



Community Perspectives on the Impact of Climate Change in the Front Range Region of Colorado

“The main problem is that society is all based on the ability to generate wealth, and people in power see climate solutions in opposition to the generation of wealth. That’s our biggest barrier.”

– Anyela Melissa, Aurora

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- ▼ METHODS
- ▼ SURVEY AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS
- ▼ QUALITATIVE DATA INTERSPERSED
- ▼ THE INTERSECTIONS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE, HOUSING, AND GENDER
- ▼ PRINCIPLES OF JUST TRANSITION FROM THE CLIMATE JUSTICE ALLIANCE



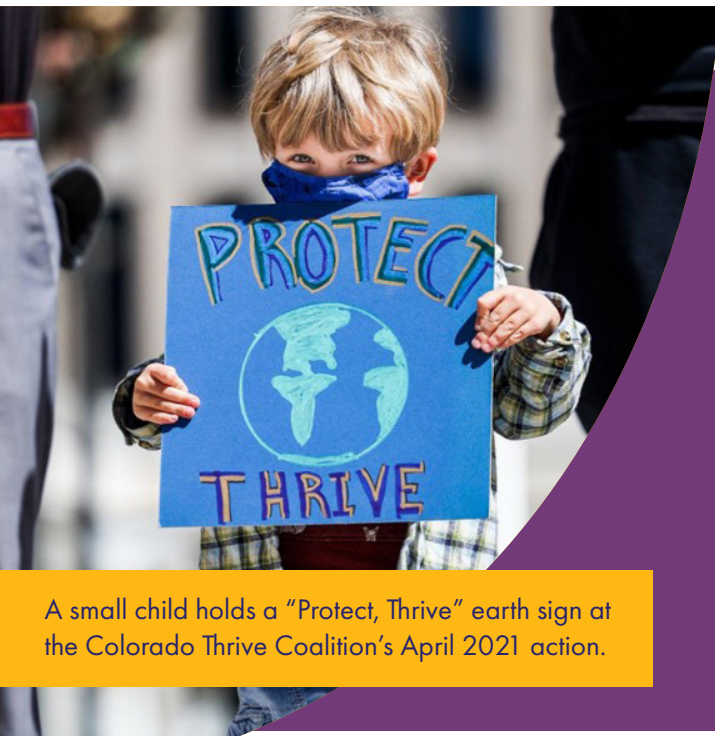
BACKGROUND

Climate change is an urgent human rights issue, aggravating longstanding socio-economic and racial inequities in Colorado and around the world. Extreme weather events like smog, droughts, and wildfires have become more frequent, posing economic challenges and endangering the health of our communities, particularly people of color and households earning low incomes. Deteriorating air and water quality, food and water shortages, and property damages are just a few of the threats that climate change poses to the physical health and well-being of Colorado workers and families.

9to5 Colorado and Colorado Fiscal Institute worked together on this report. 9to5 Colorado is a grassroots nonprofit organization that works to create systems change through issue-based advocacy, grassroots organizing, and community education by directly engaging impacted women. Our vision is that all women and their families can live and thrive in an economically and racially just world. Colorado Fiscal Institute is a fiscal policy nonprofit organization that provides credible, independent, and accessible information and analysis of fiscal and economic issues facing Colorado. Their aim is to inform and influence policy debates and contribute to sound decisions that improve the well-being of individuals, communities, and the state as a whole.

9to5's focus for the past 10 years has been on renters' rights, the rights of mobile home owners, housing justice, and workers' rights. Through this, 9to5 began to work on the intersection between housing, workers' rights, and climate change. 9to5 is affiliated with Right to the City Alliance and the National Green New Deal Network, both organizations that advocate for Green New Deal-style legislation nationwide that addresses the climate crisis in a way that centers economic and racial justice. 9to5 conducted the survey highlighted in this report as a way to better understand the climate issues facing our members and to inform our climate justice platform.

9to5 set out on this work with the full understanding that climate change is and will continue to have a disproportionate impact on our constituency, working-class women of color. Through surveys and qualitative interviews, we sought to better understand what those impacts are and strategic points for 9to5's intervention and collaboration.



A small child holds a "Protect, Thrive" earth sign at the Colorado Thrive Coalition's April 2021 action.

METHODS

9to5 conducted an intensive survey collection process in April through August of 2022, collecting over 300 surveys from community members. Staff and canvassers collected surveys online and through phone-banking and door-knocking in predominantly low-income or BIPOC neighborhoods and mobile home parks. In addition to survey collection, 9to5 and CFI conducted qualitative interviews with 10 community members and nonprofit organizations. The community members were asked to share the impact of climate change on their lives and their communities, what steps they believe policymakers should take to address the issue, what kind of changes they would like to see in their community, the barriers to community engagement, and suggested programmatic and policy priorities for 9to5 Colorado.



SURVEY AND INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Our analysis of the survey results found that most respondents are concerned about air and water quality. Respondents' answers revealed their personal and collective vulnerability to climate change. Many respondents experienced respiratory problems and breathing difficulties due to air pollution and the financial burden of coping with these challenges on a daily basis. The qualitative data also suggest that community members living in lower-income households are not only at higher risk of harm from climate catastrophe, but also suffer from environmental racism and injustice in their day-to-day costs of living. For example, many respondents mentioned the financial strain of purchasing bottled water because the tap water in their homes is unsafe to drink.

"I am a nurse, I am 59 years old; we are three family members living in a four-bedroom house in Centennial/Aurora. The three of us have health issues, we have to stay in the house when the air quality is bad. I would say I get most impacted by the wildfires, we got smoke here causing us health and respiratory problems. I have asthma, another person in my house has asthma, during the wildfires and smoke, we have to stay inside homes, and cannot do anything outside, [and] use inhalers extensively."

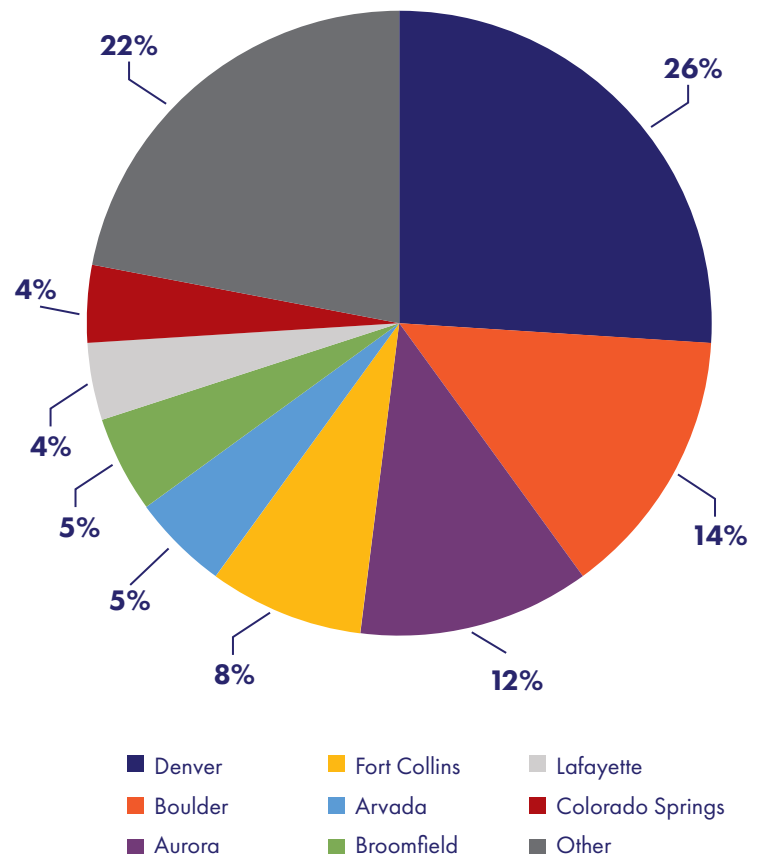
– Earlene, Aurora

Despite facing these harms firsthand, members expressed that they feel unheard and excluded from decision-making processes related to environmental issues in their communities. They shared that they lack knowledge and language about climate change and face obstacles to participating in decision-making. 56% of the respondents for this study identify as people of color, many of whom expressed their concerns about the lack of political power due to their racial background.

Our qualitative interviews also revealed a need for increased education about climate change, its causes, and what kinds of actions can curb it. While all respondents expressed being attuned to and concerned about environmental harms or changes, several of our interviewees did not have an understanding of exactly what climate change is, how it is caused, and what actions can prevent it. There was also a common thread in our qualitative interviews of a lack of trust in the political process, the sense that policymakers are only motivated by profit and that combating climate change or environmental harms is in opposition to that. This is in part due to widespread climate disinformation by the energy sector and other special interest groups. Data shows that despite harmful stereotypes, communities of color do strongly value environmental protection and have high levels of concern about climate change.¹

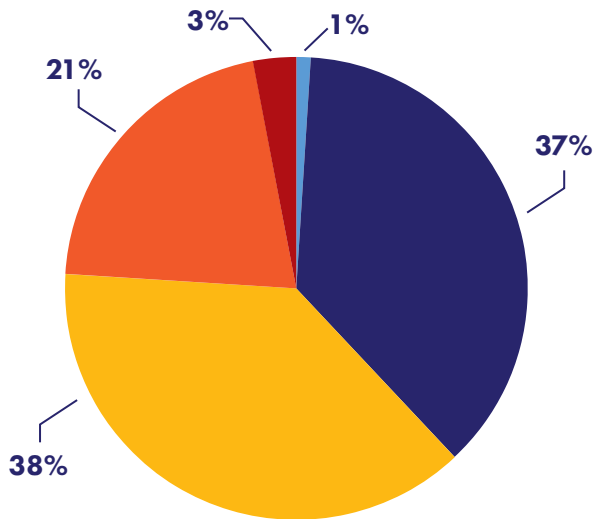
We analyzed survey data from 333 community members from 85 zip codes in the front range region of Colorado. The top eight cities where respondents live are shown in the chart to the right:

CITIES REPRESENTED IN THE SURVEY



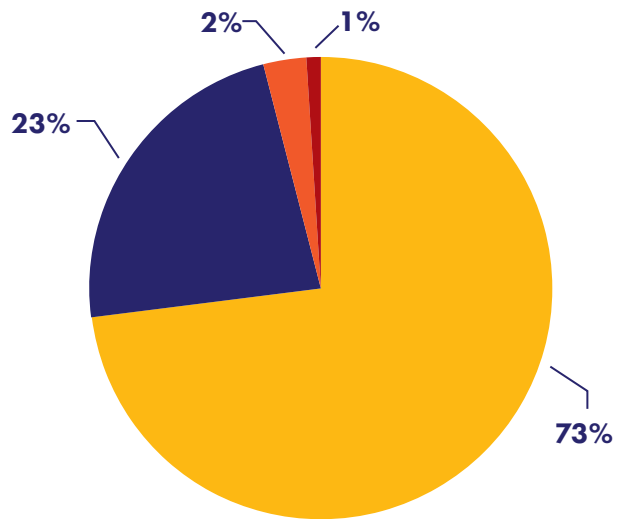
QUALITATIVE DATA INTERSPERSED

AGE



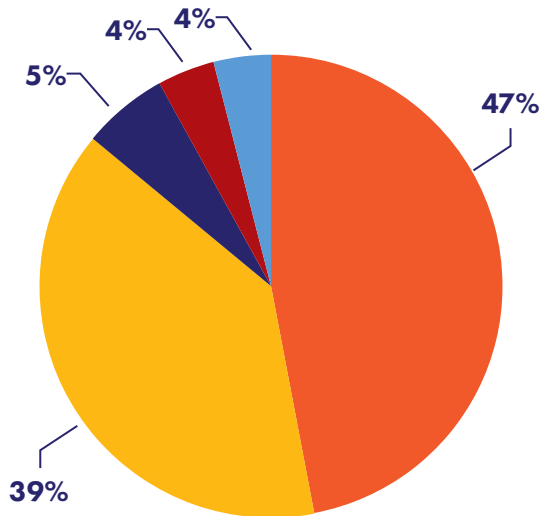
■ 18 years or younger
 ■ 19-35 years
 ■ 36-50 years
■ 51-75 years
 ■ 76 years or older

GENDER



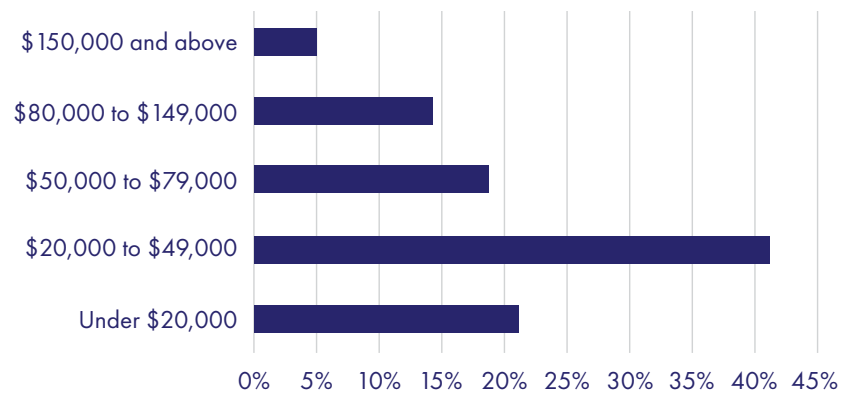
■ Woman
 ■ Man
 ■ Non-Binary
 ■ Other

RACE



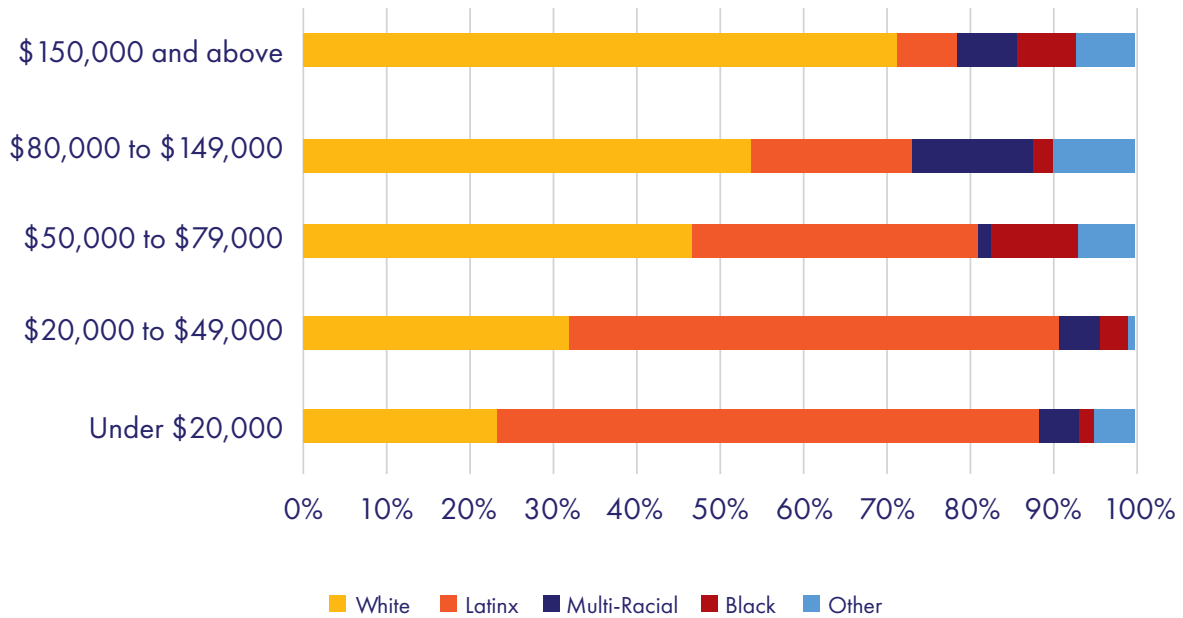
■ White
 ■ Latinx
 ■ Multi-Racial
 ■ Black
 ■ Other

INCOME GROUPS

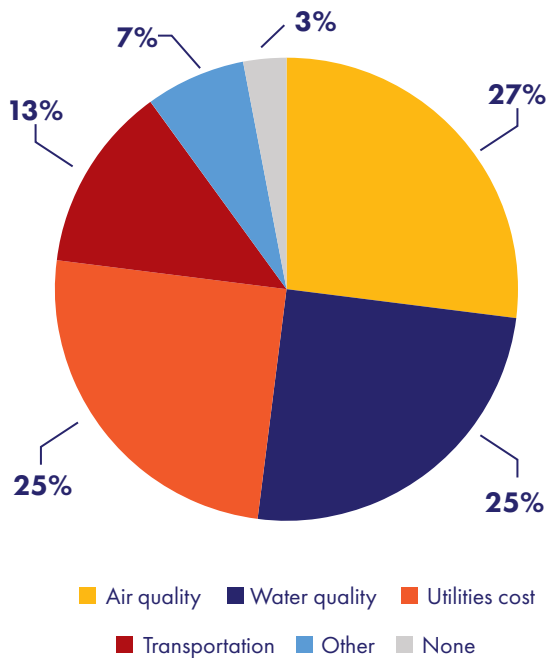


The graph below shows racial breakdown in each income group. Latinx respondents are 47% of the total sample, but make up about 65% of the lowest income group, while white people are more represented in the three highest income groups.

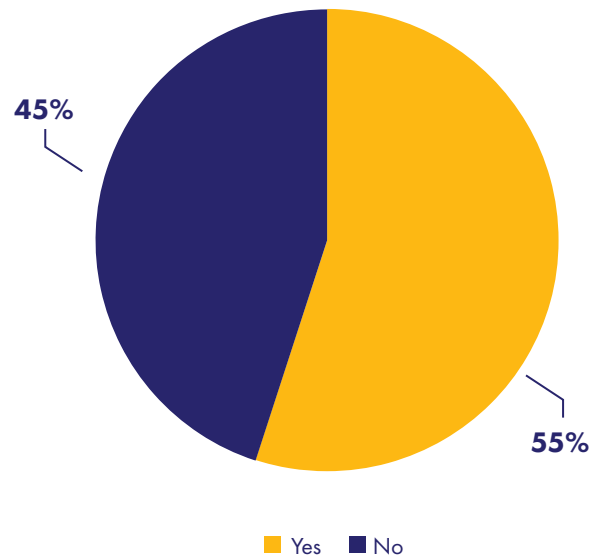
INCOME GROUP BY RACE



ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS



DO YOU FEEL SAFE DRINKING TAP WATER?

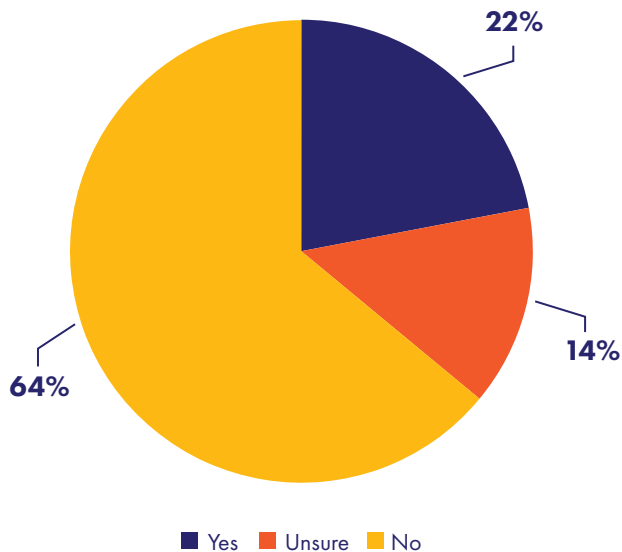


Juana, a member living in a mobile home park in Thornton, shared, "Since we can't drink the water out of the tap we have to buy bottles of water to drink... we do use the water to bathe and cook because we couldn't afford to buy water for all of that. Sometimes if we run out of bottled water we do drink from the tap but we don't think it's safe and on top of that we get charged a lot for water as a utility, more and more every month... we probably spend about \$30 a month on bottled water which is a lot for me."

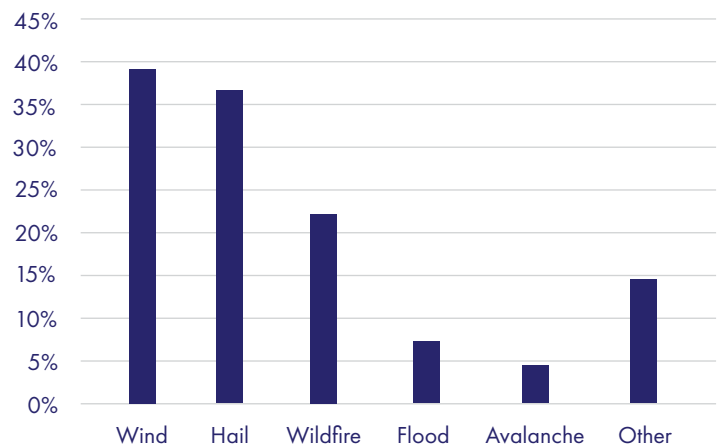
She shared that the water in her tap is "yellow, smelly, and often foamy. The water pipes are old, we can't drink water out of the tap, so we have to buy bottled water to drink." Juana still gets charged for the water in her utility bill, which is steadily increasing.

From 9to5's work with mobile home park residents, we know that the majority of residents do not feel safe drinking water in their homes. The Colorado Latino Policy Agenda survey further supports this, citing that the percentage of people who did not trust the drinking water in their homes was 10% higher for mobile home residents than the general population.²

HAS YOUR HOME BEEN IMPACTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE?



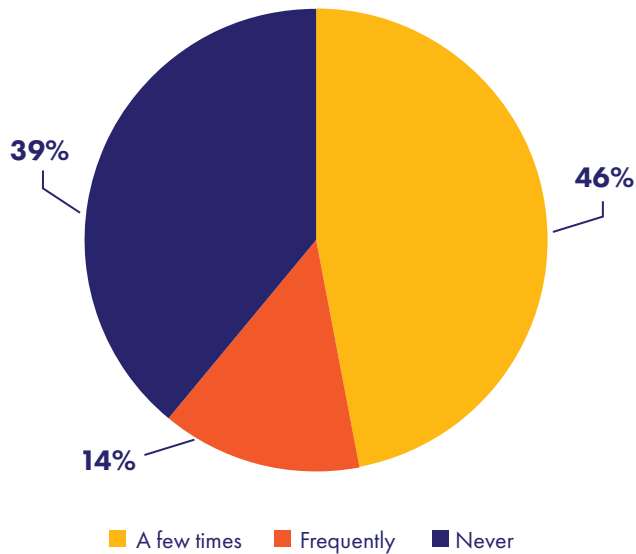
IMPACTED HOMES BY TYPE OF IMPACT



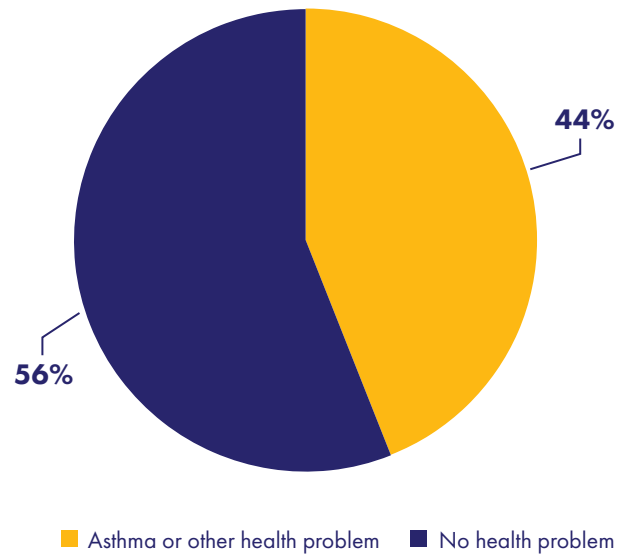
Climate change causes extreme weather events that bring heavy rains, floods, wind, snow, or temperature changes that can stress structures and facilities and damage homes and buildings. 22% of the survey respondents have indicated that their homes have been damaged by a climate disaster in the past three years. Among this group, heavy winds, hail, and wildfires have caused the most significant damages to homes.



HAVE YOU HAD TROUBLE BREATHING IN THE PAST YEAR?



FAMILIES WITH ASTHMA OR OTHER AIR QUALITY RELATED HEALTH PROBLEM



Among the survey respondents, 60% have reported they have had breathing difficulty at least a few times in the past year. 44% of all the respondents have reported having at least one family member with asthma or other conditions such as emphysema and COPD.

“I have been living all my life driving public school buses in Denver. Growing up young, the air quality was not that bad, when I was 13 years old, asthma kicked in, by 22 I was having really bad asthma, and by 27 asthma became more frequent. My kids have asthma... These air pollutants going on in our community, their level increases in the air to a point where you cannot breathe.”

– Brandy, Denver

“One of my family members and I have asthma. During the wildfires and smoke, we have to stay indoors, and cannot go outside, and we use inhalers extensively. We have to turn off the air conditioner due to air pollution, as we have breathing problems and the bad air will come in with the AC so even if it is hot, but if it is a high-pollution day, we can only turn on the fan.”

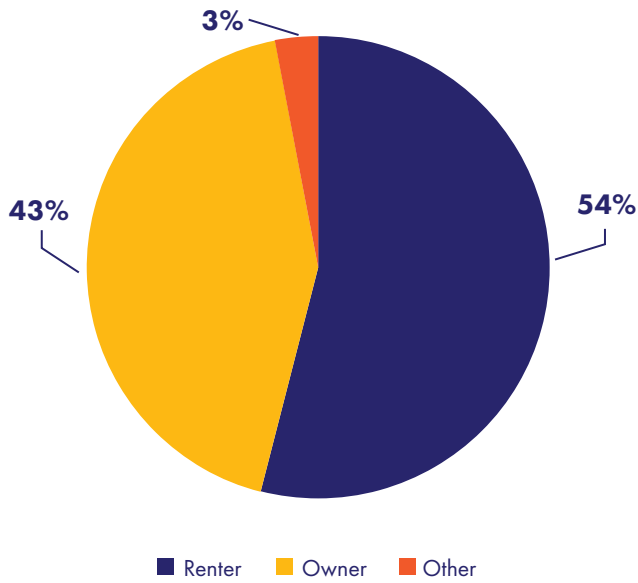
– Earlene, Aurora

Juana, who lives in a mobile home park in Thornton, shared the same challenge during the wildfires last summer. Her truck parked outside was covered in ash, and in her own words, “you couldn’t breathe, it was really difficult to breathe.”

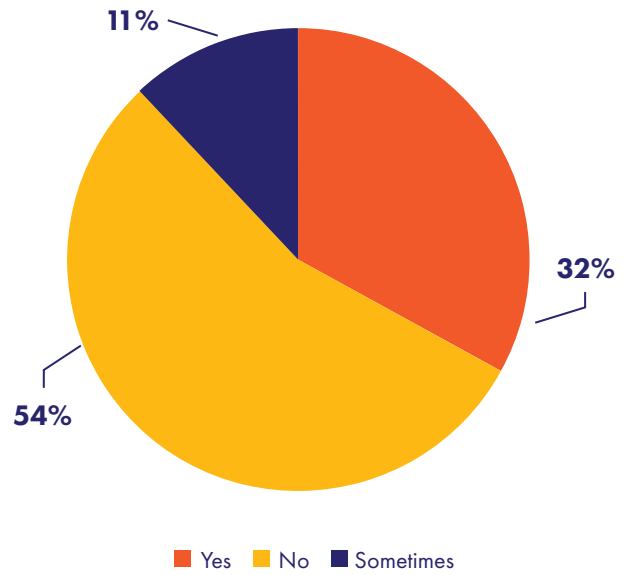
Mireya, who has lived in the Boulder Meadows mobile home park in Boulder for the past nine years, shared that the wildfires affected her breathing: “I felt like I couldn’t breathe well or take a deep breath because there was so much smoke in the air.”



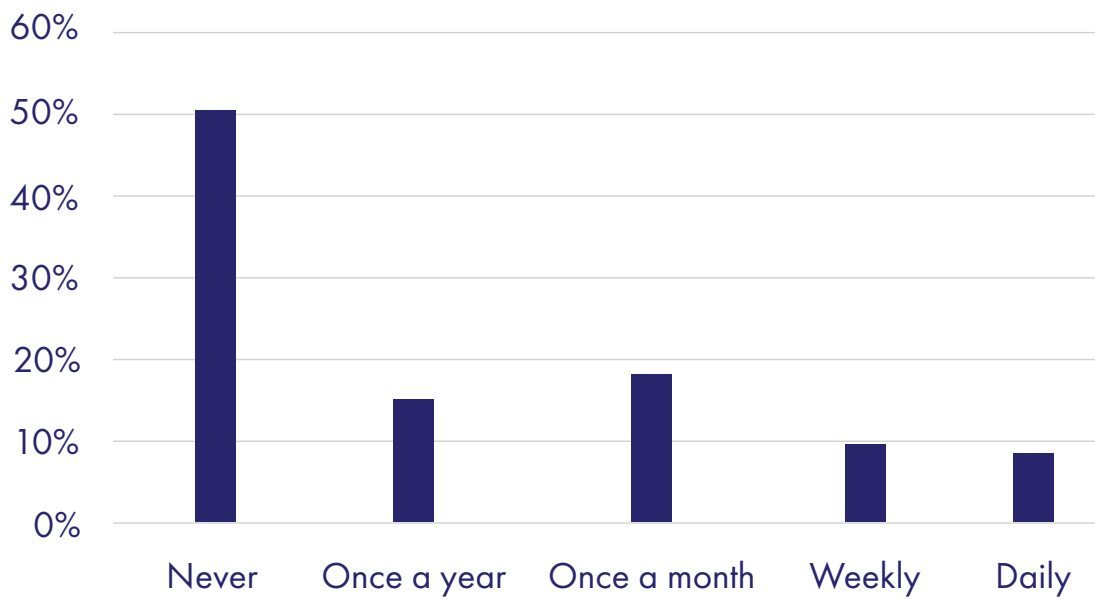
DO YOU OWN OR RENT YOUR HOME?



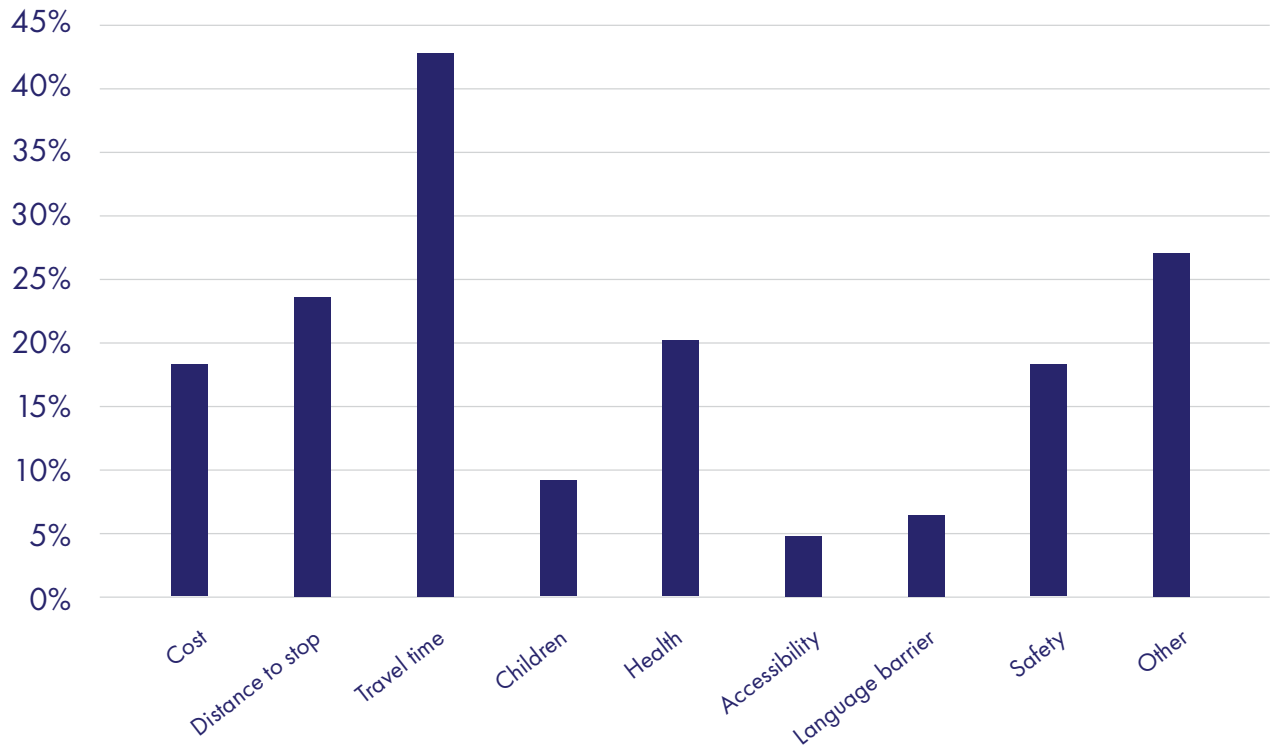
DO YOU DRIVE A CAR ALONE MORE THAN 2 HOURS A DAY?



FREQUENCY OF PUBLIC TRANSIT USE

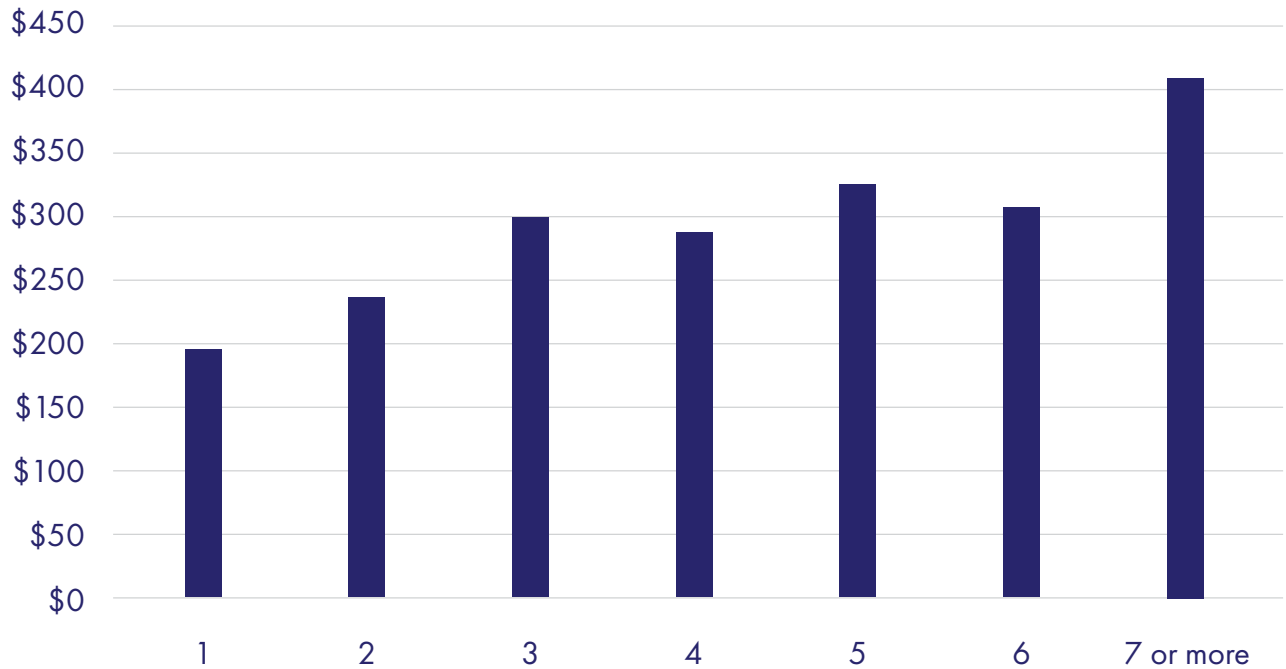


BARRIERS OF TAKING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION



Many of the respondents who answered “other” stated that they had a car, implying that they do not have a need to take public transportation and see driving their own car as the clear first choice.

AVERAGE UTILITY COST PER FAMILY SIZE



THE INTERSECTIONS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE, HOUSING, AND GENDER

Historic racial redlining and housing discrimination have systemically marginalized communities politically and economically, exposing communities of color to climate risks. Redlining is the practice of banks and lenders refusing to provide a loan or insurance to someone because they live in an area deemed to be a financial risk. It was a practice widely used to prevent Black and brown people from moving into certain neighborhoods. Although redlining was legally banned almost fifty years ago, its legacy continues through economic inequality and poor air quality due to gas emissions from refineries, factories, and industrial plants. According to data collected from 108 cities across the country by researchers at the Science Museum of Virginia and Portland State University, historically redlined districts “now contain the hottest areas” in the United States.³ The study indicates that historically redlined communities are, on average, 5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than non-redlined districts, resulting in the residents suffering from high energy bills. Historically redlined neighborhoods are more likely to have high populations of Black, Latino, and Asian residents than areas that were favorably assessed at the time.⁴ These neighborhoods have less green space and more paved surfaces that absorb and radiate heat.⁵ The residents also tend to live in lower-quality homes that are more vulnerable to extreme weather events. The north of Denver was redlined starting in the 1930s, and it was marked as “hazardous”—meaning there were too many Black and immigrant residents for it to receive federal home loans.⁶ Every time a new factory or freeway was built, these zoned neighborhoods were treated like a bullseye and were hit again and again. The RAND Corporation created an online tool to map environmental racism in Denver and to enhance access to information on the unjust distribution of environmental hazards.⁷ The areas in Denver marked in the data show a higher level of air pollution linked to asthma, cardiovascular disease, and early death. Much of this air pollution is due to fossil fuel production, tied directly to climate change. Racial redlining has stripped communities of color of their health and wealth.



Anyela Melissa at the Village Farm in Aurora, Colorado.



9to5 staff and children of 9to5 members hang a piñata at the 2021 Legislative Celebration.





Colorado Thrives Coalition rallies for climate, care, jobs, and justice during President Biden’s visit to Colorado in 2021.

Right to the City Alliance found that the real estate industry is one of the biggest contributors to deforestation and the deregulation of land use so that it may be exploited for profit. Renters and working-class families often fall at the mercy of national disasters caused by climate change and are subsequently the ones who are displaced and dispossessed of their homes.

Climate change is not ‘gender neutral;’ it adversely impacts women, especially single mothers who cannot access housing affordable to their income levels. The houses they can afford are often located in highly-polluted areas. Women of color and women from low-income communities face even more challenges. Due to the gender wage gap, women earn less money compared to men. Women of color continue to suffer the most severe gender wage gap. According to the available data, overall in the U.S., Hispanic women experience the largest pay gap, earning just 57 cents for every \$1 earned by white, non-Hispanic men in 2020.⁸ Black women earned just 64 cents for every \$1 earned by white, non-Hispanic men in 2020. Women’s lower economic status exacerbates their vulnerability to climate change. Due to being underpaid, many women of color do not have enough resources at hand to build savings, achieve economic stability, or be prepared for climate crises. Climate change deepens gender and racial inequalities.

In the most polluted areas of our state, communities of color make up the bulk of the population. The harms of pollution to communities of color in Colorado are shown on a map published by ‘Mapping for Environmental Justice.’⁹ Their data shows that compared to the white population, Colorado’s communities of color breathe air with nearly twice as much diesel pollution, and are 1.5 times more likely to live close to a Superfund site. A Superfund site is a location contaminated by hazardous waste that has been designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for management and cleanup.

Earlene shared what she saw in her community: “Women who are single parents can’t afford affordable housing. They find housing in a highly-polluted area because that’s what they can afford. Women of color get affected the most because housing is cheaper in the most polluted areas.” Their children then become highly vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, and they and their children face more severe health issues.



WHAT IS AT STAKE?

See Colorado Fiscal Institute's report, *Colorado 2050: What Climate Change Means For Colorado*, for more. The report makes clear that "the costs of inaction are great: Billions of dollars in damage have already occurred due to the wildfires of the last decade, including the devastating 2020 fires, and those costs will only grow as drought and extreme heat combine to create a longer fire season."¹⁰

Climate change is an urgent human rights issue, aggravating longstanding socio-economic and racial inequities in Colorado. Extreme weather events like smog, droughts, and wildfires have become more frequent, posing economic challenges and endangering the health of our communities, particularly people of color and households earning low incomes. Deteriorating air and water quality, food and water shortages, and property damages are just a few of the threats that climate change poses to the physical health and well-being of Coloradan workers and families.



9to5 member Brandy speaks at a rally in July 2021 to call on federal elected officials to act on climate, care, jobs, and justice.



Picture of the Marshall Fire taken by Saba Ismail on December 30, 2021.

Projections show the state's average temperature could be five degrees higher by 2050.¹¹ The higher temperatures will likely increase the severity and frequency of wildfires, droughts, blizzards, and heatwaves, potentially destroying properties, homes, and livelihoods and endangering human lives.

In September 2021, 17 Denver public schools closed or sent students home early on an extremely hot Friday because the temperature hit 97 degrees, and due to lack of air conditioning, they could not keep temperatures at a reasonable level indoors.¹² Similar circumstances led 32 Denver public schools to end classes early in September 2022 due to extreme heat.¹³ Parents who cannot afford daycare services have to take a day off to take care of their children, many times without any wage replacement. As the impacts of climate change worsen, Colorado's low-income families and economically disadvantaged students will face increasing barriers to accessing quality education in a safe and healthy academic environment.

As 9to5 begins our organizational engagement with climate justice, we aim to uphold principles of a Just Transition.



PRINCIPLES OF JUST TRANSITION FROM THE CLIMATE JUSTICE ALLIANCE¹⁴

As a member-based organization rooted in values of collective liberation, we aim to develop our climate justice platform to adhere to these principles and platforms, in collaboration with our grassroots climate justice committee.

A Just Transition Moves Us Toward Buen Vivir

Buen Vivir means that we can live well without living better at the expense of others. Workers, community residents, women, and Indigenous Peoples around the world have a fundamental human right to clean, healthy, and adequate air, water, land, food, education, and shelter. We must have just relationships with each other and with the natural world, of which we are a part. The rights of peoples, communities, and nature must supersede the rights of the individual.

A Just Transition Creates Meaningful Work

A Just Transition centers on the development of human potential, creating opportunities for people to learn, grow, and develop to their full capacities and interests. We are all born leaders, and a regenerative economy supports and nurtures that leadership. In the process, we are transforming ourselves, each other, our communities, and our society as a whole. Meaningful work is life-affirming.



Anyela Melissa and her family camping in Colorado.

A Just Transition Upholds Self-Determination

All peoples have the right to participate in decisions that impact their lives. This requires democratic governance in our communities, including our workplaces. Communities must have the power to shape their economies, as producers, as consumers, and in our relationships with each other. Not only do we have the right to self-determination, but self-determination is one of our greatest tools to realize the world we need. The people who are most affected by the extractive economy—the frontline workers and the fenceline communities—have the resilience and expertise to be in the leadership of crafting solutions.



9to5 organizers cool off with paletas after knocking on doors to fill out climate justice surveys.

A Just Transition Equitably Redistributes Resources and Power

We must work to build new systems that are good for all people, and not just a few. Just Transition must actively work against and transform current and historic social inequities based on race, class, gender, immigrant status, and other forms of oppression. Just Transition fights to reclaim capital and resources for the regeneration of geographies and sectors of the economy where these inequities are most pervasive.



A Just Transition Requires Regenerative Ecological Economics

Just Transition must advance ecological resilience, reduce resource consumption, restore biodiversity and traditional ways of life, and undermine extractive economies, including capitalism, that erode the ecological basis of our collective well-being. This requires a re-localization and democratization of primary production and consumption by building up local food systems, local clean energy, and small-scale production that are sustainable economically and ecologically. This also means producing to live well without living better at the expense of others.

A Just Transition Retains Culture and Tradition

Capitalism has forced many communities to sacrifice culture and tradition for economic survival. It has also defaced and destroyed land held as sacred. Just Transition must create inclusionary spaces for all traditions and cultures, recognizing them as integral to a healthy and vibrant economy. It should also make reparations for land that has been stolen and/or destroyed by capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, genocide, and slavery.

A Just Transition Embodies Local, Regional, National, and International Solidarity

A Just Transition must be liberatory and transformative. The impacts of the extractive economy know no borders. We recognize the interconnectedness of our communities as well as our issues. Therefore, our solutions call for local, regional, national, and global solidarity that confronts imperialism and militarism.

A Just Transition Builds What We Need Now

We must build the world we need now. This may begin at a local small scale, and must expand to begin to displace extractive practices. We must build and flex the muscles needed to meet our communities' needs.



Climate Justice Collaborative of Boulder County is an example of local governments prioritizing justice while addressing the impacts of climate change.



END NOTES

1. <https://www.ucsusa.org/climate/disinformation>
<https://coloradolatinopolicyagenda.org/>
<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/news-events/updated-tool-browse-local-opinion-data-with-the-yale-climate-opinion-factsheets-2-0/>
2. <https://coloradolatinopolicyagenda.org/>
3. <https://www.mdpi.com/2225-1154/8/1/12/htm>
4. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redlining/>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/climate/redlining-racism-air-pollution.html>
6. <https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2022/06/environmental-racism-how-historic-redlining-continues.html>
7. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TLA1456-1.html>
8. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/women-of-color-and-the-wage-gap/>
9. <https://mappingforej.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/MEJ-Press-Release-2.pdf>
10. <https://www.coloradofiscal.org/colorado-2050-climate-change/library/reports/>
11. <https://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/colorados-climate-and-colorados-health>
12. <https://coloradosun.com/2021/09/16/ways-colorado-climate-change-happening-now/>
13. <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/extreme-heat-forces-32-denver-public-schools-end-class-early/>
14. https://climatejusticealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CJA_JustTransition_Principles_final_hi-rez.pdf



