

Racism and Climate Change



Framing the Inquiry

Race, Capitalism, and Climate Change

Who bears the cost of the climate crisis, and why?

- Climate change is not only environmental, but deeply political
- Environmental harm is unevenly distributed across race and class
- The module explores climate change as a system of power and inequality

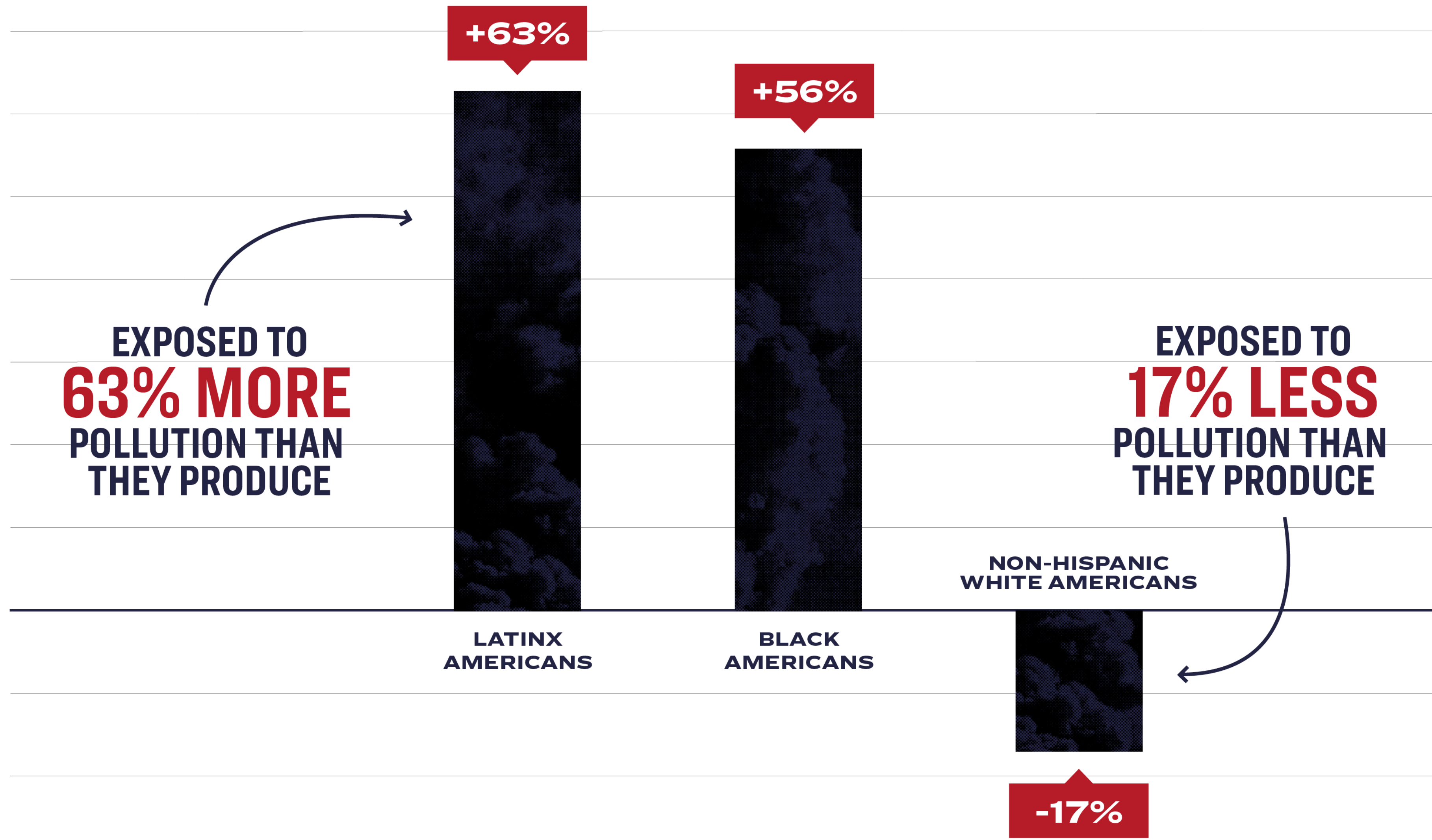
Key Question: Can climate change be understood without understanding capitalism and race?

What is environmental Racism

- Environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color.

Environmental justice is the movement's response to environmental racism.

- Environmental racism refers to the institutional rules, regulations, policies or government and/or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for locally undesirable land uses and lax enforcement of zoning and environmental laws, resulting in communities being disproportionately exposed to toxic and hazardous waste based upon race.



Causes

- Environmental racism is caused by several factors including intentional neglect, the alleged need for a receptacle for pollutants in urban areas, and a lack of institutional power and low land values of people of colour.
- It is a well-documented fact that communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately affected by polluting industries (specifically hazardous waste) and lax regulation of these industries
- A long legacy of racist housing policy and weak environmental protections contribute to this disproportionate exposure, coupled with systemic issues related to public health, education and wealth.

Case Studies

- As of 2019 over 30 million Americans live in areas where water infrastructure has violated safety standards. In rural and primarily Black Lowndes County, Alabama, only around 20% of the population has a sewer system—the others have pipes deploying raw sewage into their yards.
- Navajo Nation residents rely on water contaminated by uranium mining, and infections and cancer are rampant in these communities. Lack of access to safe water leads some residents to drive for hours to obtain safe water
- There is a nationwide trend in lack of enforcement and regulation around safety standards for drinking water, and often low-income, Black, Indigenous and other people of color who lack political clout endure the most severe impacts

Contemporary scenario

- After decades of discriminatory housing policies and inequitable development, Black communities are still disproportionately exposed to pollution and environmental toxins, leading to detrimental health impacts which are often compounded by lack of access to suitable healthcare
- This disproportionate exposure has been well-documented since the 1980s when a nationwide study by The United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice found that race was the strongest determinant of the location of commercial hazardous waste sites.
- Nationally, “African Americans are 75 percent more likely than Caucasians to live in fence-line communities—those next to commercial facilities whose noise, odor, traffic or emissions directly affect the population.”
- While Black communities and other people of color bear the greatest health costs of industrial activity and of physical climate hazards, they also bear less responsibility for the greenhouse gas emissions causing the climate crisis. While individuals within these communities can be highly resilient, confronting social and economic disparities daily, these communities also often lack the resources to adequately prepare for and respond to the health impacts of pollution and physical impacts of climate change.

Synthesis and Reflection

Climate change is not neutral - it is structured.

- Environmental harm reflects systemic inequality
- Climate systems are shaped by policy, capitalism, and race
- Justice requires structural transformation

Final Questions:

- What would climate justice require beyond emissions reduction?
- Who defines sustainability?
- Can environmental justice exist without racial justice?