

Group 5–Environmental Issues

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Introduction

Our group's main focus was environmental issues in NYC. Together, our central question surrounds our government's response to CO2 emissions in NYC. We explored the roles of various government agencies from our mayor to community boards, policies that have been enacted, and gleaned insight from various perspectives that surround one of the most prominent and complex issues today—climate change. We hope that by the end of our presentation, you will learn the roles our city government, agencies, and organizations have played in regulating CO2 emissions, and the importance of sustained action in this issue area.

There were so many different and important topics to choose from, but environmental issues, specifically CO2 emissions, are unique to us because it is a part of a larger, global, and complex phenomenon that will impact every human being on this planet. We truly believe that more action needs to be taken to address climate change and that it is an issue that requires us to dedicate effort to explore and make a difference. We hear it all the time—climate change. So much that it tends to have the opposite effect than intended. Rather than feeling inspired, people feel overwhelmed. Rather than taking action, people choose to ignore.

A major reason for neglect on climate change is the way it is presented. We think that no matter how many reusable and green products we purchase, bottles we recycle, or things we reuse, we can't make a dent. Just like voting, we start to feel disenchanting. This is normal. But our biggest takeaway is that *no action is too small*. Whether it's in your household, the city, the nation, or internationally, we must break climate change into sizable chunks of issues so that we don't feel overwhelmed.

Carbon emissions is a great contributor to the warming of our climate and we choose to focus on that solely because we see it as a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed. We

wanted to dig deeper into what our own city has done to make our boroughs a safer and more habitable place for all. We learned that our city agencies together form a dynamic system that is ready to tackle the prominent problems today. We also learned that young people like us have a lot to say, some positive, and some negative. But together, we are all united in our vision for a New York City that is cleaner, better, more equal, and an inclusive place for everyone.

Timeline

1930s: As Parks Commissioner of New York City, Robert Moses imported his racist building methods to an area dense with people of color in need of relief from overcrowded neighborhoods. Almost all of Moses's public works projects—among them Jacob Riis Park, Alley Pond, and Riverside Park, as well as 255 of the 256 playgrounds he built in the 1930s—were placed out of reach of the poor... And as Schindler points out in her paper, Moses also went out of his way to clog Harlem with cars: He placed the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge's exit ramp there, when the sensible location would have been the Upper East Side, as almost all traffic at that time came from below 100th street. As a consequence, wealthier

neighborhoods remained untouched by traffic, while Harlem's streets were overrun with bridge-bound vehicles.

<http://www.hopesandfears.com/hopes/now/politics/216905-the-lingering-effects-of-nyc-racis-t-city-planning>)

1936: Opening of the Triborough Bridge. High levels of chronic bronchitis symptoms were observed in the workers who built it.

2007-2018: The Department of Transportation installed more than 100 miles of protected bike lanes across the City. Although this minimized the available space for cars creating more congestion, it incentivized more people to ride their bikes in the city (which was much more difficult before the lanes were installed).

2018: NYC Mayor's Office Climate Policy & Program* pledged to reduce CO2 emissions by 80% by 2050 and align with the 1.5 degree Celsius change marked in the Paris Agreement.

2019: Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature passed and enacted the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), which aims to reduce statewide greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050. Additionally, the CLCPA aims to boost the state's reliance on renewable energy sources for electricity to 70% by 2030, as well as increase the amount of electricity generated from solar power (6 Gigawatts by 2025) and wind power (9 Gigawatts by 2035).

2019: New York City Council passed Local Law 97, otherwise known as the Climate Mobilization Act. The Climate Mobilization Act aims to reduce building-based carbon emissions by 40% less than 2005 levels by 2030.

2019: The same program*, an initiative of the Mayor's office, decided to invest \$20B to improve the community. According to the MIT Technology Review, "the city is planting

more street trees and increasing reflective surfaces. One program is focused on painting roofs white, which doesn't absorb heat from the sun as much as dark colors and can reduce energy bills by up to 30% during the summer.”

[\(https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/09/19/132942/new-york-city-has-big-plansand-20-billionto-save-itself-from-climate-change/\)](https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/09/19/132942/new-york-city-has-big-plansand-20-billionto-save-itself-from-climate-change/)

2019: The MTA debuts its first fleet of all-electric buses on the M14 SBS route. The buses were part of the Fast Forward plan and use zero-emission technology.

2019: NYSERDA unveiled its NYStretch Energy Code-2020 Toolkit, which provides consumers, building developers and owners, counties and municipalities with information pertaining to the costs and benefits of building electrification as well as model code legislation for counties and municipalities seeking to implement new building electrification policies.

2020: Governor Andrew Cuomo announced \$2 billion in additional funding for energy efficiency and building electrification initiatives, in order to fast-track New York to meet its 30% energy efficiency target by 2025.

Key Figures

Local Position	Role in Environmental Issues
Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Mayor has several groups that report to his Office, including The Mayor’s Office of Environmental Coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This agency provides recommendations to the Mayor on environmental policy as well as serves as the City’s liaison to state and federal environmental agencies ○ As a result of several executive orders, the OEC regulates

	<p>and manages the green buildings initiative in NYC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Source: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://www1.nyc.gov/site/oec/green-building/green-buildin-g.page ● Another one of these agencies is the Mayor’s Office of Sustainability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ They work on several programs to decrease carbon emissions, waste, and create a greener New York ○ They have also worked on several pieces of local legislation to enforce these programs ○ https://www1.nyc.gov/site/sustainability/index.page ● As the Mayor, Bill de Blasio sets key priorities for the City of New York (sort of like his platform) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Since his election in 2014, environmental conservation and limiting the effects of global warming have been at the forefront of his initiatives ○ His role essentially is to set the major goals for the City, which are then executed by different agencies
City Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The City Council holds hearings and drafts local legislation to impact New York City ● They also regulate the City agencies to ensure that they are doing their jobs effectively ● The City Council has many different Committees so that the Council members can work together to write legislation that focuses on pressing issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ One of the Committees on the Council is the Committee on Environmental Protection ○ This Committee has jurisdiction over “New York City’s

	<p>Department of Environmental Protection and the Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability and Office of Recovery and Resiliency.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It is through this legislative body that the agencies mentioned in the previous section are introduced and edited ○ Source: https://council.nyc.gov/committees/environmental-protection/
District Attorney	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The District Attorney works on criminal justice reform and fighting different types of crime in the City ● Environmental protection is not one of their priorities, but should a violation be made against one of the laws set by the City Council, they would be reviewing the charges made against them <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Source: https://www.manhattanda.org
Borough Presidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Borough Presidents advise the Mayor on what issues affect their borough and help determine land-use ● The Manhattan Borough President (Gale Brewer) has launched several initiatives concerning sustainability and environmental protection -- she also provided support for projects that aimed to mitigate the rising sea levels on the East Side <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Source: https://www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov/category/sustainability/ ● The Brooklyn Borough President (Eric Adams) also has several initiatives concerning environmental protection and parks including one to reserve land for trees and advocating for different laws in City Council (he also allocated funds for creating new playgrounds and park areas and launched a program for clean energy in Brooklyn)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Source: https://www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov/category/sustainability/
Public Advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Public Advocate serves as a non-voting member on the City Council and can introduce legislation
Comptroller	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Comptroller helps determine how the City budget is distributed and audits the financial situations of each of the City agencies ● The Comptroller would review the budgets of each of the agencies that focuses on the environment ● Source: https://comptroller.nyc.gov/about/duties-of-the-comptroller/
Community Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Community Boards advise City officials and decide on the requests of different businesses and organizations in the district ● Many of these CBs have different committees, including Environmental Protection ● Source: http://www.nyc.gov/html/qnscb1/html/explained/explained.shtml

How do New Yorkers influence their elected officials to change policies and laws (other than voting)?

New Yorkers can participate in protests, send letters to their elected officials, or join organizations that lobby elected officials for support of certain causes. Every New Yorker can also tap into their own networks and communities to spread awareness and coordinate action amongst themselves to generate support for policy changes.

Government Groups

1. The Mayor's Office of Environmental Coordination
 - a. Assist in carrying out environmental reviews, coordinates with state federal agencies on environmental policy
2. The Mayor's Office of Sustainability
 - a. team of architects, data scientists, engineers, policy advisors, and city planners working to make the city greener and decrease NYC contribution to climate change
3. NYC Department of Environmental Protection
 - a. Works on projects to keep NYC infrastructure maintained
 - i. *"We must ensure that our massive infrastructure, which extends more than 100 miles from the city, is maintained in good operating condition and is resilient."* —Vincent Sapienza, Commissioner
4. NYC Department of Parks and Recreation
 - a. Maintains NYC parks, monuments, and other public infrastructure
 - b. Seeks to promote sustainable green spaces for New Yorkers
5. Department of Environment Conservation
 - a. Seeks to empower individuals to engage in environmental policy decision makings
 - b. Work to minimize land and water pollution, coordinate policies, and enhance public health

Advocacy Groups

1. Environmental Defense Fund
 - a. Tackles on issues like global warming, human health, and pollution to protect the environment from climate change from any treats
2. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.
 - a. Non profit organization who dedicates their time and effort on solving real life problems to help make a change in the environment
3. Sierra Club
 - a. Grassroots organization that works to resolve important issues related to the environment
4. Greenpeace
 - a. Non-profit organization that contributes in peaceful ways to contribute in helping the environment from danger

5. World Wild Fund for Nature

- a. International organization that focuses on protecting wildlife and working with others in finding resources for animals and where they live in.

Interview Summaries

Katerina's interview with a recent NYC public school graduate and youth climate activist:

During my interview with a NYC youth climate activist and public school student, I learned a lot about various environmental concerns and becoming a more environmentally sustainable individual. The student I interviewed said that her motivation in becoming involved in climate issues was her innate fear of climate change. Like many, she saw that it was a very real and prominent issue that could be mitigated. Furthermore, it complimented her academic interest in earth science. When asked about her beliefs surrounding what the NYC government could do as a whole, she told me that the climate-related policies should be centered around urban planning. More sustainable buildings, green roofs, and clean energy are the key to a better future. The youth climate activist's beliefs on individual action were especially interesting to me. She said that everyone should seek to reduce their waste. She acknowledged, though, that with the immense presence of packaging makes this goal especially difficult. Finally, she told me that students can become involved through various nonprofits and organizations that advocate for sustainable environmental policy.

Helen's Interview with a NYC high school student

I interviewed my friend, a current public school student, who is also a passionate environmentalist. We discussed CO2 emissions in NYC, role of organizations, and government policies surrounding it. She also compared our world before, during, and post pandemic.

Our discussion on COVID: The brief halt in activity decreased emissions for the city and allowed for a temporary decrease in environmental damage. "I've definitely felt like the environment has been clearer than before." However, her optimism waned quickly as she noted that "our government is also very concerned with reviving our economy." A pandemic world has made us realize how the air can be so much cleaner and earth so much greener if consumption can decrease. But of course, it's not a simple issue.

She mentions the potential backlash in regards to the resuming of economic activity. The city has lost billions of dollars in revenue due to COVID19. It will take time for the economy and people to resume activity. “I’m afraid that the backlash will be even greater.” She noted that people are probably desperate for normalcy; many workers are aching to return to work, to feed their families, especially low income households.

Being an environmentalist means she is more conscious of issues surrounding the community. “I think NYC will revive and recover from this pandemic, but for now, everything is on hold,” she said. I definitely agree with her that CO2 emissions and climate change at large are extremely important and should be an utmost priority for our policymakers! But once again, we also need to acknowledge that incremental changes should be made rather than an overarching and impossible goal, since the former will encourage participation from people.

Conclusion

What We Learned

Throughout this entire process, we learned a lot about what it means to be an activist, young voice, and citizen in a time of crisis. We are all a part of a larger community that includes diverse identities. We need to become bridges of change in order to make society a better place. We have focused on carbon dioxide emissions, a fundamental problem in our city. It contributes to a larger societal phenomenon—climate change. It is important because while the world belongs to us, it also belongs to those that came before us and those after. We are all responsible for keeping the world clean and habitable. We sought to raise greater awareness through our presentation and project on this imminent issue. There is no time to hesitate. Every step, every action, matters. We need to be unified in our desire to create a greener city for everyone. This issue will always be relevant and we learned to keep fighting for change, big or small. We want continued progress to this complex issue that affects us all.

Ways to Help as a Young Person

- Students can volunteer at local charities or clean up a beach in order to help and protect the environment from pollution or waste.
- Students can use their social media platform to discuss important issues like climate change and environmental issues and how others can find ways to help and volunteer.
- Students can participate in non-profit programs that center climate issues
- Recycling is a great way for others to help the environment because by recycling, you're reducing the effect of air and water pollution, as well as saving energy in order to protect the environment from climate change.
- You can save electricity by turning off your phone, unplugging unused electronics, and taking shorter showers can help you save money and electricity in your house.
- Organize and protest! For climate change and environmental issues for your voice to be heard and to try to make an impact in your community

Work Cited

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