

Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment

A Grand Challenge for Social Work



The Grand Challenge to **Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment** is grounded in the recognition that environmental changes are inextricably linked to human health and well-being. Environmental issues such as urbanization, population growth, and extreme weather events are also social justice issues with a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable members of society.

Over the past five years, members of this Grand Challenge network have made tremendous progress towards “catalyzing social responses that strengthen individual and community capacities for anticipating and adapting to environmental changes.” They have launched a website, formed an Advisory Council, and generated numerous peer-reviewed articles, briefs, books, and presentations. They have encouraged their institutions to update curricula in line with the conceptual basis of the Grand Challenge. And they have forged interdisciplinary alliances, leveraging their expertise to advocate for policy changes at all levels of government.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Working with Teens to Document Environmental Disasters

Jennifer Willett, PhD, an assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, School of Social Work, is exploring environmental justice issues through community-based participatory research methods. In one project, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Evaluation, she is working with 15 high school students from Title 1 schools who serve as co-researchers to document “slow violence” scenarios — hidden environmental disasters that occur over time and space — in Nevada. The project uses photovoice — documentation via photography and storytelling — and is focused on climate disasters like wildfires and floods, infrastructure needs in low-income neighborhoods that intersect with environmental degradation, and the continued impact of historic mining processes. The team has presented its findings to various stakeholders across the region and in Washington, DC, and is currently developing actions to address these scenarios with AmeriCorps programs.



Illegal vehicle dumping is a dangerous problem in Sun Valley, a working class neighborhood in Reno, NV. Beyond being an eyesore, dumping creates fire hazards and pollutes the environment. Photo courtesy of Youth Scientists on the Research for Change NV Team.

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LOOKING BACK

In a 2015 [concept paper](#), leaders of the Grand Challenge to **Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment** identified four major areas for social work with respect to environmental change:

1. Disaster preparedness and response
2. Population dislocation
3. Community-level organizing and development
4. Mitigation, advocacy, and practice engagement

Over the past five years, members of the Grand Challenge network and their colleagues have engaged in myriad activities that are helping to **Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment**. They have:

- **Launched** a new [website](#) and [blog](#) to showcase their writing and research. Recent blog posts include: [“Caring for the Environment becomes Business’ Business,”](#) [“Do Solar Lamps Help Children Study?,”](#) and [“From Climate Grief to Direct Action”](#)
- **Published** numerous [briefs](#), [reports](#), [books](#), and [peer-reviewed articles](#) on the subject, including the book [“People and Climate Change,”](#) co-edited by network co-lead Lisa Reyes Mason, which “closely examines people’s lived experience, climate-related injustice and inequity, why some groups are more vulnerable than others, and what can be done about it”
- **Conducted** studies that provided insights and recommendations for the local communities of [Flint, MI](#), and [North St. Louis, MO](#)

- **Elevated** the work of junior faculty by showcasing their work in publications and providing mentorship
- **Participated** in media interviews on how the effects of natural disasters are exacerbated by underlying socioeconomic factors
- **Contributed** to podcasts such as in [SocialWork](#) from the University of Buffalo. In [one episode](#), network co-lead Lawrence Palinkas discusses the translation and implementation of evidence-based practices and in [another](#), Lisa Reyes Mason discusses the concept of person-in-environment
- **Forged** collaborative relationships with researchers and practitioners in related disciplines. Notably, Samantha Teixeira has worked with environmental activists to elaborate a social work-based rationale for supporting the Green New Deal
- **Participated** in several speaker series, including the University of Denver’s [Science for Action Series](#), NOAA’s [Coastal Resilience Webinar Series](#), and the Tennessee Environmental Council’s [Community-Driven Policy and Practice event](#)
- **Developed** new, interdisciplinary curricula for students of social work and helped promote the [Environmental Justice Curriculum Guide](#) from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)
- **Convened** “People and Climate Change: Vulnerability, Adaptation, Social Justice,” an international conference on climate change

LOOKING AHEAD

Members of the Grand Challenge have articulated the following objectives for the next five years:

- **Further specify** the goals of the Grand Challenge and the associated actions required to achieve them
- **Increase** mentoring supports for earlier-stage researchers interested in joining the network
- **Develop** strategic partnerships with other Grand Challenges, such as **Close the Health Gap** and **Eliminate Racism**
- **Pursue** opportunities to [effect policy](#) at all levels — local, state, and national
- **Increase** involvement in local community development efforts
- **Establish** stronger connections between social workers and environmental justice advocates
- **Continue to advocate** for their policy recommendations:
 1. **Adopt** and **implement** evidence-based approaches to disaster risk reduction
 2. **Strengthen** equity-oriented urban resilience policies and proactively engage marginalized communities in adaptation planning
 3. **Develop** policies targeting environmentally induced migration and population displacement (e.g. amending the Stafford Act)

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