



The Nature Gap

Confronting Racial and Economic Disparities in the
Destruction and Protection of Nature in America

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Introduction and summary

Clean drinking water, clean air, public parks and beaches, biodiversity, and open spaces are shared goods to which every person in the United States has an equal right both in principle and in law. Nature is supposed to be a “great equalizer” whose services are free, universal, and accessible to all humans without discrimination.¹ In reality, however, American society distributes nature’s benefits—and the effects of its destruction and decline—unequally by race, income, and age.

The nation’s recent reckoning with racism and violence against Black people has brought environmental injustices and disparities into long-overdue focus. The stories of Christian Cooper, threatened with violence and arrest while bird-watching in Central Park, and Ahmaud Arbery, murdered while jogging down a tree-lined street in coastal Georgia, are among the countless stories of Black, brown, and Indigenous people who, while seeking to enjoy the outdoors, have been threatened, killed, or made to feel unsafe or unwelcome.²

Meanwhile, long-running environmental injustices, such as the concentration of toxic air pollution and water pollution near communities of color, have been exacerbated by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, with Black, Indigenous, and Latino communities experiencing higher virus-related hospitalization and death rates than white communities.³ Further, in many parts of the country, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed an uneven and inequitable distribution of nearby outdoor spaces for recreation, respite, and enjoyment. Particularly in communities of color and low-income communities, families have too few safe, close-to-home parks and coastlines where they are able to get outside.⁴ At this time of social distancing, when clean, fresh air is most wanted and needed, nature is out of reach for too many.

The unequal distribution of nature in America—and the unjust experiences that many people of color have in the outdoors—is a problem that national, state, and local leaders can no longer ignore. With scientists urging policymakers to protect at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and ocean by 2030 to address the biodiversity and climate crises, now is the time to imagine how, by protecting far more lands and waters over the next decade, the United States can guarantee every child in America the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of nature near their home.⁵

Using a new analysis by Conservation Science Partners (CSP), commissioned by Hispanic Access Foundation (HAF) and the Center for American Progress, this report examines the distribution of America's remaining natural areas to understand the types and extent of disparities in nature access that exist in the United States.⁶ This report is intended to supplement, not supplant, the many individual voices and grassroots efforts that have been calling out and working to solve the many inequities and injustices in American natural resource policy. The data in this report help confirm the scale of racial and economic disparities in U.S. nature access. In particular, this report finds that the United States has fewer forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places near where Black, Latino, and Asian American people live. Notably, families with children—especially families of color with children—have less access to nature nearby than the rest of the country. In other words, these communities are nature deprived.

These disparities are particularly concerning because nature is not an amenity but a necessity for everyone's health and well-being. In the places where human activities in the United States have destroyed the most nature, there are fewer trees to filter the air and provide shade on a hot day; there are fewer wetlands and marshes to clean the water and to protect communities from floods and storm surges; there are fewer parks where children can grow their curiosity and fewer trails where adults can stretch their legs; and there are fewer public spaces where people of all races, cultures, and backgrounds can forge the common experiences and understandings that build respect, trust, and solidarity.⁷

To correct for the inequitable distribution of nature in America, among other barriers⁸ that racially and economically marginalized communities as well as LGBTQ and disabled people face to accessing the outdoors, this report puts forth several recommendations for policymakers to consider, including: creating more close-to-home outdoor opportunities in communities of color and low-income communities; changing hiring and workplace practices in government agencies, nonprofits, and foundations to create more representative leadership teams, boards, and staff; improving consultation with tribal nations and pursuing more opportunities for tribal co-management of natural resources; and working to overcome the nature gap among children by bolstering education and outreach programs. Broadly, however, the findings of this report affirm an urgent need for the United States to pursue an ambitious goal of protecting at least 30 percent of lands and ocean by 2030—and to do so in a way that ensures that nature's benefits are more evenly and fairly distributed among all of the nation's communities.

Background for the analysis

This report examines ethnic, racial, economic, and other demographic disparities in the current distribution of natural areas in the United States. It does not, however, pretend to offer a satisfactory or comprehensive answer to the questions of how and why these disparities emerged. Still, these questions are vitally important, and a deep-rooted body of scholarship and activism sheds light on the systems of power and white supremacy that have caused these disparities to emerge.⁹

One thing is worth stating upfront: The inequitable distribution of nature's benefits in the United States is not the result of a consenting choice of communities of color or low-income communities to live near less nature, to allow more nature destruction nearby, or to give up their right to clean air and clean water.¹⁰ Nature deprivation is, instead, a consequence of a long history of systemic racism.

The data that CSP developed cannot be adequately analyzed without keeping this context of environmental racism in mind, including the following realities:

- **Discrimination and racism in the United States have had profound effects on human settlement patterns and on the patterns of protections for the nation's remaining natural areas.** Redlining, forced migration, and economic segregation are just a few of the unjust policies and forces that have created barriers to, and a gradient of distance from, the United States' remaining natural areas for people of color.¹¹
- **The history of public lands in the United States is rooted in the violent dispossession of lands from Native Americans.** For centuries, settler-colonists on the North American continent displaced tribes from their ancestral homelands and engaged in the deliberate destruction of vital natural resources—many with economic and cultural significance—as a tool of genocide against the Indigenous population.¹² This legacy continues in the U.S. government's repeated failure to live up to its obligations to Indian Country that are enshrined in the treaties through which it acquired large swaths of Indian land.¹³ The federal government is legally required to ensure that tribes can access natural resources to protect their

sovereignty, culture, and economic well-being.¹⁴ Too often, however, the government has sanctioned development that threatens sacred sites, weakens and circumvents tribal consultation, and ignores tribal concerns around environmental degradation.¹⁵

- **Historically, the United States has systematically segregated and excluded people of color from public lands and other natural places.** Black people have experienced segregation from the Civilian Conservation Corps to the National Park System; the nation’s public lands, beaches, and other natural areas have also been venues in which communities of color have been the subject of legalized and institutionalized racism.¹⁶ The legacies of this exclusion persist in many forms, including in the continued underrepresentation of people of color in hiring at natural resource agencies as well as in the histories of different groups represented by national parks and public lands. It also affects visitation to national parks and other public lands and participation in outdoor recreation, as well as causes people of color to feel unwelcome or in danger in nature.¹⁷
- **People of color have been and continue to be the subject of violence, intimidation, and threats while in nature.** The broader societal criminalization of people of color—and the accompanying threat of police brutality and even murder—can be exposed in parks and public lands.¹⁸ Participants in outdoor activities face the risk of being targeted, stereotyped, and harmed for simply enjoying nature or even trying to protect it, as was clear in the case of Christian Cooper.¹⁹ Experiences such as his led to the coining of the phrase “Birding While Black” to describe the risk, difficulties, and alienation that people of color endure in certain outdoor spaces.²⁰
- **People of color have traditionally been excluded from the U.S. conservation movement.** For more than a century, the movement to protect parks, public lands, and other natural places in the United States has been dominated by white people and perspectives.²¹ Discrimination and the framing of conservation priorities through this exclusive lens—bolstered by underrepresentation of people of color at the staff and leadership levels of conservation organizations, foundations, and natural resource agencies—has perpetuated the racial divide in nature access.²²

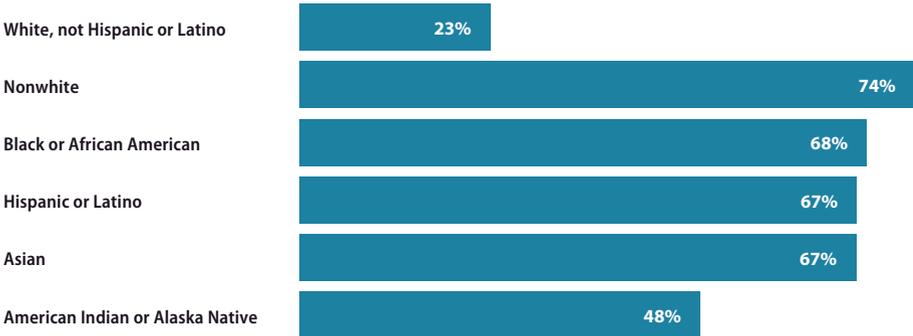
In evaluating the data discussed in the next section, it is important to recognize that people of color have long experienced unequal access to nature. The United States must not perpetuate existing inequities, which have a real cost in terms of the health and economic well-being of these communities.

Analyzing inequities in natural area loss

The United States is losing a football field’s worth of natural area every 30 seconds; this amounts to the loss, each year, of forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other natural places that combined are roughly the size of Everglades National Park.²³ The effects of these losses are not equally distributed across socioeconomic and racial groups; according to a new analysis from CSP, CAP, and HAF, patterns of development—including urban sprawl, the construction of roads, pipelines, and transmission lines, and drilling, mining, and logging—have had a disproportionately large impact on communities of color and low-income communities. As a result, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and low-income families are far more likely than white families to live in a place that is deprived of the benefits that nature provides, including nearby places that allow them to get outside safely and access clean water, clean air, and a diversity of wildlife.

FIGURE 1
People of color are more likely than white people to live in an area that is nature deprived

Percent of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics in the United States, 2017



Note: Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median.
Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

FIGURE 2

Low-income communities are more likely to experience nature deprivation

Percent of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics in the United States, 2017



Note: Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median. Low income is defined as a median household income less than or equal to the 10th percentile of median income at the census tract level across the state. High income is greater than or equal to the 90th percentile. Moderate income falls between the 10th and 90th percentile.

Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

To better understand the disproportionate burdens and impacts of nature destruction and deterioration across the country, CSP assembled information from dozens of datasets to create the most comprehensive picture to date of how human activities have modified natural areas in the conterminous United States. The scientific team at CSP then overlaid this picture of the human footprint on nature in the lower 48 states and Washington, D.C., with 2013–2017 U.S. Census Bureau demographic data, broken down into small geographic areas known as census tracts, which are about the size of a neighborhood in terms of population.²⁴ The demographic data include information on race and ethnicity, income, and family structure within each census tract.

Using CSP's data and analysis, this report provides an initial assessment of demographic disparities in the concentration and distribution of nature. The analysis refers to a census tract as "nature deprived" if it has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activity, including urban sprawl and other actions noted above, than the state-level median. The data reveal substantial differences in the degree of nature deprivation faced by different racial, ethnic, income, and family structure groups. Figures 1 and 2 summarize some of these findings, but there are at least three trends that are particularly concerning:

1. Communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live nature deprived places. Seventy-four percent of communities of color in the contiguous United States live in nature-deprived areas, compared with just 23 percent of white communities.

2. Seventy percent of low-income communities across the country live in nature-deprived areas. This figure is 20 percent higher than the figure for those with moderate or high incomes.

3. Nature destruction has had the largest impact on low-income communities of color. More than 76 percent of people who live in low-income communities of color live in nature-deprived places.

Nature deprivation has consequences. The communities that are shouldering more of the impacts and costs of nature destruction are also receiving less of nature's benefits, including air and water purification, climate mitigation, biodiversity and disease control, and opportunities for leisure and recreation.

Studies have found that, because they are more likely to live in polluted areas without sufficient tree cover and spaces to get outdoors, people of color and low-income communities are more susceptible to developing immunocompromising illnesses such as asthma—a risk factor for COVID-19.²⁵ Studies have even established a direct link between exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality.²⁶ Meanwhile, access to urban nature—and specifically the addition of green spaces to the poorest neighborhoods—can provide mental health benefits. In fact, scientists estimate that every dollar spent on creating and maintaining park trails can save almost three dollars in health care alone—a benefit that is being denied to the most economically distressed communities.²⁷

Natural spaces also act as climate regulators that mitigate urban heat islands—metropolitan areas that are warmer than their surrounding rural areas due to their surfaces and the human activities taking place—cooling the surrounding area by as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit.²⁸ These are all the more important given that climate change is already poised to disproportionately affect those with the fewest economic resources for adaptation.²⁹

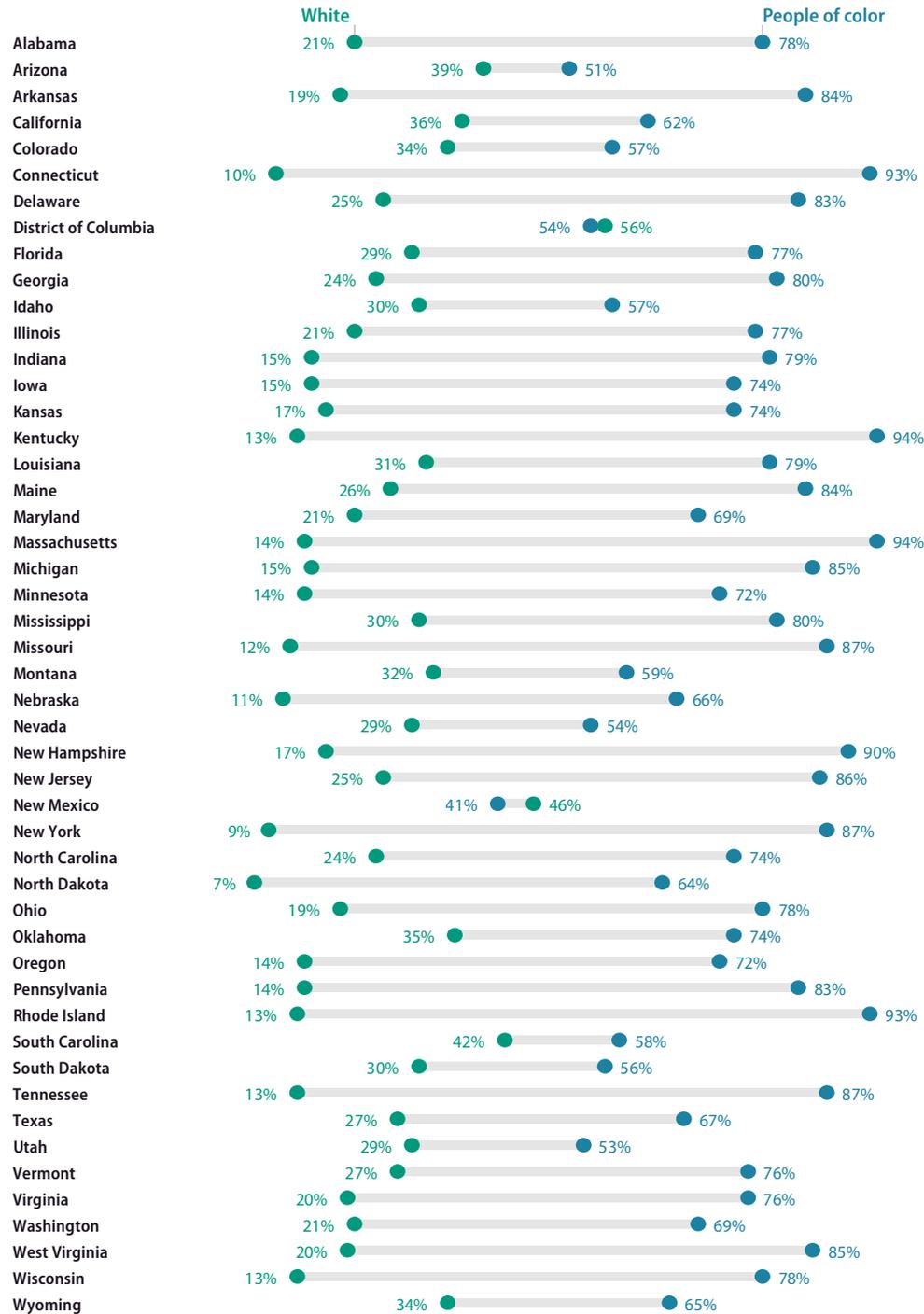
State and local variations and nature deprivation hotspots

Beyond national disparities in the distribution of nature across racial and economic groups, the data reveal concerning state-level disparities. At the outset, it is worth noting that in all states but New Mexico and the District of Columbia, census tracts classified as white had the lowest nature deprivation of any racial and ethnic groups. (see Figure 3 and Appendix Table 1)

FIGURE 3

Across the United States, people of color are far more likely than white people to live in a place that is nature deprived

Percent of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics in the United States, 2017



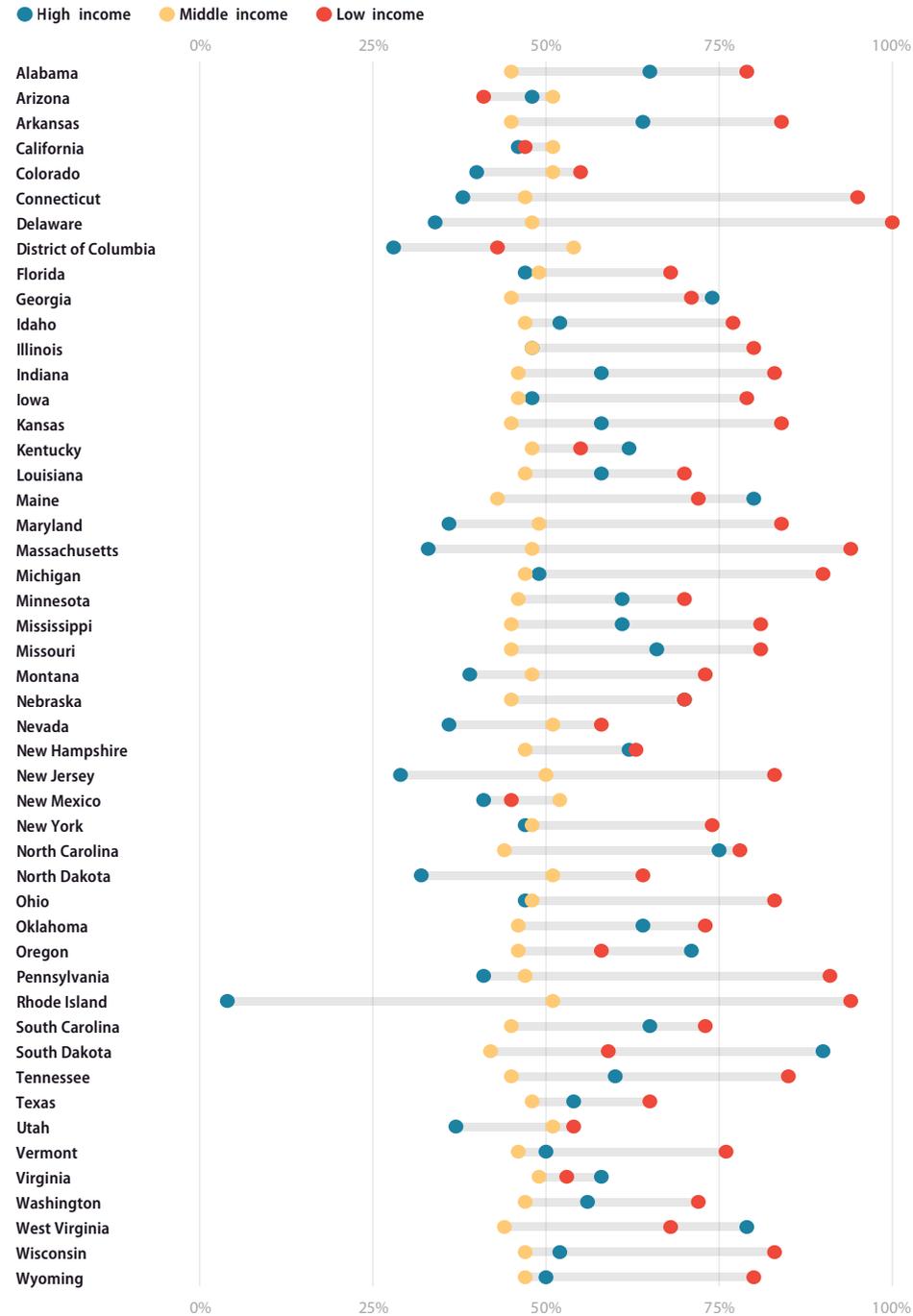
Notes: This analysis covers the contiguous United States. Data for Alaska and Hawaii are not available. Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median. Nature deprivation percentages function best for making comparisons within a state, rather than in comparing nature deprivation between states.

Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

FIGURE 4

Low-income communities are more likely to live in areas that are nature deprived

Percent of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics in the United States, 2017



Notes: Low income is defined as a median household income less than or equal to the 10th percentile of median income at the census tract level across the state. High income is greater than or equal to the 90th percentile. Moderate income falls between the 10th and 90th percentile. This analysis covers the contiguous United States. Data for Alaska and Hawaii are not available. Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median. Nature deprivation percentages function best for making comparisons within a state, rather than in comparing nature deprivation between states.

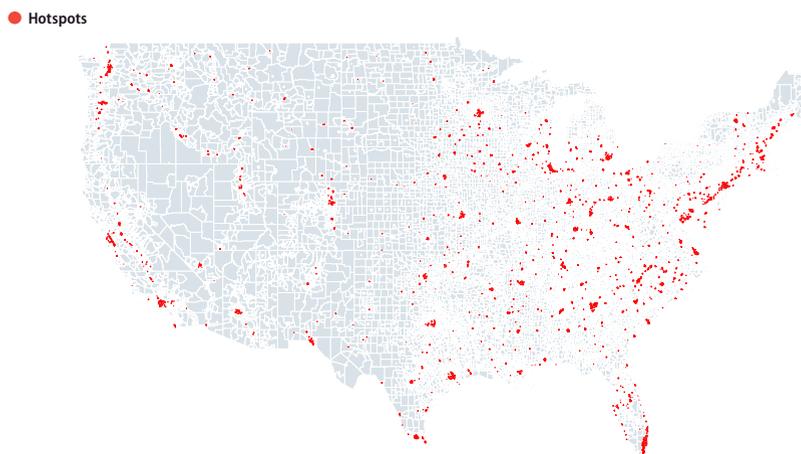
Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

In contrast, in 26 states, Black communities experienced the highest levels of nature deprivation. In 16 states, Asian communities experienced the most nature deprivation. Hispanic and Latino people experienced the most nature deprivation out of all racial and ethnic groups in eight states. Natural area loss is particularly acute for Hispanic and Latino communities along the U.S.-Mexico border in South Texas, around El Paso, Texas, and in other border communities in New Mexico and Arizona.

Evaluating state-level data by income shows that, in almost two-thirds of states, low-income residents were most likely to live in nature-deprived areas, while in 16 states, the highest income earners were the least likely to live in nature-deprived areas. (see Figure 4)

The analysis also identified so-called hotspot tracts, where there is both the highest proportion of people of color or low-income households and the highest proportion of nature deprivation. (see Figure 5) In order to address the current racial and economic disparities in nature deprivation, policymakers and advocates could use this information to help identify communities that should be prioritized for conservation investments, new parks, or restoration projects. The identification of these hotspots could also inform project-level decision-making such as analyzing how an oil lease sale or new trail would affect a socioeconomic nature deprivation hotspot. These data could also be used in concert with the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, which estimates exposure to 11 different environmental health risks at the census-block-group level.³⁰

FIGURE 5
Hot spot tracts represent the most at-risk communities



Note: Hot spot tracts are census tracts with both the highest proportion of people of color or low-income households and the highest proportion of nature deprivation.
Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

Nature deprivation and children

No age group needs nature more than children. Studies consistently find that children who spend time outdoors in natural environments experience improved health and cognitive functions, strong motor coordination, reduced stress, and enhanced social skills.³¹ Students who spend more time in the outdoors, including students from low-income backgrounds, tend to perform better on standardized tests, demonstrate more enthusiasm toward school, and have fewer attendance problems.³² According to one study, simply having more tree cover in a neighborhood could account for as much as 13 percent of variance in student outcomes; the study found the positive effect to be strongest in schools that faced the most external socioeconomic challenges.³³

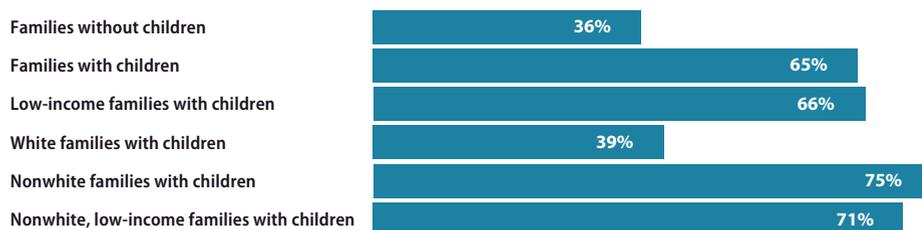
The data from CSP, however, indicate that children in the United States have far less nature nearby than the overall population. Specifically, census tracts in the contiguous 48 states and Washington, D.C., with large numbers of families with children under the age of 18 are nearly twice as likely to live in nature-deprived areas than families who do not have children under the age of 18. In every single state, with the exception of Louisiana, families and individuals with young children were more nature deprived than families and individuals without young children. These data echo the Trust for Public Lands' finding that 27 million children lack access to a quality park close to home.³⁴

For low-income families with children and families of color with children, the disparities in nature access are even more acute. (see Table 2) Three-fourths of census tracts with large numbers of families of color with children live in nature-deprived places, while less than 40 percent of white families with children do. Black and Latino or Hispanic families with children were the most nature deprived of any race or ethnicity examined.

FIGURE 6

Children in the United States have far less nature nearby compared with the overall population

Percent of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics in the United States, 2017



Note: Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median. Low income is defined as a median household income less than or equal to the 10th percentile of median income at the census tract level across the state. High income is greater than or equal to the 90th percentile. Moderate income falls between the 10th and 90th percentile.

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Energy extraction as a driver of nature deprivation

An oil and gas boom in the United States over the past two decades has fueled a rapid expansion in a network of pipelines, well pads, roads, and other infrastructure that is fragmenting natural areas and wildlife habitat. This energy boom has pushed fossil fuel infrastructure closer and closer to schools and neighborhoods, contributing to greater air and water pollution, spills and industrial accidents, and the loss of nearby nature.

The data generated by CSP confirm that, along with urban sprawl, energy development is a top driver of natural area loss in the United States, causing the loss of at least 6 million acres of natural area from 2001 to 2017. In certain regions of the country, this explosion of energy infrastructure has had a disproportionate impact on nature access for some nonwhite and low-income communities.³⁵

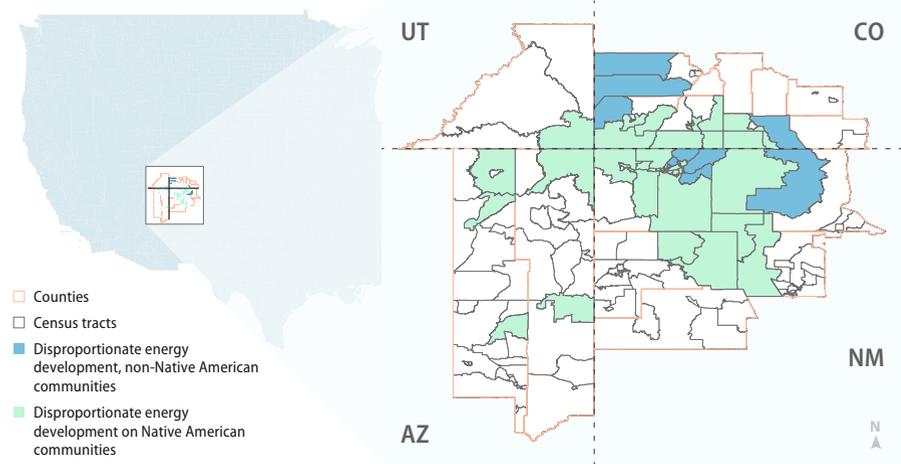
For example, in the parts of Appalachia where coal mining has been most concentrated—including Kentucky, West Virginia, and southwestern Virginia—low-income communities are located in areas with higher-than-average levels of nature loss due to energy development.

In Colorado, meanwhile, Hispanic and Latino communities have more energy development nearby than any other racial or ethnic group. In central California, the state's fracking boom, and subsequent natural area loss, has been concentrated near Hispanic and Latino communities.³⁶

Native Americans, in particular, are experiencing disproportionate impacts of oil, gas, and coal development on land, water, and wildlife. In 22 states, Native American communities are in places with the most or second-most energy development out of all racial and ethnic groups. As shown in Figure 7, on the Navajo Nation and parts of the Ute Mountain Reservation in the Southwest, for example, Native American populations experience above-average natural area loss from oil and gas development on nearby public lands.

FIGURE 7
Native Americans in the Southwest experience disproportionate impacts of oil, gas, and coal development

Energy development in Native American communities, 2017



Note: Disproportionate energy development is defined as higher than the national average for human modification from energy development.
Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature, Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

Nature deprivation and Indigenous rights

Energy development on public lands that threatens sacred sites, depletes natural resources, or pollutes the environment is especially egregious because it often stems from the U.S. government's systemic violation of its trust and treaty obligations to tribal nations.³⁷ The United States is required to respect tribal sovereignty, including over natural resources, so actions that may affect a tribe's access to economically or culturally significant lands, waters, and wildlife must undergo a formal consultation process.³⁸ In practice, however, the United States often fails to meaningfully engage tribes in natural resource decisions.³⁹

The Trump administration has exacerbated this failing, exhibiting a pattern of ignoring tribal input or conducting insufficient government-to-government consultations. In New Mexico, for example, the administration has ignored tribal input in proposing to expand oil and gas development near Chaco Canyon, the ancestral homeland of Pueblo tribes and of cultural significance to the Navajo Nation.⁴⁰ Alaska Natives are facing similar challenges in registering their perspectives regarding the administration's rush to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, as well as its efforts to log the Tongass National Forest.⁴¹ Amid the pandemic, tribal leaders and their allies nationwide have called for a pause on comment periods and significant decisions until tribes—who are experiencing disproportionate devastation from the coronavirus—can meaningfully participate.⁴²

The treatment of tribal consultation as a formality or an afterthought that can be circumvented is a core contributing factor to the loss of nature near tribes due to energy development. In order to address the nature deficit, tribes must not be excluded from the design and conceptualization stage of plans to manage natural resources, and extractive activities must not be prioritized over tribal sovereignty.

Policy recommendations to solve the inequities of natural area loss

Providing equitable access to nature, reducing the disproportionate impact of pollution on communities of color and economically disadvantaged communities, and addressing the legacies of racism and injustice in natural resource policy must be core priorities in any effort to better conserve nature in America. While this report focuses primarily on racial and economic inequities that are readily apparent through census tracts, it must be noted that public lands and nature can also be unwelcoming and exclusionary spaces for many deliberately overlooked populations, including LGBTQ communities and disabled people. In the case of LGBTQ people, the lack of U.S. census-collected data on sexual orientation and gender identity makes it impossible to assess the extent of nature deprivation. Equitable access must consider how different communities view, use, and value nature—from community parks and coastlines to front-country recreation areas and wilderness.

That a community of color is three times more likely to live in nature deprivation than their white counterparts does not happen by chance. As is discussed at the beginning of this report, inequitable access to nature is the direct result of systemic racism in the United States; its symptoms cannot be fully treated until the underlying condition is addressed. With acknowledgment that these recommendations alone are far from sufficient to solve the complex and intersecting issues of environmental racism, the following sections detail seven policies that would begin to address the inequities and the disproportionate effects of nature loss on communities of color and low-income communities.

Establish an inclusive goal to protect 30 percent of lands and ocean by 2030

As a starting point for addressing the broader nature crisis, scientists recommend protecting at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and ocean in a natural state by 2030 (a goal known as 30x30). Seventy-three percent of voters in western states support the national initiative, as do 82 percent of Latinos in those states.⁴³

In addition to protecting new areas, governments should seek to restore degraded lands and waters that have harmed the health and quality of life of communities across the country. For too long, the costs and impacts of natural resource extraction and pollution have fallen disproportionately on low-income communities and communities of color in the United States. This must be addressed through restoration policies and programs to plug orphan wells, reclaim abandoned mines, clean up superfund and brownfield sites, and reforest the urban tree canopy.

Embracing a 30x30 goal is only the beginning of the significant work necessary to build a strong, ambitious, inclusive, and equitable plan to protect natural systems for the benefit of every U.S. community. How much nature to protect—and how, where, and for whom—must honor and account for the perspectives of all people, including communities that are disproportionately affected by the degradation of natural systems; communities that do not have equal access to the outdoors; tribal nations whose sovereign rights over lands, waters, and wildlife should be upheld; environmental justice communities at the front lines of climate change; communities of color; and other historically marginalized populations.

Increase consultation and engagement with communities and empower them to lead in decision-making

All levels of government should aim to create and support programs and avenues for underserved communities to not just provide comment or consultation on decisions that affect their environment but also take the lead in decision-making. This would allow those who are directly affected by natural area loss and a lack of access to parks and public lands the opportunity to have their voice elevated and centered in a conversation in which their stakes are highest such as when public lands are leased for energy development. At the most basic level, efforts toward this end should include providing resources in languages other than English and ensuring that affected communities are able to provide meaningful public comment and consultation.

In the long term, it should include improving public comment and consultation processes to be proactive rather than reactionary as well as engaging community stakeholders in the process of building and designing resource management plans rather than approaching them for feedback after a project has already been conceptualized. Policymakers should also consider structural fixes such as new

conservation models that facilitate the declaration and management of new protected areas by communities, such as Indigenous tribes, whose contributions have historically been ignored or undermined by state and federal governments.

Ensure that staff and leadership reflect the communities they serve

Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and private companies should seek to increase the representation of people of color, LGBTQ people, and other nature-deprived communities within their own ranks. Research done by the Green Diversity Initiative, a group tracking demographic data at environmental organizations, found that less than 25 percent of staff at environmental nongovernmental organizations and foundations across the United States identify as people of color.⁴⁴ Outdoor advocates of color have long called for organizations and government to diversify their staff and leadership by integrating historically marginalized perspectives on nature into the fabric of resource decision-making and ending the exclusion of marginalized people from access to institutional power.

Seeing diversity reflected in staff is a first step toward breaking down the cultural barriers that alienate and endanger people of color in parks and other natural areas. In practice, this could include active efforts to recruit from historically Black colleges and universities, Bureau of Indian Education schools and tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, other minority-majority school systems, and similarly neglected applicant pools. Hispanic Access Foundation's MANO Project is an example of a recruitment program that is working with conservation agencies to place Latino young professionals in positions to build a workforce that reflects the population it serves.⁴⁵ Finally, it is important that organizations also examine internal systems that could disadvantage employees from underrepresented backgrounds so that diverse voices are elevated and equal—not a show of tokenism. The reporting of metrics on hiring and retention are essential tools for tracking and accountability.⁴⁶

End the childhood nature access gap through education and outreach programs

Studies have shown that spending time in nature is not only beneficial to a child's development, but it is also a crucial factor in the formation of a lifelong

appreciation of nature.⁴⁷ Increasing exposure to the outdoors for young children could help break the vicious cycle of nature deprivation that contributes to many excluded communities being locked out of conservation employment and leadership opportunities.

Funding programs for children—especially those in low-income and redlined school districts with a high proportion of low-income students of color—can serve as a leverage point for getting kids outside by providing field trips, nature-based STEM programs, and after-school resources. Federal and state governments should look to programs such as Every Kid in A Park or the New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund when considering how to correct the stark racial and economic disparities in formative nature experiences.⁴⁸ Government action in this area is an especially important investment and equalizer to break down the barriers for families who don't have extra resources for leisure or transportation to nature.

Protect more close-to-home recreation areas and make them welcoming to all

Governments at all levels should create and enhance public lands in accessible places. So-called front-country areas offer close-to-home natural settings and outdoor recreation experiences, which allow people to experience nature without needing to travel to a distant destination. An emphasis should be placed on accessible front-country parks near communities of color, low-income communities, and urban areas.

While the conservation movement has traditionally focused on protecting remote wilderness areas, a growing number of urban projects—many with a focus on equity and community participation—are demonstrating that cities can restore and protect nature with all its health and climate benefits within their boundaries.⁴⁹ Policymakers should also focus on increasing protections and accessibility to natural areas near cities, especially those with historical ties to nature-deprived groups. This could include, for example, the proposed expansions of monuments and recreational areas valued by Latino communities in southern California or Biscayne National Park, which owes its existence within eyeshot of Miami to Black conservationist Lancelot Jones.⁵⁰

Land management agencies must also redouble their efforts to attract and engage visitors through outreach programs, cultural programming, interpretation, and services—including safe

and equal access to bathrooms, programs, and any other sex-segregated facilities based on gender identity—that are inclusive and fit the needs and interests of a broad range of communities. Signage, information, and safety resources at parks and public lands should be multilingual and culturally appropriate.⁵¹

Sixty-one million people in the United States—1 in 4—have some sort of disability.⁵² Legal access requirements and best practices such as the federal requirements for outdoor spaces developed by the U.S. Access Board and the National Park Service’s All In! strategy should be followed to ensure that aging and disabled people can access the great outdoors.⁵³ Relatedly, passage of the Equality Act would help ensure legal protections against sexual orientation or gender identity discrimination in federally funded programs.

Investing in transit solutions that connect with major public transportation systems would begin to remove the physical-distance and cost barriers that nature-deprived urban communities and low-wage and shift workers face in participating in outdoor recreation and enjoyment. The Transit to Trails Act would direct the U.S. Department of Transportation to establish a grant program to fund accessible transportation systems in critically underserved communities to improve equitable access to nature. Agencies should consider hidden and explicit costs and fees that restrict access to outdoor participation—including access to ocean ecosystems—and prioritize ways to lessen or shift that burden in a more equitable manner. Community partner organizations should be supported in efforts such as HAF’s Latino Conservation Week, which encourages parks, refuges, and more to introduce and engage their communities in conservation and stewardship, and the annual LGBTQ Outdoor Summit, which is aimed at building community and making the outdoors more inclusive of the LGBTQ community.⁵⁴

Improve tribal consultation and expand co-management opportunities

Nature access—including expanded ownership, management, and staffing of public lands—is not only a moral and socioeconomic necessity to reduce disparities, but it is also a legal right of American Indian and Alaska Native people.⁵⁵ Federal, state, and local policymakers as well as national conservation leaders should engage in formal consultations with tribal leaders to determine how to better support the conservation and natural resource priorities and vision of tribal nations both on tribally owned and nontribally owned lands.

This should include exploring opportunities and additional models for genuine co-management of public lands and natural resources as well as sufficient federal funding to uphold trust and treaty obligations.

Internationally, Indigenous-led conservation has resulted in positive outcomes for socioeconomic well-being, ecosystem health, and the fight against climate change through emissions reductions and better stewardship of carbon sinks.⁵⁶ In countries such as Canada, Brazil, and Australia, studies find that lands under Indigenous management contain more biodiversity than similar areas under non-Indigenous management.⁵⁷ Successful international efforts may offer models for the United States to better recognize and support Indigenous-led conservation.

Provide funding for new parks and access programs

Programs that fund the creation of new parks and open spaces, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), are critically important to increasing the pace of conservation, creating jobs, and connecting people to nature. Congress should pass the Great American Outdoors Act, which includes permanent and guaranteed funding for the LWCF, to continue to protect open spaces—such as national parks, forests, and cultural resources as well as local parks, trails, and playgrounds—in all 50 states.

Upon passing the act, policymakers should ensure there is swift implementation and distribution of the new funds to help address nature deficits. Specifically, the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program within the LWCF should be given expanded and dedicated funding. The ORLP supports projects that create parks and expand outdoor recreational opportunities in low-income urban areas across the nation.⁵⁸

Conclusion

In the United States today, the color of one's skin or the size of one's bank account is a solid predictor of whether one has safe access to nature and all of its benefits. As a result, low-income communities, communities of color, and families with children have diminished outdoor recreation opportunities and access to nature; deteriorated drinking water quality; worsened air pollution; greater vulnerability to heat, drought, and floods; greater exposure to disease; and less resilience to the impacts of climate change. As local and national leaders attempt to address the climate and nature crises, they must acknowledge the legacy of environmental racism and pursue policies that are centered in justice and equity. Correcting for the racial and economic factors that contribute to nature-deprived communities will be a critical component of this work.

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Appendix

Table 1 shows state-by-state levels of nature deprivation by race and ethnicity and income. Nature deprivation percentages function best for making comparisons within a state, rather than in comparing nature deprivation between states.

TABLE 1

Nature deprivation trends by state

Percentage of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics, 2017

State	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native American	White	High income	Middle income	Low income	Nonwhite and low income
Alabama	70%	77%	59%	39%	21%	65%	45%	79%	79%
Arizona	63%	64%	54%	40%	39%	48%	51%	41%	39%
Arkansas	74%	73%	72%	43%	19%	64%	45%	84%	87%
California	61%	52%	55%	48%	36%	46%	51%	47%	53%
Colorado	64%	56%	57%	46%	34%	40%	51%	55%	51%
Connecticut	60%	90%	92%	60%	10%	38%	47%	95%	95%
Delaware	59%	81%	60%	53%	25%	34%	48%	100%	100%
District of Columbia	40%	53%	60%	66%	56%	28%	54%	43%	45%
Florida	52%	62%	69%	44%	29%	47%	49%	68%	73%
Georgia	84%	68%	63%	51%	24%	74%	45%	71%	83%
Idaho	64%	70%	56%	47%	30%	52%	47%	77%	89%
Illinois	52%	67%	69%	52%	21%	48%	48%	80%	85%
Indiana	65%	79%	70%	54%	15%	58%	46%	83%	83%
Iowa	69%	72%	68%	56%	15%	48%	46%	79%	82%
Kansas	75%	74%	70%	41%	17%	58%	45%	84%	95%
Kentucky	79%	91%	74%	54%	13%	62%	48%	55%	93%
Louisiana	71%	74%	68%	42%	31%	58%	47%	70%	77%
Maine	80%	77%	72%	43%	26%	80%	43%	72%	96%
Maryland	57%	67%	68%	54%	21%	36%	49%	84%	98%
Massachusetts	74%	85%	90%	63%	14%	33%	48%	94%	96%
Michigan	69%	84%	61%	43%	15%	49%	47%	90%	94%
Minnesota	73%	75%	71%	44%	14%	61%	46%	70%	73%

TABLE 1
Nature deprivation trends by state

Percentage of people living in a nature-deprived area by census tract demographics, 2017

State	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Native American	White	High income	Middle income	Low income	Nonwhite and low income
Mississippi	70%	76%	65%	53%	30%	61%	45%	81%	78%
Missouri	76%	87%	68%	38%	12%	66%	45%	81%	93%
Montana	60%	69%	67%	52%	32%	39%	48%	73%	82%
Nebraska	72%	71%	64%	51%	11%	70%	45%	70%	71%
Nevada	57%	58%	56%	40%	29%	36%	51%	58%	47%
New Hampshire	84%	76%	81%	40%	17%	62%	47%	63%	91%
New Jersey	49%	71%	82%	58%	25%	29%	50%	83%	89%
New Mexico	59%	68%	56%	38%	46%	41%	52%	45%	32%
New York	79%	76%	79%	55%	9%	47%	48%	74%	85%
North Carolina	80%	70%	63%	44%	24%	75%	44%	78%	84%
North Dakota	79%	82%	67%	44%	7%	32%	51%	64%	59%
Ohio	65%	75%	65%	53%	19%	47%	48%	83%	82%
Oklahoma	82%	84%	75%	13%	35%	64%	46%	73%	81%
Oregon	81%	81%	63%	41%	14%	71%	46%	58%	81%
Pennsylvania	66%	82%	74%	60%	14%	41%	47%	91%	93%
Rhode Island	64%	97%	92%	62%	13%	4%	51%	94%	100%
South Carolina	78%	51%	62%	42%	42%	65%	45%	73%	78%
South Dakota	77%	80%	63%	37%	30%	90%	42%	59%	48%
Tennessee	75%	84%	76%	43%	13%	60%	45%	85%	96%
Texas	63%	56%	65%	47%	27%	54%	48%	65%	68%
Utah	63%	58%	57%	37%	29%	37%	51%	54%	46%
Vermont	71%	73%	69%	36%	27%	50%	46%	76%	100%
Virginia	78%	58%	72%	49%	20%	58%	49%	53%	80%
Washington	72%	70%	61%	42%	21%	56%	47%	72%	79%
West Virginia	83%	81%	72%	48%	20%	79%	44%	68%	95%
Wisconsin	76%	79%	77%	51%	13%	52%	47%	83%	82%
Wyoming	59%	76%	58%	61%	34%	50%	47%	80%	100%

Note: Low income is defined as a median household income less than or equal to the 10th percentile of median income at the census tract level across the state. High income is greater than or equal to the 90th percentile. Moderate income falls between the 10th and 90th percentile. This analysis covers the contiguous United States. Data for Alaska and Hawaii are not available. Communities are considered nature deprived if their census tract has a higher proportion of natural area lost to human activities than the state-level median.

Source: Vincent A. Landau, Meredith L. McClure, and Brett G. Dickson, "Analysis of the Disparities in Nature Loss and Access to Nature. Technical Report." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2020), available at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CSP-CAP_Disparities_in_Nature_Loss_FINAL_Report_060120.pdf.

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Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

