

YONKERS

Yonkers sees higher temps in areas impacted by discriminatory housing practice: Study

Tiffany Cusaac-Smith Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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Higher temperatures in many of Yonkers' minority communities overlap with neighborhoods cordoned off through a discriminatory housing practice known as redlining, according to a preliminary study.

With the exception of areas such as malls or major roadways, the study by Groundwork Hudson Valley found that neighborhoods of Glenwood, LaMartine Heights, Radford, Old 7th Ward and Nodine Hill as having higher median temperatures from 2013-2019.

Those hot areas have a higher percentage of poverty, large Black and Latino populations — and they are mainly in historically redlined communities, the study said.

Reducing urban heat exposure and looking at redlining, advocates argue, are equity issues as hundreds of people in America die from high heat each year.

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“The impacts of redlining as it relates to climate change — those were policies that we put in place a long time ago,” said Brigitte Griswold, executive director of Groundwork Hudson Valley. “These things didn’t happen by accident and they’re not going to be corrected by accident.”

Redlining refers to the system used by banks and the real estate industry in the 20th century to determine which neighborhoods would get loans to buy homes, and neighborhoods where people of color lived — outlined in red ink — were deemed the riskiest to invest in, USA TODAY said.

This practice prevented Black families from amassing and maintaining wealth in the same way that white families could. That resulted in the growth of the racial wealth gap and housing insecurity that persists today, USA TODAY reported.

Although the practice was banned in 1968, communities deemed "hazardous" by the federal Home Owners' Loan Corp. from 1935 to 1939 are still much more likely than other areas to be home to lower-income, minority residents, a 2018 study by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition found.

And, according to the Groundwork Hudson Valley study, that plays a role in high heat. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said around 618 people in America are killed by extreme heat every year.

Heat islands identified

Oded Holzinger, of Groundwork Hudson Valley, said one of the phenomena researched in its study was called heat islands, where dense urban areas remain hotter than suburban areas.

“The urban heat island is one of the obvious and strongest phenomena here because it has ... the strongest impact on global warming and it also has the most impact on the most vulnerable population, and a lot of people,” he said.

Holzinger said when you look deeper into that phenomenon with Yonkers anomalies emerge between hotter neighborhoods and slightly cooler areas such as Crestwood.

With the exception of places such as the Cross County Shopping Center and major roadways such as Central Park Avenue, most of the hot spots are in the five neighborhoods, according to the study.

The five neighborhoods have less tree canopy, which provides shade, the study found. And they have more impervious surfaces such as sidewalks and asphalt. Those surfaces collect the heat in the day and expel it at night, preventing the area from cooling down after sunset.

“Temperatures not having the opportunity to draw during nighttime” plays a large role in the urban heat island phenomenon, Holzinger said. “The dense urban streetscape just mitigates

that cooling factor. So, it maintains the heat through the night.”

Even on a summer day upstate, he said, an individual will start feeling the cooling factors in the evenings. In dense urban areas the impact might not be felt because of heat still coming from buildings and roads.

Moreover, hot spots are typically in areas around public housing and affordable housing by Westhab.

Implementing solutions

Now that Groundwork has more of the data, it's engaging the Yonkers community in finding ways to mitigate excessive heat in redlined communities.

The organization will work with Westhab and the Municipal Housing Authority of Yonkers. Groundwork also will conduct surveys, have virtual town halls and phone banks on tree planting projects, reflective roofing and electric bill subsidies to get the community's support.

The Municipal Housing Authority of Yonkers, which houses thousands of low- and moderate-income families in the affected areas, said that they will work to fix the issue at its properties, including providing cooling centers in preparation for blackouts.

The agency also wants to use reflective paint for roofing at public housing and increase the tree canopy in hotter neighborhoods. Adding the trees in southwest Yonkers may be an uphill drive because there's not a lot of space to put them in that area and they take great strides to preserve them.

Wilson Kimball, the agency's new president and CEO, said that mitigating heat this summer is particularly challenging as more people stay at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

“We cannot ignore how hot it has been this summer and think that business can continue as usual without finding ways to adapt the properties we manage and the properties our Section 8 tenants live in to this new reality,” Kimball added.

Contributing: USA TODAY

If you have trouble affording an air conditioner, you may be able to get assistance through the state's Heating and Cooling Assistance program.

Tiffany Cusaac-Smith covers Yonkers, the fourth-largest city in New York. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter @T_Cusaac. Sign up today for a digital subscription.