



Health, Equity, and Nature

A Changing Climate
in Lake County, Illinois



BRUSHWOOD CENTER AT RYERSON WOODS

Executive Summary

Everyone deserves a healthy environment and access to the outdoors.

Clean air, water, and access to the outdoors are vital to human health. This report outlines key findings and recommendations for improving wellbeing in Lake County, Illinois, by addressing systemic inequities at the intersection of environment and health.

Key Findings

History has set the stage.

Like many communities in the United States, Lake County's history of housing discrimination and industrial development continue to drive systemic inequities at the root of environmental and health injustices. Analysis of demographic information, including race, population, average age of death, median household income, and housing cost, revealed that Black and Brown communities in Lake County experience the lowest life expectancy, the highest housing cost burden, and lowest median household income.

Northeastern Lake County is most overburdened by environmental and health inequities.

Environment and human health do not exist in isolation; they are deeply interconnected. We combined 38 data sets from health, environmental quality, climate, transportation, green space, and

demographic data to create the Systemic Inequities Assessment Map (Figure 1). The map identifies geographies most overburdened with these inequities, including North Chicago, Park City, and Waukegan.

Community is leading the fight for environmental justice.

Community members and organizations in Lake County fighting for environmental justice are in a position of strength with recent successes, including the 2022 closure of the coal-fired power plant in Waukegan. Yet, many toxic challenges remain, particularly in northeastern Lake County, including superfund sites, ethylene oxide pollution, coal ash ponds remaining at the recently closed coal-fired power plant, and additional water, ground, and air pollutants from industry and diesel. These environmental injustices have impacts on health that can cause respiratory diseases, skin rashes, and cancer.

Nature abounds, yet access does not.

Lake County is home to beautiful green and blue spaces including Lake Michigan, park districts, county forest preserves, state parks, rivers, and spaces created by grassroots groups. Yet, despite this natural abundance, there are barriers to accessing the outdoors. Nearly half of Black/African American respondents and 31% of Hispanic respondents express access, safety, or maintenance concerns to visiting parks or open spaces versus 21% of White

respondents (Figures 12-14). Interviewees identified numerous barriers to accessing nature, including limited transportation options, lack of materials in Spanish, cold weather, and a need for more culturally relevant nature-based programs, providers, and partnerships.

A warmer, wetter climate is here, and it is impacting health.

The already changing climate compounds existing community health risks. Rising temperatures impact human health through heat-related illness, sleep quality, increased allergens, and food availability. Mosquito-borne illnesses, tick-borne illnesses, decreased water quality, and flooding are on the rise due to increased precipitation.

Nature is a source of healing.

Interviews with community members revealed a dominant theme of “transformative experiences pertaining to nature.” In the wake of the pandemic, many people recognize the mental and physical health benefits of spending time outside, particularly for individuals coping with trauma. A common thread across responses highlighted the importance of connection, and how nature can facilitate a deeper and more meaningful connection with one’s self, community, and environment.

Recommendations

Improving a healthier environment and communities in Lake County will mean uplifting, supporting, and investing in community-driven, equitable solutions. Our recommendations focus on the local level, but opportunity abounds at state and national policy levels as well.

The report outlines six themes of recommendations and more than 60 actions that can be taken to address these issues. The themes and an example action from each category include:

1. Center community voices and assets

Example: Create an accessible, digital community asset map to document, share, and maintain health equity resources, including nature-based programs and spaces.

2. Prioritize communities overburdened by systemic inequities

Example: Invest in recreational infrastructure and programs as well as increased transportation options connecting people to these spaces.

3. Advance climate justice through clean air and water

Example: Support grassroots groups and community organizers pushing for environmental justice in Lake County and particularly ethylene oxide regulations and removal of the coal ash ponds in Waukegan.

4. Increase awareness and access to outdoor green and blue spaces

Example: Ensure that all marketing and promotion of outdoor resources, including program descriptions, trail maps, and signage, is translated into Spanish.

5. Integrate nature solutions with healthcare systems

Example: Provide professional development to local healthcare providers and community health workers on green and blue space assets in Lake County, as well as the associated health benefits.

6. Invest in culturally relevant social infrastructure for outdoor engagement

Example: Increase culturally relevant, nature-based programs by investing in more multilingual facilitators, community-designed programs, and partnerships.

Report Background

The goal of this report is to serve as a tool for community members, organizations, and decision-makers to improve health and wellbeing in Lake County, Illinois. The report’s mixed methods approach is rooted in community assets and combines existing data, mapping, qualitative data, and art. Brushwood Center began this project in response to growing community demand and momentum for systemic changes to address racial and ethnic inequities at the intersection of health, climate, and the environment.

Figure 1.
Systemic Inequities
Assessment of
Health, Equity,
Nature, and Climate
in Lake County, IL

