approach to hazard mitigation and involving historically underserved populations in the planning and decision-making processes.

Social vulnerability, understood as the potential for loss within an individual or social group, recognizes that there are characteristics that influence an individual's or group's ability to prepare, respond, cope, or recover from an event. These characteristics often overlap within populations to create heightened vulnerability, which may be compounded by deficiencies in infrastructure within communities. While not predictive, understanding where populations have increased vulnerability and exposure to natural hazards can help emergency managers take actions to lessen impacts to these communities before an event or distribute needed recovery dollars after an event.

Indices, such as the CDC SVI tool, can be helpful for emergency managers to identify geographic areas of heightened social vulnerability. For engagement purposes and identifying local partner organizations, it may also be useful to understand populations who may be disproportionately impacted by disasters, including:

- Underserved communities with a low socioeconomic status
- People of color
- Tribal and First Nation communities
- Women
- Members of the LGBTQ+ community
- Individuals experiencing homelessness or displacement
- Rural communities

- Elderly and youth populations
- Populations with limited English proficiency
- Service workers and migrant laborers
- Populations with limited cognitive or physical abilities
- Institutionalized populations, such as those in prisons and nursing homes
- Renters

While these populations may have strong social bonds that enable them to withstand disasters, many may find it difficult to stockpile resources to prepare for an event, recover quickly, or take action to reduce the risk posed by natural hazards while also meeting everyday needs.

Today, the negative impact of historic government policies continue to compound recovery challenges in communities of color and low-income populations. For example, redlining limited access to federally backed mortgages based on race until the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Research has shown that formerly redlined areas are on average 5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than non-redlined areas and summer surface temperatures in some areas can vary by as much as 20 degrees. Recent studies have also shown that within some urban areas, flooding losses have been concentrated in Black and low-income communities. Obtaining flood insurance to offset these impacts is out of reach for our most underserved households.

WHOLE COMMUNITY

While each individual defines "community" differently, the "Whole Community" refers to individuals and families, including those with access and functional needs, businesses, faith-based and community organizations, nonprofit groups, schools and academia, media outlets, and all levels of government, including state, local, tribal, territorial, and federal partners that have a shared responsibility in emergency preparedness and mitigation.
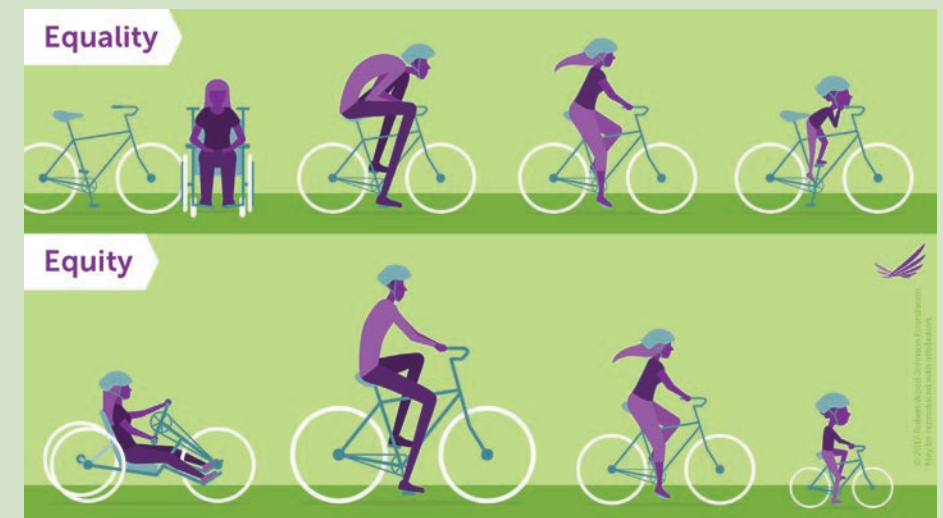
A CALL TO ACTION

All populations have value and agency to contribute to emergency management and hazard mitigation. When emergency managers engage the Whole Community early and often, residents can grow into partners in response and emergency managers can grow into community allies. Also, community members are local experts about their neighborhoods and hazards and can help emergency managers better manage risk. Community partners, which can include informal leaders with leverage outside of traditional community organizational structures, can serve as trusted voices that champion mitigation initiatives. At every stage of the disaster cycle, partnerships with those most affected by disasters allow our communities to thrive and become more resilient in the future.

Understanding community needs and knowing where to target assistance in advance of an event will help emergency managers:

- Deploy the right resources to offset deficiencies in physical or social infrastructure,
- Support communities in becoming more self-sufficient and reduce loss of life and property,
- Funnel scarce recovery funding to those most in need, and
- Enable mitigation funding to be prioritized for communities most affected by disasters.

Considering equity is not just an important opportunity to make our profession more effective. As emergency managers and civil servants, we have a duty to ensure that our actions and the execution of our programs do not have an adverse impact on the civil rights of those we serve. In addition to ensuring the equitability of specific hazard mitigation actions, we must see that the processes by which these actions are realized also are conducted equitably. To avoid implicit assumptions in decision making about the nature of social wellbeing, people, and communities, members and representatives of the community need to be engaged early and throughout the mitigation lifecycle as key contributors.

LEVEL UP

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region IX, in partnership with Georgetown Climate Center, produced the Level Up Audio Project to share stories, case studies, and best practices to inspire hazard mitigation action and strengthen our community of hazard mitigation and climate adaptation professionals. Listen to episodes here.

ASSESSING SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

While quantifying data that includes all vulnerable conditions can be challenging, identifying regions that experience social vulnerability through key demographic and socio-economic metrics, determined at the census tract level, can help direct a deeper understanding of those groups' susceptibility to natural hazards. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) pairs a mapping tool with 15 different variables and is one tool that can direct attention to vulnerable populations.

Learn more about the characteristics that can influence vulnerability: svi.cdc.gov/Documents/Publications/SVI_Community_Materials/atriskguidance.pdf
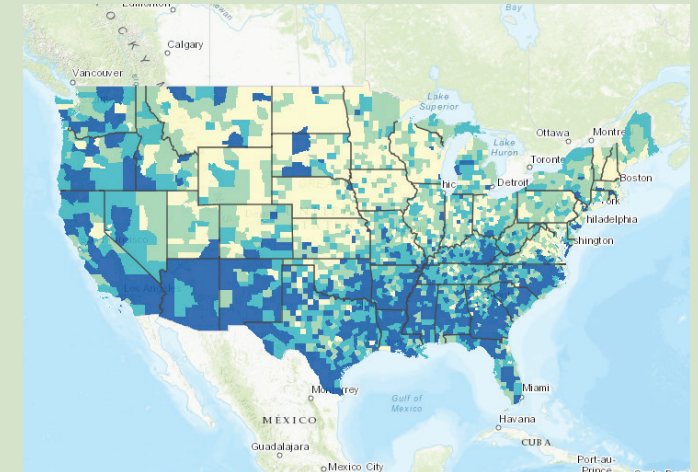
WORKING IN COLLABORATION

Fundamentally, emergency managers must know the communities they serve and collaborate with residents of the frontline communities most vulnerable to the impacts of disasters. A great way to do that is through partnership with and empowerment of community-based organizations in mitigation planning, project development, and related initiatives. This may come in the form of establishing a community advisory committee that has power in the decision-making process. When communicating about mitigation, focus on the community's priorities or shared goals, such as community safety, or ways that mitigation can promote a vibrant, resilient community, rather than using highly technical terms. Translating mitigation initiatives into what communities care about will help bring more people to the mitigation table who are equipped to engage.

WHAT MORE EQUITABLE MITIGATION LOOKS LIKE

Inclusive processes take time. When we work collaboratively with diverse populations and stakeholders, we will arrive at more effective outcomes. Each community has its own definition of what it takes to achieve equity and the definitions are often informed by local goals. One way to measure equity is through better outcomes, such as disasters that no longer disproportionately impact our most vulnerable residents and when their long-term recovery is easier. Other ways we can measure equity successes in our mitigation initiatives are when:

• At-risk populations lend expertise and have agency in the hazard mitigation process,

• Barriers to participating in mitigation activities are removed and training, language access, transportation, meals and/or childcare are provided,

• Investment takes place in traditionally underserved communities,

• Race is no longer a determining factor of risk,

• Indicators of social vulnerability and environmental burden are assessed alongside hazards in mitigation plans and are used to target outreach or risk reduction projects,

• State and local governments include equity as a factor for the prioritization of projects in and implementation of their administrative and hazard mitigation plans,

• Cost share is reduced for small or under-resourced communities,

• Resources are provided to build local capacity and capability for grant application processing and administration,

• An impact assessment is completed before a mitigation project to ensure that it helps and does not negatively impact at-risk populations, or

• Those engaged in mitigation activities are representative of the Whole Community.

An example of these approaches is reflected in the 2020 King County Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan in the State of Washington. The plan includes a 2010 countywide ordinance requirement to include 14 pre-established determinants of equity in all county work, including plans, actions, systems, and budgets. These 14 elements, along with population vulnerability, will be used to prioritize mitigation investments in the communities most vulnerable to disasters. The ranking criteria for projects are described in the Hazard Mitigation Strategy section of the plan and will provide the basis for project submissions to FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program.

The guide and opening dialogue end here, but the conversation of equity is only beginning within hazard mitigation. We encourage you to reach out to and continue the conversation with us. If we mischaracterized any aspect of equity, social vulnerability, or peoples, please let us know. We strive to be active listeners, learning along the way, and adapting as we grow in understanding.

ENGAGE WITH US

Are you a state, territorial, tribal, or local official interested in making the connection between equity and hazard mitigation? Are you a community leader or resident interested in connecting with local officials to reduce risk from hazards? Please contact us at FEMA-R2-MT-Planning@fema.dhs.gov.

RESOURCES

American Planning Association Quick Notes on Inclusive Planning Processes
planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/publication/download_pdf/PAS-QuickNotes-82.pdf

Government Accountability Office Environmental Justice Guidance
gao.gov/assets/710/701401.pdf

Department of Homeland Security Environmental Justice Strategy
dhs.gov/dhs-environmental-justice-strategy

FEMA Environmental Justice Guidance
fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1730-25045-1173/env_justice_policy.pdf

FEMA Engaging Faith-based and Community Organizations Planning Considerations for Emergency Managers
fema.gov/media-library-data/1528736429875-8fa08bed9d957cdc324c2b7f6a92903b/Engaging_Faith-based_and_Community_Organizations.pdf

FEMA Office of Equal Rights, Civil Rights Program
fema.gov/about/offices/equal-rights

Addressing Social Equity through Natural Hazards Mitigation Planning
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQZ_v9Fo1Mc

NAACP "In the Eye of the Storm"
live-naacp-site.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/NAACP_InTheEyeOfTheStorm.pdf

Urban Sustainability Directors Network Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning
usdn.org/uploads/cms/documents/usdn_guide_to_equitable_community-driven_climate_preparedness-_high_res.pdf

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