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Authors

Lozano, Mark T.
Kendall, Alissa
Arnold, Gwen
[et al.](#)

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How Much Do Local Climate Action Plans in California Consider Emissions, Cost, and Equity?

Mark T. Lozano, Alissa Kendall, Gwen Arnold, John T. Harvey, Ali A. Butt
University of California, Davis

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POLICY BRIEF

Issue

Spurred in part by state-level climate policies, California cities and counties have released climate action plans (CAPs) over the last decade to set emissions reduction targets and outline actions that will help meet those goals. However, the state provides little guidance to jurisdictions on how to produce these plans. The range of information included in CAPs varies dramatically across jurisdictions. Additionally, little is known about how jurisdictions transition from the planning to the implementation phase of climate action, or what major factors influence their decision-making process. Other state laws promote emissions reductions in disadvantaged communities, highlighting the importance of making equity a key consideration in CAPs.

Researchers at the University of California, Davis assessed and scored over 30 CAPs released between 2009 and 2020 based on the degree to which they addressed three themes: emissions reductions, cost, and equity. The resulting scores on each of these themes were analyzed for correlation with the year of the CAP release and local demographic data on education level, poverty rate, median income, population, and population density. The researchers also surveyed local agency staff from 25 California jurisdictions with published CAPs about the importance of different factors during climate action planning and implementation, the inclusion of equity impacts in CAPs, sources of funding, and more. Finally, the researchers developed a set of guiding questions to assist jurisdictions in developing CAPs that include equity considerations both broadly and by specific sector.

Key Research Findings

Historically, climate action plans have tended to neglect equity issues. The researchers found that CAPs were most comprehensive in their consideration of emissions reductions, less so in their consideration of cost, and least in their consideration of equity. This is understandable, since the primary goal of CAPs is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions using limited funds. However, the finding highlights how, at least in writing, local jurisdictions have not extensively considered the impacts that proposed actions have on the communities most impacted by environmental and social burdens.

CAPs tended to include details on projected emissions reductions if they were released in more recent years and from jurisdictions with lower poverty rates and a higher proportion of Hispanic residents (Figure 1). This suggests that CAPs have been trending towards more quantitative assessments of emissions reduction strategies over time. More recent CAPs also tended to better quantify the costs of emissions reduction strategies.

Greater consideration of equity concerns and goals tended to be found in more recent CAPs and in those produced by jurisdictions with higher levels of education. Many early CAPs, from 2009 to approximately 2018, failed to mention equity at all. However, CAPs produced in 2020 showed a marked increase in how much they addressed equity, perhaps inspired by the movement for racial justice that ignited after the killing of George Floyd.

The stated needs of the community receive less consideration than funding availability during CAP implementation. Survey responses revealed that cost is

significantly more important during CAP implementation than during planning, whereas local priorities factor more heavily into planning than implementation. Unsurprisingly, emissions reduction potential of CAP strategies was the most important factor during both planning and implementation.

Survey responses revealed that equity has been increasingly considered in CAPs due to strong pushes from communities as well as various equity-centered funding opportunities. However,

considering equity impacts across the lifecycle of projects, such as how introducing electric buses may generate more power plant pollutants in another community, was widely regarded as beyond the scope of local jurisdictions due to limits in control and funding. When discussing funding, some jurisdictions reported depending on free and volunteer work to implement actions and update their CAPs. Finally, many respondents mentioned budget/cost and political will as the biggest influencers on a project’s likelihood of implementation.

Policy Implications

Local jurisdictions should make a concerted effort to highlight equity themes in their CAPs. However, survey responses revealed that many jurisdictions are underfunded and under resourced when it comes to climate action planning, such that many struggle to include the minimum amount of information needed in their CAPs. Therefore, it would be helpful for state or federal governments to allocate additional funds and resources to aid in the efficient and effective development of more comprehensive local

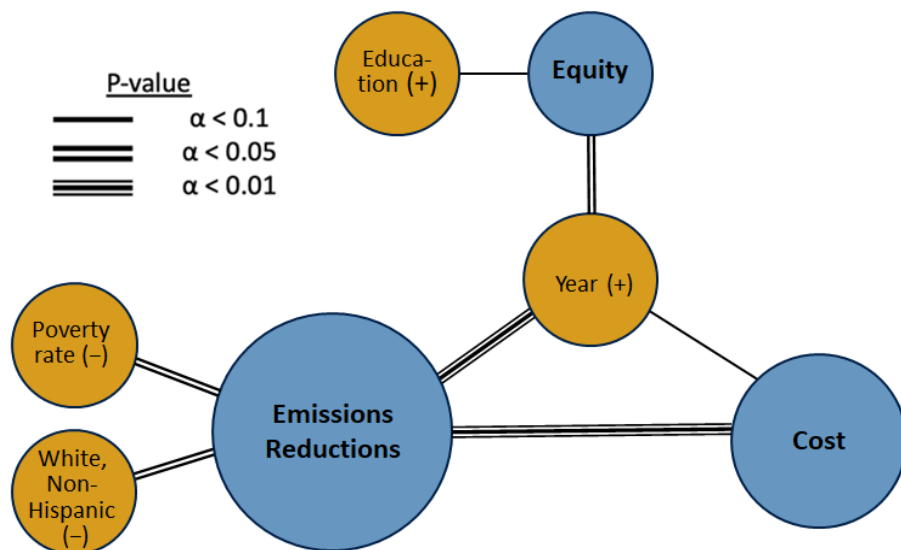


Figure 1. A diagram of the correlations between various factors (in yellow) and the scores on each theme (in blue). More lines between the circles indicates a more statistically significant correlation; the size of each blue circle represents how much the CAPs, on average, considered each theme.

CAPs that consider equity as well as emissions and cost. Additionally, equity would be achieved more effectively through collaboration between jurisdictions to expand consideration of impacts that are currently beyond local borders.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from “Assessing the Three E’s—Environment, Economy, and Equity—in Climate Action Plans” a report from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation, authored by Mark T. Lozano, Alissa Kendall, Gwen Arnold, John T. Harvey, and Ali A. Butt of the University of California, Davis. The full report can be found on the NCST website at <https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/project/greenhouse-gas-reduction-opportunities-local-governments-development-supply-curves-co>.

For more information about the findings presented in this brief, contact Alissa Kendall at amkendall@ucdavis.edu.

The National Center for Sustainable Transportation is a consortium of leading universities committed to advancing an environmentally sustainable transportation system through cutting-edge research, direct policy engagement, and education of our future leaders. Consortium members: University of California, Davis; University of California, Riverside; University of Southern California; California State University, Long Beach; Georgia Institute of Technology; and the University of Vermont.

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