

THE DISASTER DIVIDE: CLIMATE INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Key U.S. findings from Oxfam's report "Disaster Divide: How climate chaos deepens inequality and enriches the few"

Oxfam's new report finds that the richest 0.1% of people—8 million—now emit more than the poorest 44% of humanity, 3.5 billion people combined. One year of emissions from the richest 1% will cause an estimated 1.9 million excess deaths from heat. Time and again, the harm falls disproportionately. In more unequal countries, for example, deaths from flooding are seven times higher.

The United States exemplifies both extremes. It carries the largest share of historical responsibility for excess emissions (40%), hosts more than two-thirds of the world's private jet flights, and is home to investors who profit both from fueling climate disasters and cleaning them up—all while its lowest-income households, whose emissions have contributed the least to the climate crisis, are the most exposed to climate-driven costs.

BY THE NUMBERS IN THE U.S.

- In just under 4 months, someone in the richest 0.1% emits more CO₂ than someone in the poorest 50% has emitted over the last 30 years
- The richest 0.1% emit 48x more CO₂ per person than the average person
- In 2025, U.S. private jets emitted more CO₂ in less than 1 minute than the average person will emit in an entire year
- 68% of the world's private jet flights departed from the U.S. in 2025

THE U.S.'S SUPER-WEALTHY DRIVE OUTSIZED EMISSIONS

Between 1850 and 2015, the United States alone was responsible for 40% of global carbon dioxide emissions, compared with 29% for the EU-28 and 8% for the entire Global South.

The world's private jet set is a miniscule proportion of the population that contributes enormous amounts of climate pollution, and they happen to be overwhelmingly American. Jets are used by the richest 0.003% of the world's population, around 250,000 people. In 2025, 68% of the world's private jet flights departed from the U.S., despite just 4% of the world's population living there. Private jets emitted 16 million tons of CO₂ last year, roughly what 80 million newly planted trees would absorb over 20 years. Each flight alone produced 3.7 tons of CO₂ on average, around what an average person emits in a year, and the world's private jets combined emit more in two seconds than someone in the poorest half of humanity emits in a year.

The investment emissions of the world's 1,000 billionaires — defined as the emissions of the companies in which they hold stakes of 10% or more — reached 486 million tons of CO₂e in 2025. This volume of emissions is equivalent to that of the 19th most-polluting country—just after Australia. Seventy-one percent of the companies in which billionaires hold financial stakes sit in highest-emitting sectors such as oil, gas, and chemicals. Using S&P Global's Trucost Paris Alignment model, Oxfam found that 69% of the billionaire-owned companies are off track on emissions reduction targets, compared with 51% of the S&P Global 1200. In one particularly egregious example, Oxfam estimates that the Tyson family's roughly 20% stake in Tyson Foods carried \$1.9 billion of the company's environmental damage costs in 2024, a figure that monetizes the meatpacker's emissions, water use, waste, and pollution across its own operations and its supply chain.

Despite an apparent disregard for their polluting activities, prominent billionaires acknowledge climate damages and increasing risks and are taking steps to insulate themselves and their families from the crises they helped create. Wealthy people are buying islands and building fortified compounds and bunkers to shield themselves from environmental and technology crises. Mark Zuckerberg, for example, has built a 5.5 km² estate on the Hawaiian island of Kauai with a bunker equipped with its own energy and food supplies.

CLIMATE DISASTERS ARE ENGINES OF FURTHER INEQUALITY

Inequality turns extreme weather into disasters. Studies show that more unequal countries suffer higher death tolls and greater damage, and a panel study of 158 countries between 1995 and 2019 links increased climate impacts to rising income inequality. The report's U.S. case studies exemplify this pattern.

California wildfires: Insurers' monitoring systems, like AIG's Wildfire Protection Unit or Chubb's Wildfire Defense Services, alert the wealthiest—who evacuate their mansions by helicopter and move into five-star hotels, often with bills prepaid by their insurers. AIG, Chubb, and PURE offer pre-emptive wildfire protection, charging up to six-figure annual premiums for policies typically available only on property insured above \$1 million. In Altadena, a historically Black and brown middle-class community with a legacy of generational home ownership, many homeowners lacked insurance or had only partial coverage. Countless families lost their homes—often a primary source of wealth built over decades—in the 2025 wildfires. Many sold their ruined properties to predatory real estate companies at discount rates. Across California, homes in communities the U.S. government classifies as disadvantaged are about 29% more likely to be destroyed by wildfire over the next 30 years, yet 28% less likely to carry out preventive fire-resistant upgrades.

New Orleans: Hurricane Katrina caused nearly 2,000 deaths and devastated the city's Black and low-income neighborhoods, located mainly in its lowest, most flood-prone areas. In the years that followed, neighborhoods higher ground gentrified: wealthier, white residents shifted to less flood-exposed tracts while many displaced Black residents struggled to return at all. New Orleans is one of the most unequal cities in the U.S. on an income level.

Puerto Rico: Puerto Rico was left stranded and unsupported by the federal government after Hurricane Maria in 2017. In the aftermath, Puerto Rico's governors privately contracted out operation of the electrical grid, which has led to longer service restoration during blackouts, including one in April 2022 that left the entire island without power. Hurricanes Maria and Irma caused 2,975 deaths in Puerto Rico and 66 in the U.S.

Insurance favors the wealthy by design. Global climate events cost \$162 billion in the first half of 2025, with the U.S. accounting for \$126 billion. In high-risk areas, premiums are rising sharply or coverage is disappearing. In some U.S. states, state-backed insurance steps in as insurer of last resort when private insurers pull out, creating a perverse incentive for development in storm-stricken areas. Insurers keep making large

profits from investments in fossil fuel companies while becoming increasingly reluctant to cover climate-related risks.

HIGHER FOOD PRICES HIT LOW-INCOME AMERICANS HARDEST

The poorest fifth of U.S. households spend 33% of their incomes on food, compared with 8% for the highest income group. Thus, climate-driven price shocks hit them far harder as a share of their budgets. Oxfam's report documents an 80% year-on-year rise in U.S. vegetable producer prices by November 2022 after droughts in California and Arizona, and cites research showing that temperature shocks outside the U.S. raise the price of produce imported into the country by 1.5% after two years. During the 2021–25 H5N1 avian influenza outbreak, a climate-sensitive zoonotic disease, more than 120 million birds were culled in the U.S., sharply reducing supply and tripling egg prices even as feed costs stayed relatively stable.

A handful of food giants profit from scarcity. Four companies, Archer-Daniels-Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus, controlled an estimated 50–60% of global trade in cereals, oilseeds, and protein crops in 2022. The profits of major food traders also tend to rise during crises. Cargill's revenue rose 7% to its highest-ever level in the financial year ending May 2023, and the company stopped publicly reporting its profit during the pandemic; it now counts 21 family members as billionaires, up from 14 in 2019. Archer-Daniels-Midland made its highest-ever profits in the second quarter of 2022. Food industry billionaires' wealth has grown by more than \$130 billion in real terms since 2020. Large-scale agribusinesses in the U.S. and the EU also receive billions of dollars in subsidies that let them export staple crops at prices smallholder farmers in poorer countries cannot match.

CASHING IN ON CLIMATE PAIN: DISASTER CAPITALISM IN THE U.S.

In the U.S. alone, the cost of climate impacts reached almost \$1 trillion between May 2024 and April 2025, equivalent to 3% of GDP. In contrast, the global disaster recovery industry is forecast to grow from \$70 billion to \$92 billion a year by 2029, and Bloomberg's Prepare and Repair Index of disaster preparation and recovery companies beat the S&P 500 by 10 percentage points annually between 2019 and 2024. Private equity firms are buying up disaster restoration companies at a rapid pace.

For these firms, destruction and rebuilding both prove lucrative. Until very recently, private equity company Blackstone was raking in money from its investment in disaster relief company Servpro while backing numerous fossil fuel companies, including Ohio's General James Gavin Power Plant, one of the single largest sources of coal pollution in the U.S. (sold to Energy Capital Partners in 2025). Oxfam's new "Destroy and Rebuild" index of 217 companies that profit from creating, preparing for or recovering from climate disasters finds they made \$1.8 billion on average in 2025 and paid out more than \$1 billion on average to shareholders. Six major asset managers, including Vanguard, BlackRock and State Street, hold more than a quarter of the value of all Destroy and Rebuild companies. BlackRock and Vanguard are invested in 92% of them, with combined holdings of more than \$1 trillion.

Funds marketed as responsible are invested in the biggest polluters. The HC Capital Trust Catholic SRI Growth Portfolio holds 45% of the Carbon Majors, including Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Shell, BHP and TotalEnergies, and the BlackRock Carbon Transition Readiness Aware Fund holds 19%.

WHAT THE U.S. SHOULD DO

Oxfam identifies five steps to break the climate and inequality doom loop, and many of the underlying policies pay a double or triple dividend to families. Very high taxes on private jets, for example, reduce the wealth of the richest, cut carbon pollution, and raise revenue to help ordinary people at home while fulfilling climate finance promises abroad. For the United States, the report's recommendations mean:

- **Curb the emissions of the super-rich.** Introduce permanent progressive taxes on the wealth and income of the richest 1%; punitive taxes on private jets and other high-emitting luxury items; higher tax rates on wealth invested in polluting industries; and a permanent rich polluter tax on fossil fuel profits above a low benchmark. Require corporations and investors to disclose Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions and set science-based targets in line with the Paris Agreement.
- **Pay a fair share of climate finance.** Rich countries like the U.S. must deliver at least \$300 billion a year by 2035, mostly as grants rather than debt-inducing loans, triple adaptation finance by 2035, and channel it through the UN climate funds.
- **Set timebound targets to reduce inequality.** Adopt a national plan so that the income of the richest 10% does not exceed that of the bottom 40%; raise wages

to a living wage and guarantee universal public services such as healthcare, childcare, and education.

- **Protect the most exposed communities.** Build comprehensive social protection and climate-resilient public infrastructure; invest in people-centered early warning and evacuation systems; and regulate private insurance markets to prevent excessive premiums or withdrawal of coverage through government-backed reinsurance, catastrophe insurance pools, mandatory insurance, and resilience-linked premium reductions.
- **End disaster capitalism.** Introduce long-lasting windfall taxes on companies profiting from crises; profit ceilings or excess profits taxes on private corporations delivering emergency responses; temporary caps on prices and profit margins for essential commodities during declared disasters; a ban or strict limits on speculative trading in food commodities; and break up monopolies. Rebuild public-sector disaster response capacity and prioritize public over private finance.