



Underfunded and Underprotected: Regional Analysis of Food Insecurity and Climate Policy Gaps

A comparative research initiative (Buffalo, NY and Baltimore, MD) by Youth in Macro, supported by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars' Carnegie Young Leaders for Civic Preparedness Program

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2025

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Executive Summary

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This community-centered research initiative investigates how chronic disinvestment, food apartheid, and climate vulnerability endanger Black communities in Buffalo, NY, while also offering a comparative lens on Baltimore, MD, to understand shared challenges and diverse local solutions. Grounded in interviews, policy analysis, and community storytelling, the project seeks to amplify local voices, document grassroots efforts, and generate actionable policy recommendations.

Buffalo's East Side, one of the most segregated and under-resourced urban neighborhoods in the U.S., has faced deadly consequences of institutional failure from the 2022 blizzard to the Tops supermarket mass shooting. In Baltimore, similar patterns of racialized disinvestment, aging infrastructure, and food insecurity shape daily life in historically Black neighborhoods. By studying both cities together, we hope to illuminate how structural neglect manifests in different contexts while showcasing the resilience and leadership already present on the ground.

Our research examines both New York and Maryland state-level policies related to emergency preparedness, food justice, and public investment. It centers the lived experiences of elders, youth, caregivers, and local organizers aiming to not only highlight systemic barriers but also strengthen and support community-led solutions such as mutual aid networks, urban farming, and policy advocacy.

Background

In 2022 East Buffalo, New York experienced a devastating loss to the community when a racist shooter assaulted the only food market within their area (Community Health Center of Buffalo, 2022). TOPS was known as the sole provider of groceries within the 78% black area of East Buffalo, NY. After a 20 year battle to have the supermarket available to the community, servicing a community that has been redlined through instituting a grocery gap that creates food apartheid to minorities. In tandem with issues of policy and care from the government that led to the Buffalo Blizzard of 2022 (Democrat & Chronicle, 20223). Disinvestment and disconnectedness from the experiences of minority communities from government officials has created multiple gaps addressed in this research including food apartheid, preventative extreme weather measures, and disability related care.

Food insecurity is prevalent in both East Buffalo and Baltimore. As noted by both Capozziello (2024) and Muench (2024) systematic racism has dismantled both communities' ability to have nourishing and safe food. Nourishment is not just about the amount of calories, carbohydrates, or fiber one consumes. There is more to consider than food when one thinks of nourishment; social, environmental, financial, and spiritual nourishment also affect a person. Systematic oppression and neglect refrain from the building of overall nourishment from a community of people. This research looks to examine the underfunded and underprotected nature of East Buffalo, New York; while also examining comparative cities such as Baltimore, Maryland.

METHODOLOGY

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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The research team conducted interviews with grassroots organizations in Buffalo, NY, and surveyed residents in Baltimore, MD, about food insecurity in their communities. 15 people participated: 9 completed the survey, and 6 contributed through organization and community interviews in Buffalo, NY.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Buffalo NY

At a community event hosted by Eastside Stewards in Buffalo, NY, Amou Mawien spoke with an East Side resident and longtime gardener about her experiences. She shared, “Food insecurity is definitely a problem within our city. I don’t have a car, so it’s always been challenging for me to access fresh food. That’s why I started a garden in my backyard.” Drawing from this personal challenge, she now supports others: “People usually come to me for advice on gardening. I’ve set up gardens at my parents’ house, my family’s houses, and now I help others do the same.”

One of the many resources that Buffalo, NY, residents across the west side and east side have turned to is organizations like Grassroots Garden of WNY, which helps turn empty lots into gardens. When asked, “How does your organization help those who are food insecure?” Tim, GGWNY, “At the same time, a single community garden does not produce enough food to feed, you know, even the whole block for the whole summer. It supplements groceries, for sure, but it's not something where, you know, a family of five can say, all right, I'm gonna get past my produce from the media garden this summer.”.

Baltimore MD

In a Baltimore MD, resident Samyra stated “I feel like food insecurity is a big thing in Baltimore but I have not seen this issue be truly addressed. As someone with no car, Harris teeter and Streets market is was to expensive and getting to an affordable grocery store will have me jump on the bus. I can't carry all my belongings to the bus, that is unreliable “

Regional Analysis: Buffalo NY & Baltimore MD

Food insecurity is a significant issue across the US. In this report, we will focus specifically on Black communities in Buffalo, NY, and Baltimore, MD.



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Why these two cities?

Both cities are post-industrial cities with shrinking populations and have a majority-Black neighborhoods facing food apartheid. Baltimore, MD, and Buffalo, NY, use grassroots, community-led solutions to fill the gap. By comparing them, we learn what works in different contexts, we identify shared policy failures, we highlight community resilience and advocacy models, and the findings can inform other cities with similar histories.

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Food Insecure Areas

Buffalo NY: East and West Buffalo

- 45% of people in Buffalo and Erie County live below the poverty line, and more than 12% of Erie County is food insecure. - Buffalo Healthy Living

Baltimore, MD: Food insecurity is more prominent in East & West Baltimore neighborhoods

- "Nearly one out of four Baltimore City residents and one out of three Baltimore County residents reported trusting their local government to do the right thing most of the time." -JHU

Written By Esther Hilaire

NY State Policy

Executive Summary

This policy brief analyzes how climate justice and emergency infrastructure policies impact historically marginalized Black neighborhoods in Buffalo and Rochester, New York. This brief critically evaluates the New York State Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA) and the federal Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program. While both policies provide frameworks for plans to address climate-related risks, systemic barriers persist in the prevention of equitable access to their benefits. The brief also identifies gaps in implementation, highlights impacts on surrounding communities, and offers targeted recommendations to advance justice-based infrastructure investment and disaster response.

Approaches

- Policy Review: Analysis of New York State climate legislation, FEMA documentation, and local government climate adaptation plans.
- Data Mapping: Comparison of funding recipients with environmental justice maps and historically redlined neighborhoods.
- Stakeholder Input: Preliminary stakeholder interviews with local policy professionals, Black farmers across the Northeast & NY area, elderly populations, emergency managers, and community-based organizations.

Food Policy Analysis

Nourish New York

- Nourish New York (2020) strengthens farms and food banks by purchasing surplus state-grown products and distributing millions of meals. While effective in moving fresh food into the charitable system, reliance on existing food bank networks limits equitable access. Without neighborhood-level transparency, it remains unclear whether high-need and predominantly Black communities are proportionally served.

Actionable recommendations

1. Publish neighborhood-level distribution data and targets. From what can be determined, both Nourish NY and other major distributors should publish their deliveries by ZIP code or census tract and compare that with estimates of food insecurity and demographic data, at least quarterly.
2. Provide/establish grants for cold storage for perishable food items, trucks, staffing and partner capacity buildings (i.e churches, community centers, and smaller pantries) in neighborhoods that are disproportionately food insecure to ensure that resources are reaching areas of need accurately.
3. Prioritize community partnerships and mobile markets with equity metrics.

Conclusion

While BRIC offer frameworks for climate resilience and emergency preparedness, their benefits remain out of reach for many of the communities most in need.

Written By Zamaria Bethea

Disinvestment in Baltimore

Executive Summary

Baltimore's housing and food systems are deeply shaped by structural racism. The 2007 inclusionary housing law was a missed opportunity to disrupt cycles of vacancy and displacement in Black neighborhoods. These same neighborhoods face food apartheid, where systemic disinvestment limits access to affordable, nutritious food. Addressing either issue in isolation will not solve the crisis. Baltimore must adopt stronger inclusionary housing mandates, support Black-led community land ownership, and create policies that treat food access and housing justice as inseparable.

Approach and Results

- This brief draws on findings from the Maryland Center on Economic Policy, Baltimore City planning data, and food justice organizations. It emphasizes the
- connection between racist land use patterns and both vacancy and food insecurity, offering policy ideas that address both.

Relevant Background

Baltimore's food and housing inequities are rooted in structural racism, from the 1910 racial zoning ordinance to redlining and predatory lending. Disinvestment has left many majority-Black neighborhoods—such as Sandtown-Winchester, Broadway East, and Upton, with high vacancy, poor infrastructure, and limited food access.

Policy responses have been weak: the 2007 Inclusionary Housing Law produced only 37 affordable units in 16 years due to loopholes, while initiatives like the Baltimore Food Policy Initiative and Green Network Plan remain underfunded and slow-moving. As of 2024, over 15,000 vacant properties remain concentrated in Black neighborhoods, many of which overlap with city-designated "Food Priority Areas" suffering high rates of diet-related illness and low supermarket access.

The move towards the term coined by Karen Washington, residents surveyed have noted that they describe the systemic neglect as "food apartheid" rather than simple food deserts. Proposed solutions emphasize affordable access to groceries, support for Black-led food justice organizations, mobile produce delivery, investment in local farms, and community control over land and food systems.

Results

Baltimore's housing and food access policies have failed to address racial inequities. Over 15,000 vacant properties, mostly in historically redlined Black neighborhoods—overlap with designated Food Priority Areas marked by poor supermarket access, high diet-related illness, and low vehicle ownership. The 2007 Inclusionary Housing Law produced only 37 affordable units in 16 years, as developers largely avoided requirements through waivers and loopholes.

Written By Cydney Doughty

Food Apartheid, Psychological Harm, and Community Healing: A Multilevel Analysis of Baltimore's Black Communities

Historical context:

The prevalence of food apartheid in Baltimore's Black communities is a direct result of systemic racism, discriminatory urban planning, and chronic disinvestment. Unlike "food desert," which implies a natural condition, "food apartheid" acknowledges the intentional, racialized denial of food access. From redlining and highway construction to supermarket disinvestment and policy neglect, structural racism created environments where Black residents disproportionately suffer food insecurity. By the 1980s and 1990s, national grocery chains withdrew, leaving corner stores and fast food outlets. Today, over 30% of Black residents live in areas with limited access to fresh, affordable food, compared to only 8% of white residents.

Approach and Results

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Psychological Analysis

Sense of Safety and Systemic Harm

In Baltimore, long-term disinvestment in Black communities has created unsafe, unstable environments—over-policed yet under-protected, with decaying infrastructure and few opportunities. Racialized policies and narratives reinforce trauma, as seen in events like the 2022 Tops supermarket shooting, which highlight vulnerability in public spaces. These conditions foster chronic hypervigilance, mistrust of institutions, and emotional distress.

Identity Development and Psychological Fragmentation

Oppressive macrosystems fracture identity development, forcing Black individuals to navigate "double consciousness." Racism embedded in institutions pathologizes Blackness, producing alienation, cultural dislocation, and diminished self-worth when cultural validation is absent.

Well-Being and Intergenerational Trauma

Neglect at every system level—family, school, community, and policy—undermines well-being. When basic needs like food and safety go unmet, toxic stress and complex trauma emerge, impairing development and mental health. As a result, Black residents face elevated risks of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and learned helplessness—outcomes rooted in systemic harm, not individual failings.

Conclusion

Food apartheid in Baltimore reflects systemic racism and structural neglect that harm Black communities' mental and emotional well-being. This harm is structural, not accidental, and addressing it requires reparative investment, culturally competent care, and community-led healing rooted in justice.

Buffalo NY, and Baltimore, MD

Statistics

According to the 2018 study, 31.5% of **Black residents**, 11.4% of Hispanic **residents** and 8.9% of **white residents live** in a Healthy **Food Priority** -JHU

85% of **Buffalo's Black residents** live on the East Side of Main Street. Racial gaps in income cost the region \$4.3 billion annually. Black residents are 6x more likely than white residents to live in a "food desert."-2022, Open Buffalo

Cross-City Points

- Both are majority-Black, post-industrial cities with shrinking populations.
- Both have legacies of redlining and disinvestment shaping food apartheid.
- Both rely on grassroots solutions (gardens, mobile markets, mutual aid) that are important but under-resourced.



Both Buffalo and Baltimore illustrate how structural racism, disinvestment, and weak policy responses have produced food apartheid in majority-Black neighborhoods. In Buffalo's East Side, decades of segregation and redlining left residents dependent on a single supermarket, later targeted in the 2022 mass shooting, while the 2022 blizzard exposed failures in emergency preparedness.

In Baltimore, overlapping housing and food inequities, marked by 15,000 vacant properties and limited access to affordable groceries reflect the legacy of redlining, highway construction, and failed inclusionary housing policies.

Despite these differences in context, the consequences are similar: **high rates of food insecurity, diet-related illness, unsafe environments, and widespread distrust in government institutions.** In both cities, residents and grassroots groups have responded with gardens, urban farms, mobile markets, and mutual aid—community-led models that supplement but cannot replace systemic reform. Taken together, Buffalo and Baltimore demonstrate that policy efforts too often emphasize volume or symbolic reform without addressing equity. Both cases underscore the need for transparent data, targeted investment in Black neighborhoods, and support for community-driven food justice strategies that confront food apartheid as a structural, not accidental, outcome.

Findings & discussion

Findings: Community-Based Food Initiatives

Community outreach is central to food equity in both East Buffalo and Baltimore. In Buffalo, grassroots programs like Food for Spirit educate residents about fresh foods and grocery access, but federal disinvestment—including \$1.3M cut from food initiatives and \$30M from AmeriCorps—has strained pantries, compared to prior Biden-Harris support for climate and disaster preparedness (\$6.9M). In Baltimore, farms such as Backyard Basecamp, Filbert Street Garden, and Plantation Park Heights Urban Farm offer educational resources, medicinal herbs, and SNAP/EBT benefits, promoting mental, physical, and emotional well-being while addressing food deserts. Despite these efforts, funding gaps and policy neglect limit their reach and sustainability, highlighting the need for protected, well-resourced, and government-recognized community programs.

Community voices remain central to this research, highlighting the importance of education and direct connections to disinvested neighborhoods. Understanding why grocery stores are scarce, how policy decisions shape access, and the lived experiences of residents is crucial for building informed community advocates. Both Baltimore and Buffalo show that community spaces—historically meant for residents—have become inaccessible, underscoring the need to document disenfranchisement and include marginalized groups, including disabled residents, in planning and advocacy.

. – Jazmine Stallings, Team Researcher

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

1. Data Transparency & Targeted Distribution

- Require food assistance programs (e.g., Nourish NY, local pantries) to publish neighborhood-level delivery data by ZIP code or census tract.
- Align distribution with measures of food insecurity, poverty, and demographic data to ensure equitable access in historically marginalized neighborhoods.

2. Community-Centered Funding & Capacity Building

- Provide grants for cold storage, transport, staffing, and infrastructure to local food programs, gardens, and smaller pantries in high-need areas.
- Prioritize funding for Black-led and other community-based organizations addressing food justice and climate resilience.

3. Mobile & Accessible Food Initiatives

- Expand mobile markets and “produce trucks” to reach residents with limited transportation.
- Pair distribution with education on nutrition, gardening, and food preparation to enhance long-term community well-being.

4. Housing & Land Equity

- Strengthen enforcement of inclusionary housing laws and expand affordable housing in disinvested neighborhoods.
- Convert vacant lots into community spaces, urban farms, or gardens with resident input and ownership.

5. Integrated Emergency Preparedness & Climate Resilience

- Invest in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation programs targeted at historically marginalized neighborhoods.
- Include accessibility planning for disabled residents and those with limited mobility.

6. Cultural Validation & Mental Health Support

- Fund programs that integrate mental health support, trauma-informed care, and cultural affirmation alongside food and housing initiatives.
- Use educational programs to empower residents as advocates, connecting lived experiences to policy and civic engagement.

7. Cross-City Learning & Policy Adoption

- Document and share best practices from community-led solutions in Buffalo and Baltimore to inform policies in other post-industrial cities with similar racialized disinvestment.

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