# INTERSECTIONAL CLIMATE JUSTICE: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE OF COLOR IN THE MID-ATLANTIC

by

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## ABSTRACT

Disasters worsen existing inequalities and disproportionately impact marginalized communities; thus, studies of vulnerability often assess these impacts according to social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and ability. Scholars are increasingly using the lens of intersectionality to examine differentiated vulnerability across multiple social identities, yet little empirical work has been done to understand the experiences and perceptions of climate-related disasters of LGBTQIA+ people of color. LGBTQIA+ communities are disproportionately vulnerable to extreme weather and disasters in part due to high rates of homelessness and bias in planning and response. Furthermore, LQBTQIA+ people of color, especially Black transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, face a heightened level of discrimination and violence. Considering this, we conducted a set of semi-structured interviews with those who identify as or work with LGBTQIA+ people of color, or those in the environmental justice, city planning, or government sectors in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. in order to understand the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQIA+ people of color extreme weather events or disasters. By closing this research gap, we show how the lens of intersectionality can be used to foster a more inclusive climate justice movement

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Mid-Atlantic coast of the United States is prone to climate stressors such as heat waves, flooding, extreme cold, and sea level rise (Yarnal, 2000). Those that are at the forefront of these stressors are communities of color, low-income residents, and other socioeconomically marginalized communities. Legacies of disinvestment and systemic racism drive this vulnerability and existing social stressors will only be exacerbated by the climate crisis (Hendricks & Van Zandt, 2021). The lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) shows us how oppression and power is shaped by the combination of multiple identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, age, ability, class, nationality, sexuality, and gender) therefore, it is a helpful lens to understand climate vulnerabilities (Mikulewicz, 2023). There has been a movement to understand how the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) community is disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis (Goldsmith & Bell, 2022). However, little empirical work has focused on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people of color. This project thus aims to address this gap by using the lens of intersectionality and climate change vulnerability to assess the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people of color.

In order to address these research gaps, we have examined three different research questions: 1) How do LGBTQIA+ people of color perceive climate and severe weather conditions in the Mid-Atlantic? 2) How do people working in

environmental justice and policy spaces perceive climate risks for LGBTQIA+ people of color? 3) To what degree are LGBTQIA+ people of color incorporated in policy and practice relevant to support services? Through examining these research questions, we hope to support a more inclusive climate justice movement that includes the perspectives and needs of LGBTQIA+ people of color.

# Chapter 2

# BACKGROUND

## 2.1 The Mid-Atlantic Region

The Mid-Atlantic Region (MAR) in the United States includes New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, Virginia, and Delaware. In 2024, the population is estimated to be 57.01 million (World Population Review, 2022). These states experience high population growth and hold many urban centers. Because of its built environment in low-lying areas, the MAR is highly susceptible to severe weather and disasters, putting populations at risk for these disasters (Benson et al., 2000).

The coastal areas of the MAR are prone to flooding, hurricanes, and sea-level rise. Hurricane Sandy (2012) and Hurricane Irene (2011) are notable cases that show the vulnerability of the MAR infrastructure, particularly in coastal and urban communities (Saunders & Senkbeil, 2017). The MAR also experiences other weather events such as extreme heat and cold. As shown in Table 1, flooding events were the most common extreme weather event throughout the MAR from 2014-2024 (*Storm Events Database | National Centers for Environmental Information*, n.d.). Extreme heat is the second most common event through most of MAR, except in Pennsylvania where extreme cold is second most common. Although these states experience similar severe weather patterns, each state experiences different scales of these disasters, as shown in Table 4. This points to the need to examine populations across the MAR to

better understand the ongoing climate crisis and how it may affect vulnerable populations.

Table 1. Total Occurrences of Extreme Weather Events in Mid-Atlantic region from March 1st, 2014, to March 1st 2024

| Weather event | States | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | DE | PA | NJ | MD | VA | NY |
| Flooding | 64 | > 500 | 267 | >500 | >500 | >500 |
| Hurricanes (Tropical Storm) | 6 | 10 | 36 | 19 | 91 | 25 |
| Extreme Cold | 0 | 217 | 1 | 12 | 53 | 304 |
| Extreme Heat | 10 | 64 | 67 | 76 | 41 | 88 |

Source: https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/stormevents/choosedates.jsp

Understanding the social and environmental context of the Mid-Atlantic is a critical point in understanding how vulnerabilities may be affected or exacerbated by climate crisis. Thus, in addition to weather data, demographic data helps us understand a quantitative baseline that can further guide research and policy development in order to understand current demographic trends and distributions. Current U.S Census Data provides an overview of race and ethnicity demographics MAR states as shown in Table 2 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). U.S Census Data has also released statistics related to LGBTQIA+ categorizing percentage of total same sex households for each state as shown in Table 3 (Bureau, n.d.). Furthermore, Table 4 shows statistics on same-sex relationships based on racial/ethnic group, giving insight on

quantitative data pertaining to the number of LGBTQIA+ people of color in the region. While this information provides background knowledge of a percentage of demographics for a particular area, ultimately, it does not fully capture communities that are most vulnerable or applies the lens of intersectionality to its data collection. This points to a need to utilize qualitative data and the lens of intersectionality to understand the unique experiences that these populations may face.

Table 2. Race and ethnicity demographics provided by the U.S Census Data from 2020 on Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey, Virginia, and New York.

| **Race and Ethnicity** | **State** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **DE** | **PA** | **NJ** | **MD** | **VA** | **NY** |
| White | 58.6% | 73.5% | 47.2% | 51.9% | 58.6% | 52.5% |
| Black or African American | 21.5% | 10.5% | 29.1% | 12.4% | 18.3% | 13.7% |
| American Indian and Alaskan Native | 0.3% | 0.1% | 0.2% | 0.1% | 0.2% | 0.3% |
| Asian | 4.3% | 3.9% | 6.8% | 10.2% | 7.1% | 9.5% |
| Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.1% | 0.0% |
| Some Other Race Alone | 0.5% | 0.4% | 0.6% | 0.8% | 0.5% | 1.0% |
| Two or More Races | 4.3% | 3.5% | 4.4% | 3.1% | 4.7% | 3.6% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 10.5% | 8.1% | 11.8% | 21.6% | 10.5% | 19.5% |

Table 3. Total same sex households provided by the U.S Census Data from 2023 in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, Virginia, and New York

| State | Total Same Sex Households |
|---|---|
| DE | 1.5% |
| PA | 0.9% |
| MD | 0.9% |
| NJ | 0.9% |
| VA | 0.9% |
| NY | 1.2% |

Table 4. Same sex relationships categorized by race provided by the U.S Census Data across the United States

| Race and Ethnicity | Male-Male | Female-Female |
|---|---|---|
| Black or African American | 5.7% | 8.3% |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 0.7% | 1.1% |
| Asian | 4.4% | 3.3% |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | 0.2% | 0.3% |
| Some Other Race Alone | 4.7%% | 4.4% |
| Two or More Races | 12.0% | 10.0% |
| Percent of Couples Interracial | 37.2% | 25.2% |

## 2.2 LGBTQIA+ Communities

LGBTQIA+ communities have been a target of historically and current discriminatory policies leading to high rates of homelessness, unemployment, and economic opportunities. A study found that in 2021, 17% of the LGBTQIA+ community in the US experienced poverty and 21% of transgender people experienced poverty in a year, these existing social vulnerabilities will be exacerbated by the climate crisis (Badgett et al. 2019). Furthermore, poverty statistics show additional stress for LGBTQIA+ people of color. For white LGBTQIA+ members, the poverty rate is 13.0% while for LGBTQIA+ people of color the rate is 24.7%, further highlighting the intersection of overlapping identities and how this shapes unique vulnerabilities (Badgett et al. 2019). People living in poverty are more likely to live in flood prone areas, experience health impacts from heat and cold, and lack access to resources to recover after disasters (Chalupka et al., 2020). In some cases, LGBTQIA+ people experience heightened vulnerability due to institutional homophobia and transphobia embedded in disaster relief. For example, a report found that after Hurricane Katrina, a right-winged religious group that was offering support for those that were affected by the hurricane, excluded LGBTQIA+ couples from disaster relief and support (Goldsmith & Bell, 2022). Oher instances showed that during the disaster, trans and intersex people had barriers to accessing evacuation shelters and bathrooms. (Dominey-Howes et al., 2013) This points to the need to understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ communities with climate disasters and severe weather in order to

identify ways to make disaster relief services and climate action more accessible and inclusive.

### 2.3 Communities of Color

In the US, climate change vulnerability is exacerbated by systemic processes including legacies of redlining, exclusionary zoning, and settler colonialism (Whyte, 2018). These practices caused the intentional sitting for communities of color to be situated in environmentally high-risk areas. Legacies of disinvestment create differences in neighborhood quality and exposure for communities of color and ultimately leaves these communities more vulnerable in the midst of climate disasters (Lewis et al., 2019).

Studies have shown how legacies of systematic racism and disinvestment have impacted how communities of color are impacted by climate change and other environmental stressors (Hendricks & Van Zandt, 2021). Within the MAR, a study found that 60% of African Americans in Baltimore were situated one mile from a Toxic Release Industry (Perlin et al, 2001). These communities are at higher risk of spillages and chemical releases from the impacts of severe weather. Another study found that 44% of Latino and Hispanic communities live in counties with high flood risk as opposed to 35% of non-Latinos (Hernandez, 2023). These communities are often excluded from decision making spaces about environmental and climate action due to limited access to information, language barriers, or other limits of accessibility.

This points to the need to understand the experiences of communities of color in the MAR to recognize structural injustices and legacies that have made these communities overburdened by climate disasters and to incorporate more inclusive practices for disaster mitigation.

### 2.4 Intersectional Climate Justice

Climate justice is both a movement and theoretical framework highlighting the disproportionate responsibility between high and low emitting countries are most vulnerable to climate change impacts (Sultana, 2022). It extends to the community and individual level to show differentiated climate change vulnerability across social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and class (Mikulewicz et al., 2023). Overall, climate justice seeks to expose the root causes of climate change to dismantle systematic issues.

Hurricane Katrina became a pivotal moment showing the intersection between climate and justice as a community in New Orleans was impacted by the hurricane. New Orleans experienced prior social vulnerabilities such as poverty, food insecurity, and segregation. Because of these prior social vulnerabilities, the effects of the hurricane exacerbated the community's conditions (Schlosberg et al, 2014). Furthermore, lack of support was given after the hurricane as the community received less government relief, fewer loans, and continued discrimination. Using a lens of

climate justice, this provides an example of how climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

The lens of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, a legal scholar and social scientist who highlighted discrimination against Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality recognizes that overlapping identities create unique experiences and create forms of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality is useful to researchers as it offers explanations as to complex social and political climates and provides a lens to examine how these inform the inclusion or exclusion of marginalized identities in policy and practice. It has since applied to study differential impacts of climate change and political representation.

The lens of intersectionality is applied in this study examine the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ people of color using qualitative methods. This lens allows us to examine forms of oppression that might make LGBTQIA+ people of color more susceptible to climate and severe weather. Using a qualitative method, we can understand prior notions of social vulnerabilities that LGBTQIA+ people of color face and how this may be exacerbated by the climate crisis. As the climate justice movement continues and grows, it is critical to see apply the lens of intersectionality to this movement to make a more inclusive movement and to further support and serve communities needs prior, in the midst, and after a disaster.

# Chapter 3

# METHODS

## 3.1 Interview Protocol Methodology: Perspectives from Environmental Justice and LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Groups

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to conduct semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals (Table 5) from August 2023 to May 2024. Interviews were conducted from August 2023 to January 2025. Interviews took place with those who were LGBTQIA+ people of color and those who work in LGBTQIA+ advocacy to examine the needs and challenges within the LGBTQIA+ people of color community across the Mid-Atlantic. Other interviews were conducted in the perspective of environmental justice activists to see if and how they apply the lens of intersectionality or LGBTQIA+ people of color into their practices. Eight interviewees identified as with LGBTQIA+ advocacy, and four interviewees were with environmental justice groups. About five of these interviewees were from Pennsylvania, five from Delaware, and two from Maryland. Eleven interviews took place virtually and one was in person based on the interviewee's choice. They were around 30-45 minutes in length. Nine interviewees were from urban centers such as Wilmington, DE, Philadelphia, PA, Annapolis, MD, Allentown, PA, and Reading, PA (Figure 1). Two interviewees were from the rural areas of the MAR. This is important to note that these differences in types of communities may play a role in the unique social and climate vulnerability their community might perceive.

Interviewees from environmental justice advocacy groups were asked sets of questions on the following topics: 1) information about their background and work that they are part of 2) current community challenges that are of concern 3) memorable severe weather events that may occur in their community 4) how they see their work intersecting with the LGBTQIA+ people of color community. LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups had a similar interview protocol; however, they were also asked questions about topics including: 1) if and how their work intersects with disaster preparedness or the environment and 2) if and how they see unique social and environmental challenges for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Semi-structured interviews were used to understand respondent's emotions and perspectives of lived experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) and allow interviewees to shape the conversation. Furthermore, qualitative data allows us to see any emerging themes that may be consistent throughout the interviews.

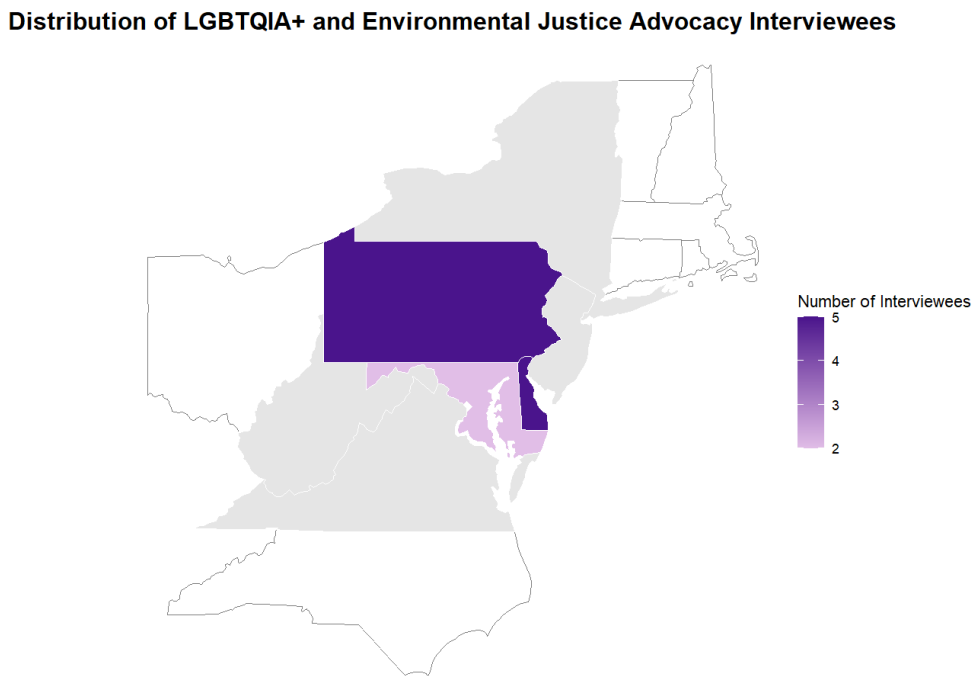


Figure 1. Locations of interviewees that work in environmental justice and LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the Mid-Atlantic

### 3.2 Data Analysis: Perspectives from Environmental Justice and LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Groups

Once interviews were conducted, they were then transcribed verbatim. Interview data was then examined through NVivo using a combination of inductive and deductive coding approaches. That is, some of our codes are based on existing literature related to our research questions, and some emerged as key themes as we analyzed the data (Table 5). In this discussion we use LGBTQIA+ people of color to acknowledge a broad spectrum of identities.

Table 5. Codebook used to code interviews conducted with LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups and Environmental Justice Organizations

| Name | Description | Citation |
|---|---|---|
| Climate Justice | Rooted in exposing the root causes of climate change to dismantle systemic oppression | Sultana, 2022 |
| COVID | Interviewee refers to influence of COVID on LGBTQIA+ people of color | Flagg & Campbell, 2021 |
| Discrimination | Interviewee refers to how LGBTQIA+ people of color face heightened discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and/or sexuality | Meyer, D. (2015) |
| Extreme Cold | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to how extreme cold is a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Cited in Interview |
| Extreme Heat | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to extreme heat being a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Conlon, K. C., et al., (2020) |
| Flooding | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to how flooding is a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Goldsmith, L., et al., (2022) |
| Food Security | Social Vulnerability; LGBTQIA+ people of color facing food security issues | Odoms-Young, A. (2019) |
| Housing | Social vulnerabilities; expression of LGBTQIA+ people of color facing homelessness or housing insecurity | Ecker, J. (2016) |
| Hurricanes | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to how hurricanes are a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Cited in Interview |
| Inclusive Policy | Interviewee sites what inclusive action agencies should take to include the needs of LGBTQIA+ people of color | Newell, P., et al., (2021) |
| Intersectionality | Rooted in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory | Crenshaw (1989) |
| Sanctuary | Interviewee refers to the experiences LGBTIA+ people of color in relation to safety | Cited in Interview |
| Support Services | Interviewee describes the quality of places and resources to go to into the midst of a disaster i.e community centers, homeless shelters, churches, etc. | Cited in Interview |

To ensure accuracy of codes, a comparison of code analysis was done of two transcripts was done between two users. We obtained a kappa score of 0.44 which is considered moderate agreement. We then went back into data to understand differences that may have arose and found that many texts were coded similarly but at various lengths.

### 3.3 Interview Protocol Methodology: Perspectives from LGBTQIA+ community members

Interviews with LGBTQIA+ community members were conducted from October 2024-December 2024. We posted an interview flyer in person and online in LGBTQIA+ community centers and other areas in major cities such as Philadelphia. We interviewed fourteen individuals who identified as LGBTQIA+ people of color community members. Six interviewees were from Pennsylvania, three interviewees were from New Jersey, three interviewees were from New York, and two interviewees were from Virginia. Community members were compensated with a $50 VISA gift card for their time and participation. Figure 2 highlights the specific areas of which community members are from.

All 14 interviews took place virtually over Zoom. Interviewees were asked sets of questions on the following topics: 1) information about their background and where they are from 2) positive attributes about their community 3) current community challenges that are of concern 4) memorable severe weather events that may occur in their community 5) current community resources to access that are for LGBTQIA+

people of color 6) how government and policy can be more inclusive to LGBTQIA+ people of color.

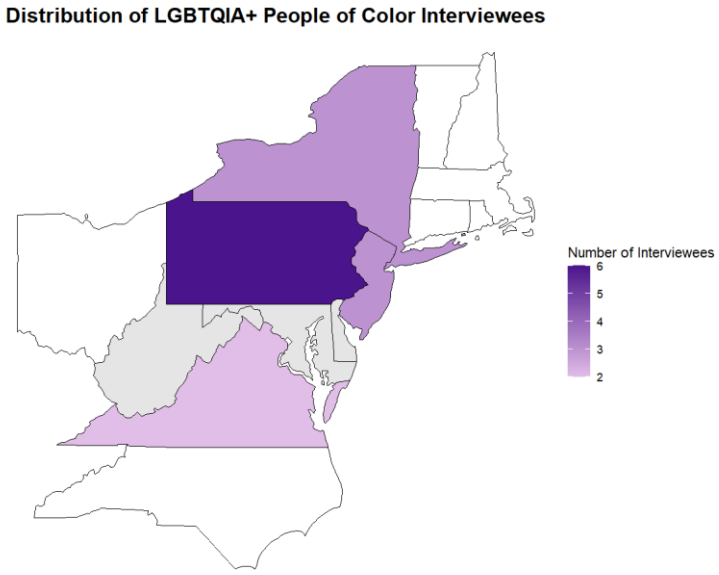


Figure 2. Locations of interviewees that identify as LGBTQIA+ people of color community members.

### 3.4 Data Analysis: Perspectives from LGBTQIA+ people of color community members

Due to differing themes that were more apparent in the community members, a different codebook was used based on these emerging themes as shown in Table 6. New codes were added such as acceptance, displacement, education, employment, mental health, outreach, and representation. Other codes were kept such as housing, extreme cold, extreme heat, intersectionality, etc. However, some codes were not used such as COVID, climate justice, and hurricanes because they did not appear in these interviews.

Table 6. Codebook used to code interviews conduct with LGBTQIA+ community members.

| Name | Description | Citation |
|---|---|---|
| Acceptance | Interviewee refers to the feeling of inclusivity and acceptance in their community | Cited in Interviews |
| Discrimination | Interviewee refers to how LGBTQIA+ people of color face heightened discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and/or sexuality | Meyer, 2015 |
| Education | Interviewee describes there needs to be education to schools or disaster relief services to facilitate more cultural competency | Gorman-Murray et al., 2014 |
| Employment | Social Vulnerabilities; expression of LGBTQIA+ people of color facing discrimination in workplace or difficulty finding work | Cited in Interviews |
| Exclusion | Actions or policies that have been used to harm LGBTQIA+ people of color | Sears & Mallory, 2011 |
| Extreme Cold | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to how extreme cold is a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Cited in Interviews |
| Extreme Heat | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to extreme heat being a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Conlon et al., 2020 |
| Flooding | Climate Disaster; Interviewee refers to how flooding is a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color | Goldsmith et al., 2022 |
| Health | Social Vulnerabilities; LGBTQIA+ facing concerns with access to health care | Bovicini, 2017 |
| Housing | Social Vulnerabilities; expression of LGBTQIA+ people of color facing homelessness or housing insecurity | Ecker 2016 |
| Inclusive Policy | Interviewee sites what inclusive actions should be taken to include the needs of LGBTQIA+ people of color | Newell et al. 2021 |
| Intersectionality | Rooted in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory | Crenshaw, 1989 |
| Mental Health | Interviewee refers to mental health issues associated due to social or climate vulnerabilities | Oliveira et al., 2024 |
| Outreach | Interviewee describes how better outreach can be done from community centers, disaster relief centers, and churches to better serve LGBTQIA+ people of color | Cited in Interview |
| Representation | For LGBTQIA+ people of color are incorporated in government, society, workplace, etc. to increase visibility | Cited in Interview |
| Sanctuary | Interviewee refers to the Experiences of LGBTQIA+ people of color in relation to safety | Cited in Interview |
| Support Services | Interviewee describes the quality of places and resources to go in the midst of a disaster i.e community centers, homeless shelters, churches, etc. | Cited in Interview |

# Chapter 4

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I will discuss the three emerging groups: environmental justice advocacy, LGBTQIA+ advocacy, and LGBTQIA+ people of color. Through each of these groups, I will explore their unique responses pertaining to how they perceive social vulnerabilities such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, discrimination, and others. I will then explore the responses to memorable severe weather and thoughts about climate change. I will include summarizing emerging themes of how each group would like to inclusive policy to help mitigate the impacts of both social and climate vulnerabilities as well as recommendations that could be pointed towards government and relief organization. Ultimately, understanding these individual groups will help in identifying overlapping themes or gaps between each of these groups.

## 4.1 Environmental Justice Advocacy

### 4.1.1 Social Vulnerabilities

EJ advocacy groups expressed that housing has been a concern for many members of their community. For example, one interviewee stated, “So one of the ways we have had experienced is extreme heat. The past couple summers as we all know have been getting hotter and there's a fairly significant population of individuals who are without housing currently. . .” (Interview 5) This shows how environmental

justice activists perceive how pre-existing social vulnerabilities may be exacerbated during severe weather events, particularly heat.

Another interviewee explained how the climate crisis may impact one's social vulnerability, using the example of how the remnants of Hurricane Ida left many people in the community vulnerable and without housing, "But because the storm wasn't severe, we didn't get the brunt of Hurricane Ida, we got the remnants. FEMA said yeah, but we can't give you federal funds that give direct assistance to those that were affected, but we can help out with homeowners, but renters were left out in the cold." (Interview 6). This highlights how climate disasters may exacerbate social vulnerabilities and how disaster response systems may fail to address the needs of marginalized communities. In this case, homeowners were more likely to receive FEMA support, while renters, who are often more socially vulnerable, were unable to receive support. This is consistent with other studies, of how those living in New Orleans had to evacuate during Hurricane Ida and there was limited federal and local aid to help these communities (Trivedi et al., 2024). Further, this explains how communities might not be able to fully recover from a disaster as the failure in response and lack of aid may inhibit a community's physical and emotional rebuild (Storr & Haeffele-Balch, 2012). This is especially true for those who experience preexisting social vulnerabilities and cannot be prepared for a disaster.

### 4.1.2 Climate Disasters

EJ advocacy groups also explained that hurricanes, flooding, and extreme heat were major concerns for their communities. Many activists were concerned about how both slow and sudden onset hazards, especially flooding and extreme heat, would exacerbate pre-existing social vulnerabilities such as housing. Two interviewees specified how local communities in their region are facing exacerbated effects due to historical discrimination and lack of climate mitigation. Furthermore, one interviewee stated that Hurricane Ida left many displaced in the local area. These interviewees highlight the types of ongoing climate disasters and what communities are impacted (Table 7).

Table 7. Responses to memorable severe weather events or thoughts about climate change from EJ interviewees

| | |
|---|---|
| Flooding-Interview 6 | "The storm systems, or the sewer system from places like Southbridge. Rather than having separate storm and sewage systems, they have a combined storm and sewer system**. So, when flooding occurs in the sewers, overwhelmed and the water comes out of the sewer into the street, so does the sewage.**" |
| Hurricane-Interview 6 | **"The more recent one I think that was significant was back in Hurricane Ida couple years ago we had several families that were displaced** because of you know the flooding that came from the Hurricane and we didn't get the full brunt of hurricane here in Delaware, we saw the remnants that would put those remnants resulted in five inches of rain in the short period of time. |
| Extreme Heat-Interview 5 | **"Yeah so one of the ways we have had experienced is extreme heat.** The past couple summers as we all know have been getting hotter and there's a significant population of individuals who are without housing." |

### 4.1.3 Inclusive Policy

When asked if and how they considered LGBTQIA+ people of color in environmental justice, one interviewee described how there has been little consideration of this group in climate crises as this group has not been on the radar for environmental justice practices. At the same time, although there has been little recognition previously, work is being done to address this gap. One interviewee stated, “So what we're trying to do is as part of the proactive community engagement work that we are doing what identifying LGBTQ+ groups to talk to them about environmental justice.” (Interview 7) This interview highlighted the perspective of environmental groups and whether they include LGBTQIA+ people of color into conversations in environmental justice

## 4.2 LGBTQIA+ Advocacy

### 4.2.1 Social Vulnerabilities

LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups expressed that pre-existing social vulnerabilities such as housing and food insecurity were a concern amongst LGBTQIA+ people and LGBTQIA+ people of color. One of the interviewees stated that LGBTQIA+ people of color experience food insecurity as many community members is not situated near local grocery stores. This is consistent with another study that examined pulse survey data and found that members could not afford more food and were unable to get to the

store to buy food because of lack of transportation or health limitations (Singh et al., 2022).

Housing was the most common themes that emerged from the interviews. First, respondents highlighted that LGBTQIA+ people with unstable housing were particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events due to their high level of exposure. Second, in the perspective of an advocacy group, housing insecurity has made it difficult to reach and offer services during or after a disaster. Third, affordable housing was reported as a concern for LGBTQIA+ people of color, especially for youth. Due to the lack of supportive policies and legislation to protect LGBTQIA+ rights in certain states, LGBTQIA+ people of color move to states to maintain personal sanctuary what interviewees named as “personal sanctuary”. Members often move to urban centers with more resources and inclusive policies; however, these places often have high cost of living and can struggle to find affordable housing. Table 8 highlights particular responses from LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations.

Table 8. Responses to concerns in the community from LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations.

| | |
|---|---|
| Housing-Interview 2 | “and that can be really challenging for our community and then you know for folks that don't have you know consistent housing it also can be a lot harder to get resources and news to them in general so I do know that even we talk about you know responding to those natural disasters that are happening it's really hard sometimes to reach you that don't have a consistent address or location or a way to get a hold of them.” |
| Food Security-Interview 4 | “I think food security is a problem. We've all seen what food prices have done in the last year in particular so and while this isn't necessarily climate-related one of the problems we have with the food security system as it is so snap. |

### 4.2.2 Climate Disasters

When asked about LGBTQIA+ people of color exposure to severe weather in the MAR, interviewees mentioned that extreme cold, extreme heat, flooding, and hurricanes have been a concern for the community. Mentions of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Isabel, and Hurricane Agnes were particularly memorable across LGBTQIA+ advocacy interviewees. Interviewees mentioned how flooding forces people from their homes and that LGBTQIA+ people may face increased challenges when finding resources. Extreme heat was also mentioned as an important risk for a variety of reasons. One interviewee stated that extreme heat was a concern, especially during Pride events, and that advocacy groups now must consider access to water or cooling stations. One interviewee also expressed that those who wear binders are especially vulnerable to harmful health effects from extreme heat. Lastly, an interviewee mentioned how extreme cold has been an issue in particularly Pennsylvania as they have noticed the winters continue to get colder. Table 9 highlights LGBTQIA+ advocacy responses to climate change and severe weather.

Table 9. Responses to memorable severe weather events or thoughts about climate change from LGBTQIA+ advocacy organizations

| | |
|---|---|
| Hurricane-Interview 8 | "and we've really seen that with **Hurricane Katrina and what happened to the LGBT population and their accessibility towards some of the some of the things that we're needed, some of the resources**." |
| Extreme Heat-Interview 12 | "And I guess like when it comes to like heat . . . I could think of was I feel like I've had like offhanded conversations about like trans masc members and binding in the heat, which is just a cautionary thing in and of itself" |
| Extreme Cold-Interview 3 | "Its been getting colder that I have ever, and I have lived in Pennsylvania my entire life. **It is colder than I have ever remembered it. I live in an apartment complex and like our pipes last year that we didn't have water for 3 days here. I mean these building are built to be in Pennsylvania.** |
| Flooding-Interview 2 | "I would say in that particular space in Annapolis **it actually is not as directly impacting you know like a low income communities it's a lot of businesses in that area but they're still folks who aren't always going to have the money to rebuild should they get flooded out.**" |

### 4.2.3 Inclusive Policy

In terms of support needed for LGBTQIA+ communities of the color, one of the interviewees has cited that disaster relief organizations need to improve communication and resources distribution methods to be more accessible for people holding multiple marginalized identities. Furthermore, one interviewee suggested that cultural competency training for disaster relief agencies to effectively communicate with these communities. Others mentioned collaborative education between advocacy groups and disaster relief management services. Another emerging theme that was found throughout the interviews was the importance of establishing personal sanctuary and acceptance for community members and that LGBTQIA+ people should be included in conversations of climate planning and mitigation. One interviewee

highlighted (as shown in Table 10) that a pride flag can be utilized in spaces particularly in, disaster relief organizations, to make a more inclusive signal to the community when there is a disaster. Utilizing these signals can help individuals feel safe seeking support, which is vital especially in the midst of a crisis or disaster. Table 10 highlights responses of the advocacy organizations on how they would like to see inclusive policies and actions that can serve the needs for LGBTQIA+ people of color.

Table 10. Inclusive policies LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups would like to see in place.

| | |
|---|---|
| Inclusivity-Interview 2 | "there aren't that many groups of people who have the intersectional background maybe in educating these groups on what they need to be doing and so I think with government entities it can be really hard to get in and change policies and procedures from like the outside perspective **and so I think like when I think about working in these communities and working with the people in them it's really important to communicate and network with other groups that are already in the area doing the work**" |
| Intersectionality-Interview 1 | "Because every time I walk out the door I don't even know or every time I go into a business I don't know if they're going to start you know treat me and my wife weird or whatever and so I think that that frame could be really helpful we have disaster recovery experts, we have best practices, **we have research we have that so what if we what if we translate that into social supports, economic supports, political support for lgbtq people for particularly lgbtq people of color**" |
| Sanctuary-Interview 1 | "But maybe it could have been refined a little bit more and so I think about like what are people's needs in natural disasters and how can we make sure that they're met because their resource guide was like well **you know if you're part of the lgbtq community like things like a pride flag that can signal somebody is like a safe space or a safe person to go to can be really important. And so what are the needs in those spaces?**" |

One of the themes of exclusionary housing seen across interviews with LGBTQIA+ advocacy was related to shelters. Some of the interviewees mentioned

that shelters, are not accessible, starting that “there is a serious lack of places that are 100% affirming and accessible, so we really don't have many places and the places that we do have they’re at capacity, so they can't accept anyone and they're not purely accepting LGBT people.” (Interview 8) These results are consistent with a study that focused on LGBTQIA+ people of color youth in shelters and found that their participants indicated stress as shelters segregated based on gender identity and participants detailed how they were placed with a gender category that did not fit their identity (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). Furthermore, one interviewee noted that community members may not stay in the shelter because of unsafe practices, “Right now I have three people that I know that are living under a bridge. And they may be living there because they choose to live there because they feel the shelter is not safe and, in some cases, it is not and then in others it's no room at the end. So that is a huge problem and as climate changes and it gets colder or rainier or whatever there's going to be more people who are displaced and need those services.” (Interview 4) This interview particularly highlights how their experience has seen LGBTQIA+ members not being able to access shelters, furthering their exacerbation to climate change. Ultimately, these interviewees experienced that exclusionary actions that occur within shelters or other support services have left many LGBTQIA+ people of color vulnerable.

### 4.3 LGBTQIA+ People of Color

#### 4.3.1 Social Vulnerabilities

When asked about stressors and challenges, interviewees reported that they have experienced levels of discrimination in employment, healthcare, and housing (Table 11). This echoes previous work that has focused on the unique challenges that LGBTQIA+ people of color may face (Kum, 2017; Meyer, 2015). Specifically, interviewees described how their gender identity or sexual orientation has led to discrimination in the workplace. Interviewees cited that it is difficult to be motivated to find employment due to consistent discrimination in the workplace. This is consistent with a study that found LGBTQIA+ people of color were more likely to experience discrimination and harassment due to sexual identity that white LGBTQIA+ members (Sears et al., 2024).

Further, interviewees described discrimination in healthcare where they or someone they know have difficulty accessing medications or medical facilities due to being part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This is consistent with other another study that focused on how transgender people of color interviewees reported poor healthcare experiences by highlighting when participants went to LGBTQIA+ friendly healthcare providers, they feared they may experience racism. Further, when they went to providers of color, they feared they may experience transphobia (Howard et al., 2019). This provides the experiences that LGBTQIA+ people of color face in different settings where one might face discrimination.

Other interviewees cited how housing has been difficult to access for the LGBTQIA+ community. One interviewee explained that members in their community were homeless and could not receive support services from local organizations because the organization itself was lacking capacity to meet the community needs'. Finally, other interviewees have discussed that mental health struggles are common. One interviewee cited how the community often feels isolated and lonely, which negatively affects their mental health. Table 11 displays example responses showing unique challenges that LGBTQIA+ people of color may face.

Table 11. Responses from LGBTQIA+ people of color of what are unique challenges ongoing in the community.

| | |
|---|---|
| Employment- Interview 15 | "I'd say, for example, providing employment. That's the most crucial one because, you know, many employers don't want to employ someone who looks like me." |
| Healthcare- Interview 25 | "On my situation, my myself, the challenge that I have faced largely is to acquire the medical facilities. Before I joined the community that I'm in, when I tried visiting the hospitals, some hospital did not accept me and give me the medical support because I am part of the LGBTQ community." |
| Housing- Interview 28 | "So we had an issue because we are most of us were homeless, and accommodating all of us was quite a problem, a big issue because they were not financially capable at that time. So at least let the government allocate enough money to these organizations because they help us a lot." |
| Mental Health- Interview 27 | One thing I can say is isolation. You know, LGBT, we have individual, and we always remain lonely. We feel always like we are isolated. We live in our own small space that normally affect our mental health." |

Interviewees have identified that there are unique challenges associated as LGBTQIA+ people of color. One interviewee said, "I'd say as a person of color and a

member of the LGBTQ community, you are facing more than one societal challenge. I'm thinking, according to my experience, if you're not maybe Black, but also still of the LGBTQ community, you are at a better position than a Black person who is also LGBTQ community because you will face, maybe a ridicule on your sexual orientation and because of your color." This highlights how the lens of intersectionality reveals unique social vulnerabilities of overlapping marginalized identities.

All 14 interviewees who identified as LGBTQIA+ people of color community members have mentioned a concern or have experienced some sort of discrimination related to sexual orientation and identity. Further, over half of interviews have mentioned discrimination in employment, healthcare, education, and housing. This highlights how various forms of discrimination are unique vulnerabilities that LGBTQIA+ people of color face. Further, this may allude as a more of a primary focus of concern for community members rather than severe weather or climate change.

### 4.3.2 Climate Disasters

Interviewees have cited flooding, extreme heat, and extreme cold as a concern for their community. One interviewee cited major flooding that occurred in 2024, which impacted transportation and caused property damage. Another interviewee mentioned how in mid-July that extreme heat prohibited them from going outside and

changed their daily routine. Lastly, a participant referenced extreme cold during which they saw others in their community suffer from these conditions due to lack of housing. Although not included as an overarching theme, two participants from New Jersey highlighted that they experienced earthquakes as a notable concern, showing the variability of disasters across states within the Mid-Atlantic. Table 12 highlights the responses of LGBTQIA+ community members who shared their experiences on climate disasters.

Table 12. Responses to memorable severe weather events or thoughts about climate change.

| | |
|---|---|
| Extreme Cold-Interview 19 | "Personally, I can manage, but I see around me some people don't have housing, and it's usually so hard for them. Some even die because of is it hypothermia or something of the sorts? Extreme cold conditions they live from it. |
| Extreme Heat-Interview 17 | " there's that time back mid-July, still this year that we also experienced the hottest season, like, the hottest time, and it felt like we're in hell like, it was too hard to even you couldn't be outside, like, being outside was a punishment you just had to stay indoors and just hydrate a lot because it was really hot. |
| Flooding-Interview 16 | "In Philadelphia, in 2024, we experienced significant flooding. That was severe because due to the heavy rainfall and the severe weather events, there were reports of flash flooding in various neighborhoods impacting transportation and causing some property being damaged. But the local authorities issued us with some warning and took measures to manage the floods that became beneficial to the people in the area" |

Interviewees have further described how either themselves or someone they know have experienced displacement during a disaster. For example, one interviewee cited, " . . . we even had to relocate for a while for the floods to come, and then when we came back but property was lost. Part of our garage was damaged, and we just had to start over, building it and also mourning the other people in the community that had

lost their lives. It was a really tragic time." (Interview 17) Another interviewee cited, "We went to another area. So those were some of the effects that we experienced about the flooding. But initially, when it started, it just affected my daily routine. But as we went on, things became wild. That's why we lost someone, and my property was damaged." (Interview 28) This shows the impact of how certain severe weather events may leave lasting impacts, both emotionally and physically.

Some interviewees cited that they were not able to relocate during a disaster and were forced to face disasters in place. One interviewee described that it was difficult to access resources and being forced to stay and face the disaster, "Let's say it's flooding and you have to move, and it's hard. Because at times, when we have severe weather and we can't move our infrastructure, sometimes we are in bad areas that have poor infrastructure, and we are unlikely to access resources." (Interview 27) Another interviewee explained that some members of LGBTQIA+ people of color may not be able to relocate due to not having an affirming place to go, "So, there are people that I personally know of the queer community who are also African American, who fled to their relatives in other states who are maybe a bit open minded, as compared to me. Those relatives will maybe shun you because of your orientation. So you'll have to face the flood or the calamity, instead of maybe fleeing. So it's being a person of color and also queer, it kinda pushes you to deal with the climate change results rather than maybe flee or maybe shield yourself from them. That's my experience." (Interview 24) This shows that LGBTQIA+ people of color may not be

able to relocate as biases among family and friends limits safe relocation options. Thus, they may face the decision of staying in place and facing the extreme event or relocating and facing social exclusion and possible harm.

One interviewee cited that LGBTQIA+ people of color, have difficulty recovering from a climate disaster due to existing social vulnerabilities " . . . as a queer person and as a person of color, you are maybe faced with, the bouncing back from the climate change in case there are floods or like a tornado. So, such incidents or natural occurrences can hit you so bad as a person of color, more than a normal person. In fact, you are not able to bounce back as quick as them due to maybe, resources put across for them, but not for people like us. . ." (Interview 24) This highlights how compounding vulnerabilities may not allow LGBTQIA+ people of color to recover quickly when there is a severe weather event.

Interviewees have stated that either they themselves or someone they know were able to receive help from local support services such as churches, shelters, and disaster relief organizations. The majority of interviewees said this aid was helpful, especially in the aftermath of disasters when either experienced property damage or had to relocate. Many of these services were able to offer temporary housing and food to community members. We were interested to find this as this is inconsistent with another study that found Hurricane Katrina impacted the LGBTQIA+ African American community in New Orleans and experienced discrimination during community and federal aid (*Hurricane Katrina's Struggling Black Gay Community*,

2015). However, some interviewees stated some gaps in the support services during the midst of the disaster through response times. Ultimately, this shows how services may be provided for the aftermath of the disaster; however, more improvement is needed during the midst of disasters to minimize tragedies that occur in the community.

### 4.3.3 Inclusive Policy

Despite facing discrimination within places of work, healthcare, and housing, twelve interviewees have cited that they feel accepted within their community describing where they live as “inclusive” or “welcoming.” Interviewees have described how their local LGBTQIA+ community center has been extremely helpful in providing care and aid for needs for community members. Interviewees also cited that there are things that could be done to better improve acceptance beyond the community, particular with external support services. Table 13 highlights what members would like to see done to better improve the quality of acceptance in the community and beyond, especially in places of employment, government, education, healthcare, and housing.

Table 13. Inclusive policies LGBTQIA+ people of color would like to see in place that can support the community and beyond

| | |
|---|---|
| Interview 13 | "I'm thinking maybe they can use the LGBTQ flag more often or in more places or even in their offices just for the LGBTQ community to feel well represented." |
| Interview 14 | "More access to support services, because limited access sometimes makes it hard to find resources quickly." |
| Interview 16 | I think the government, by supporting us and advocating for equality of the LGBTQ also mobilization or offering marriage certificates, advocating for anti- discrimination, and creating rights. The enabling adoptions for the LGBTQ parents, enabling them to adopt a child or two, and offering health and social support. |
| Interview 17 | "I really love to see equalism in the communities. They should accommodate everyone who identifies as LGBTQ regardless of color. As I had said, you'll see biasness in the communities, they'll tend to accommodate people of people who are white more, and you'll see there are no Black people there and it becomes white dominated and even as a black [person] trying to fit in that community feel odd. Like, there should be that equality scene." |

Interviewees stated that they would like to see improvement in outreach and communication tactics from support services (i.e. churches, community centers, disaster relief organizations) to better support LGBTQIA+ community members in the midst of climate disasters. Members have mentioned utilizing social media platforms would be beneficial to create awareness of existing organizations where community members know where to go to. Some members specified that alerts and alarms would be helpful to know when a disaster hits. Further, members would like to see faster response times by creating an application to know where members might be in the community during a disaster. Lastly, one interviewee suggested that organizations can create specific branches that particularly help LGBTQIA+ people of color. Table 14

highlights what members would like to see to improve outreach and communication in relation to climate disasters.

Table 14. Outreach strategies LGBTQIA+ people of color would like to see to be better supported in the midst of disasters

| | |
|---|---|
| Interview 13 | "Yes, I think they can communicate through social media mostly on Instagram and TikTok where it's almost like everyone is on those platforms." |
| Interview 22 | "Maybe if there could be better ways of sending alerts and responding as quickly as possible in areas maybe where when a specific area is suffering with a specific, severe weather, responding as quickly as possible because and coming up with better ways of housing" |
| Interview 24 | "I'm referring to the LGBTQ community, the organizations that the open communities. So I'm thinking they can maybe have a branch of the organizations that strictly deals with relief and help after such an event strictly for queer people and people of color. That will be nice to give them a sense of belonging and safety. A bit of safety to know they can have people who will take care of them in case of anything." |
| Interview 25 | "On my side, I think there should be like an application whereby, maybe in a disaster the application gives an exact location of where you are. Not leave alone to the 911. You know, for the dial calls, you may tend to call. At the same time, maybe there's others who are calling for support, and the people in the contact center might be filled. . . . So for me, I think there should be a maybe a very big team that is willing to show support and help and available in maybe every area and sub area, whether urban, whether suburban in all the areas that are there. In all the areas whereby in the app, during a time when there is disaster, there is a bathroom or maybe a place you place your finger and request for support. |
| Interview 28 | "Maybe sometimes respond immediately to emergency cases because sometimes they delay a lot, and you end up because I lost someone in the process and be because of their delay." |

### 4.4 Overall Results

Through this interview study, we found that there was some overlap between the three groups we interviewed. Figure 3 shows a network sociogram of the three different groups and how themes compare across the groups. The sociogram was created by mapping connections based on whether specific codes were mentioned by

participants. We analyzed whether these codes were unique to one group or shared among other groups, helping to visualize relationships and overlaps in their responses. For example, from the diagram we found that there was a significant overlap in experiences and concerns around extreme heat and flooding across all three groups. Further, there was an overlap in discrimination and housing mentioned as major social vulnerabilities and similar inclusive policies and support services discussed. However, we found that there was a minimal shared experience between some of the groups. For example, LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups and EJ groups had similar experiences with mentions of hurricanes and climate justice. However, there was minimal overlap between only EJ and LGBTQIA+ people of color. This signifies that LGBTQIA+ people of color's representation and needs might not be currently considered in environmental justice movements. There is some overlap between LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups and LGBTQIA+ people of color as both groups account intersectional experiences and the need for personal sanctuary and safety. Further, these two groups share recounts of extreme cold weather events.

When reviewing our codes, we found that the interviews with LGBTQIA+ people of color members had many distinct experiences. For example, many members recounted discrimination in employment, education, and healthcare and often felt anxiety. Further, members had experienced or had someone in their community experience forms of displacement. Community members also expressed the need for inclusive policy that targeted better outreach and representation. Further, many long

for an end to discrimination and to increase acceptance that goes beyond their immediate community. There were some mentions of themes of health and displacement amongst EJ and LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups, however, these themes mostly emerged from interviews with LGBTQIA+ community members.

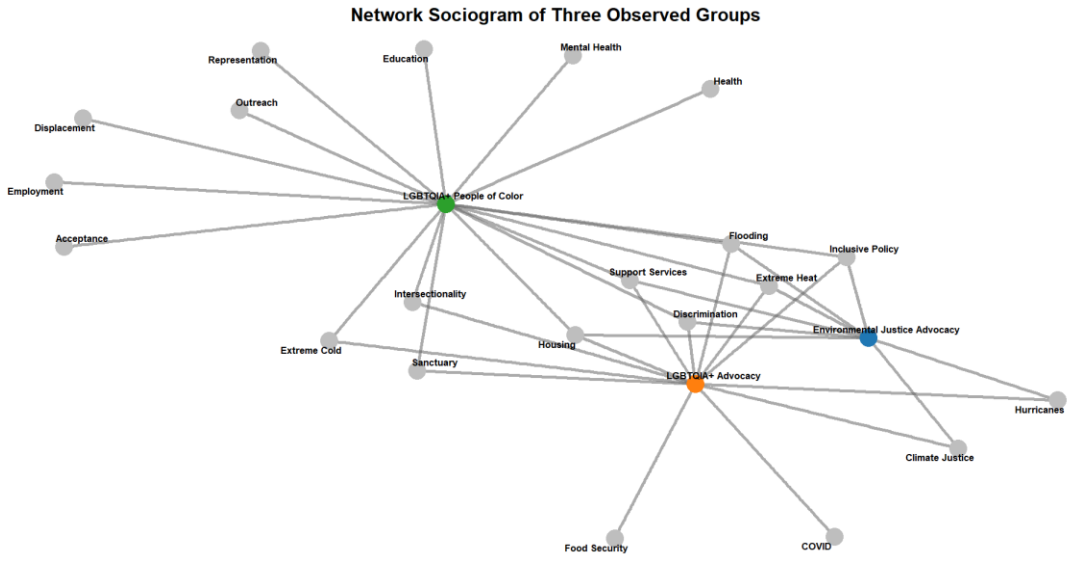


Figure 3. Network Sociogram showing the relationship of three interviewee groups and what experiences they may have in common or differ from.

Because all groups have mentioned or experienced themes of extreme heat, flooding, housing, discrimination, support services, and inclusive policy, we examined the extent to which each of these codes were mentioned across all interviews. Out of the 26 interviews conducted, we found that around 79% of participants mentioned flooding as a concern for their community while extreme heat was only mentioned

34.6%. Discrimination was mentioned by 84.6% of the interviewees and housing was mentioned 57.7%. Lastly, 69.2% of participants mentioned support services that were known in the community where members could go for general care or in the midst of disasters and 92.3% of participants mentioned inclusionary policies that either support services or government could do to better support the community, especially with LGBTQIA+ people of color.

# Chapter 5

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study highlights the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ people of color in the Mid-Atlantic. These perspectives are critical to understand to see what gaps there may be in the environmental and climate justice movement. Furthermore, inclusionary practices that apply the lens of intersectionality can amplify the voices that are most underrepresented in these movements. We see from these interviews that race, sexual orientation, and identity play a role in shaping unique experiences with climate vulnerability. We also see prior social vulnerabilities of LGBTQIA+ people of color such as discrimination in identity, employment, healthcare, and housing may be exacerbated during the climate crisis. Furthermore, communities may have a harder time recovering climate disasters because of these social vulnerabilities.

From this study, we found that there was an overlap between the three interviewee groups. However, we found that there was minimal overlap between LGBTQIA + people of color and EJ groups, signifying that there might not be representation of the community in current environmental justice efforts. Future work calls for environmental and climate justice movements to further incorporate the lens of intersectionality into work to make sure certain communities are amplified in these movements. For example, these movements could utilize more inclusive language,

utilizing LGBTQIA+ flags to ensure acceptance and safe spaces, and engage in cross-sector collaboration to combat shared social vulnerabilities.

Community members gave many different responses as to how government and support services can better improve outreach and communication in the midst of disasters. Some suggestions that were highlighted from the interviews include establishing a branch within disaster relief organizations that specializes in supporting LGBTQIA+ people of color and the creation of app to help pinpoint where to go in the midst of disasters.

This study did not include perspectives from disaster relief organizations and government offices. Thus, future studies should look at how particularly disaster relief organizations and government offices might incorporate the lens of intersectionality into their work and if and how they consider LGBTQIA+ people of color in the midst of disasters. Future work also points into looking into integrating the lens of intersectionality into climate policies and legislation within the Mid-Atlantic. It would be beneficial to investigate through a policy analysis of Mid-Atlantic states and urban centers to see whether climate policies utilize the lens of intersectionality. This analysis can help inform more inclusive legislation and policies that address the unique vulnerabilities and needs of marginalized communities. Ultimately, this study was conducted in the Mid-Atlantic and the experiences with disasters may differ across different regions of the United States, and in other countries with various policies and climate stressors. Future research should look at how LGBTQIA+ people

of color might experience disasters in other locations to continue to inform inclusive policies and disaster response.

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