

Policy Brief

Building Capacity for Climate Preparedness in Black Communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area

Background

A research team led by Dr. Ingrid Waldron (McMaster University), with Dr. Zobia Jawed (McMaster University), Dr. Abel Chikanda (McMaster University), Dr. Paulin Coulibaly (McMaster University), Dr. Jeffrey Denis (McMaster University), Dr. Alemu Gonsamo (McMaster University), Dr. Alexander Hall (McMaster University), Dr. Sean Kidd (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), research assistants (JP Craig, Sawyer Bailey, Nicole Doria), and project partners including the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (Ontario Chapter), the ENRICH Project, Partners for Action (University of Waterloo), and Toronto Environmental Alliance, conducted a study entitled *Building Capacity for Climate Preparedness in Black Communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area*. The study engaged 120 Black residents across six community workshops in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA): Hamilton (2), Brampton (1), Mississauga (1), Scarborough (1), and Central Toronto (1). This study was funded by a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant.

The aim of the workshops was to build on the knowledge about, and experiences with, climate change among Black residents of the GTHA. In doing so, the workshops challenged deficit-oriented narratives about Black community engagement in climate change. The workshops also aimed to co-develop community-led interventions to increase climate preparedness.

The workshops had several key objectives:

- To assess the level of awareness and knowledge that Black communities in the GTHA have around the social, economic, and health/mental health impacts of climate change and climate change preparedness.
- To determine the nature of the resources and expertise these communities have access to that prepare them for these impacts.
- To develop their leadership skills and a network of experts that can help them develop a climate change preparedness plan that would build community resilience and forge connections between Black communities, academics/researchers, and climate and environmental organizations.
- To prepare Black communities in the GTHA to participate in climate change policymaking and decision-making.
- To develop diverse knowledge mobilization resources that will share and amplify the stories and experiences of Black communities around climate change preparedness to diverse audiences.

The workshops were designed to build the capacities of Black residents through a presentation on climate change and climate justice, introduction to online mapping tools, group

dialogue, and roleplaying emergency scenarios, laying the groundwork for more just and effective climate action rooted in the perspectives of Black communities in the GTHA.

The Problem

Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities in Canada are experiencing the worst effects of climate change in a country warming at more than twice the global rate. Research shows that Black communities disproportionately reside in areas with heightened environmental risks, such as poor air quality and proximity to pollution sources. Despite being among the most affected, Black Canadians face systemic barriers to meaningful participation in mainstream climate conversations and decision-making. This exclusion leads to mistrust and a lack of communication: policymakers do not hear the insights and needs of Black residents, and mainstream climate solutions often fail to reflect their realities. The workshops revealed a strong sentiment about being historically left out of climate planning and a desire for Black-led solutions and local resilience networks.

What We Want to See

Across all workshops, participants articulated a clear and consistent set of needs, which we share below. These core themes represent what Black communities want to see from governments and institutions to ensure they are prepared for the impacts of climate change. After this section, you can find the breakdown for each of the six workshops to learn more about more specific, local needs.

Resilient and Equitable Infrastructure

- **Enact and enforce a maximum heat bylaw.** Participants in multiple municipalities described the life-threatening danger of extreme heat in rental apartments that lack cooling. They pointed to the policy gap where landlords are required to provide heat but not cooling as a critical issue that needs immediate rectification to protect tenants.
- **Fund and prioritize the retrofitting of older, low-income, and social housing.** As a long-term solution to the problem of unsafe indoor temperatures, a dedicated program is needed to upgrade older buildings for energy efficiency, cooling, and flood proofing.
- **Invest in safe, reliable, and accessible public transit.** The failure of public transit was a major concern, particularly in Brampton where chronic overcrowding made transit unreliable and inaccessible, and in Scarborough, where derailment of a rapid transit line was named as an example of an inequitably planned system. Participants described the state of public transit as a structural barrier that limits access to essential services, jobs, and safe evacuation routes during emergencies.
- **Increase and protect community green space, including parks and tree canopy cover.** Participants raised concerns about the loss of green space due to unchecked development, linking it to poor air quality, increased flood risk, and a lower quality of life.

Accountable Community-Centred Governance

- **Establish formal, paid processes for community oversight and co-design of climate policies.** Given the deep mistrust of government inaction and performative gestures,

processes are needed that move beyond tokenism and give Black communities meaningful power to shape policies directly impacting their neighbourhoods.

- **Hold public meetings and consultations at accessible times (evenings, weekends) and in local community hubs.** Provide childcare, food, and translation services to remove barriers.
- **Develop accessible, culturally relevant information and communication strategies.** Participants described a need for practical, easy-to-understand information on emergency preparedness and civic advocacy. They noted that official communication often fails to reach them and proposed using trusted, familiar community members as messengers and creating tailored formats to overcome these barriers.

Community-Led Resilience and Opportunity

- **Provide direct funding for Black-led, community-level climate initiatives.** A recurring theme was the lack of financial resources and access to credit within Black communities. Participants called for investment that empowers them to lead their own solutions, rather than relying on under-resourced or top-down programs.
- **Create clear pathways for Black youth and workers into the green economy.** Participants identified the need for targeted training, mentorship, scholarships, and job opportunities to ensure that Black communities are not left out of the economic benefits of the green transition.
- **Ensure mental health support is part of all climate and emergency preparedness plans.** Participants across all workshops spoke about the mental toll of climate change, including anxiety, depression, fear for the future, and the stress of navigating disasters.
- **Support and expand Black-led urban farming and community gardens.** Participants identified disconnection from land and food as a key vulnerability. They saw local, culturally relevant food production as a critical strategy to improve community health, ensure food security and heal a historically broken relationship with land.
- **Resource and support existing community networks.** Participants consistently identified trusted local institutions, particularly churches, schools, and neighbourhood groups, as the true first responders in a crisis. Policy should focus on equipping these existing hubs with the funds, training, and supplies they need to function effectively.

Community Concerns

The six workshops revealed that Black residents across the GTHA have significant concerns about the effects of climate change and their level of preparedness, with unique priorities emerging in each location.

Hamilton

In Hamilton, the conversation centered on economic precarity, direct health impacts, and a strong belief in community-led solutions as central to climate preparedness.

- Economic precarity was described as a major barrier to engagement in climate action. Participants spoke about the daily pressures of housing instability, rising costs for food and electricity, and precarious employment. They noted that the need to focus on immediate economic survival left little energy for long-term climate issues.

- Participants connected health issues directly to changing weather. They spoke of increased joint pain from cold, severe migraines triggered by shifts in air pressure, and heat-related illnesses in urban areas. The mental and emotional toll of climate change was also noted, including mood changes and anxiety.
- There is a strong belief in grassroots, community-led solutions. In an emergency, participants consistently identified trusted local institutions like churches, cultural centers and schools, as essential hubs for providing shelter, food, information, and medical support.
- Participants expressed a deep sense of internal community responsibility and capacity for mutual aid. This was demonstrated through detailed plans for sharing resources and a stated belief in pooling community assets. Participants also identified a clear role for government in providing emergency supplies and infrastructure.

Brampton

In Brampton, participants described systemic neglect, high living costs, health concerns, and infrastructure failures as key barriers to climate preparedness.

- Rising costs of living were described as a barrier to preparedness. Participants spoke about increases in food prices, rent, and car insurance. These pressures were understood as linked to broader systemic conditions that reduce their capacity to plan for future risks.
- Participants raised concerns about environmental exposure and health. They discussed connections between air pollution, allergies, and chronic illness, and the quality and safety of food available in the community.
- Changes in weather patterns were observed as affecting planting and growing. Participants shared experiences of inconsistent seasonal cycles disrupting gardening, including unseasonal frost and early warmth, connecting this to concerns about food availability and affordability.
- The public transit system was described as insufficient for daily needs. Participants identified delays, long wait times, and inconsistent service as obstacles to mobility, framing the lack of dependable transit as a structural issue that limits access to essential resources, including in emergencies.

Mississauga

In Mississauga, participants identified government inaction, health effects, economic constraints, and the need for relevant communication.

- Participants described a deep mistrust of government and corporations. They referred to experiences with performative action and a lack of policy transparency, pointing to a pattern of short-term political thinking that prioritizes immediate goals like reelection over long-term policy.
- Physical and mental health burdens were connected to environmental conditions. Participants spoke about respiratory illnesses like asthma and allergies being exacerbated by poor air quality and wildfires and described experiencing climate-related anxiety and depression.
- Economic pressures were identified as creating significant barriers. Participants described financial constraints limiting personal choices to cheaper, less sustainable options, and raised concerns about the need for job creation, particularly for Black youth in a green transition.

- There was a need for accessible and personally relevant information for both civic advocacy and emergency preparedness. Participants said they were often unsure how to engage with public officials like councillors, and proposed using trusted, familiar community members as messengers in tailored formats, such as videos, to overcome communication barriers.

Scarborough

In Scarborough, participants spoke about infrastructural failures, economic inequities, health and well-being, and community connection.

- Participants described concerns about unchecked development and failing infrastructure. They spoke of a landscape with too many buildings, a lack of green space, and intense traffic. The recent derailment of Scarborough Rapid Transit was named as a clear example of how inequitable planning and infrastructure failures directly affect community mobility.
- Economic inequities were identified as a key barrier to resilience. Participants connected the lack of community-level funding and access to credit as a fundamental problem, and discussed how climate change exacerbated existing economic pressures, pointing to rising prices for staple foods.
- Health and well-being were discussed in relation to environmental and social conditions. Participants described the mental toll of climate anxiety, including from witnessing global disasters as a diasporic community, fear for the future, and depression during cold periods. The social isolation of children disconnected from outdoor play and each other was also a key concern.
- Participants expressed a strong belief in community connections as a core preparedness strategy. They emphasized that relying on neighbours and local institutions like churches is essential, with a central theme being the need to build these community networks before disaster strikes.

Toronto

In downtown Toronto, participants named precarious housing and labour conditions, systemic inequities, and the direct health impacts of environmental degradation as central to their experience of climate change.

- Precarious housing conditions were identified as a critical vulnerability. Participants described how a lack of air conditioning, inadequate public cooling centres, and power outages create life-threatening situations during heat waves. They pointed to the policy gap where landlords are required by law to provide heat but not cooling, leaving renters to suffer in unsafe indoor temperatures.
- Precarious labour was described as a key driver of climate vulnerability. Participants discussed how racialized and low-income workers, including those in non-union construction and those experiencing houselessness, are often forced to choose between health and a paycheck during wildfires or heat waves.
- Participants articulated a deep understanding of how systemic inequities produce climate vulnerability. They connected the disproportionate impacts on Black and racialized communities to being under-resourced, which they described as a lack of material and financial capacity to recover. They also discussed how these disadvantages compound over time.

- The disconnection from land and local food systems was identified as a key concern. Participants spoke about the unreliability of traditional agricultural knowledge in a rapidly changing climate and the desire to heal a historically broken relationship with land as a source of community resilience and food security.

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