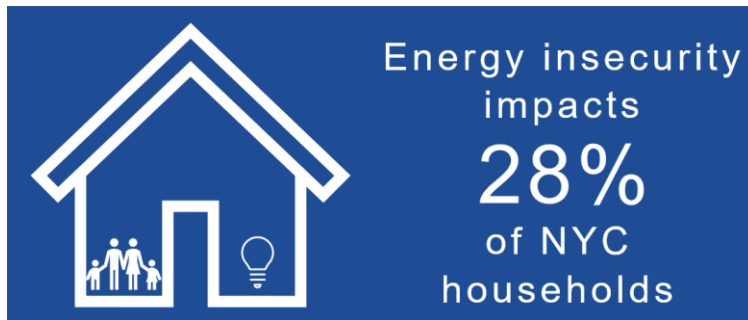


Community Voices: How Energy Insecurity Affects New Yorkers



Energy is essential. It lights homes, allows families to cook, keeps air conditioning on for cooling and heat on for warmth, and powers medical equipment required to manage health conditions. But almost one in three New Yorkers (28%) experiences **energy insecurity**, struggling to meet basic household energy needs. Energy insecurity is not only an inconvenience but can harm health, and people with worse health are also more likely to be energy insecure. People and households with energy insecurity are more likely to experience heart, breathing, and mental health conditions, and energy insecurity is more common among people who rely on electrically powered medical equipment. Energy insecurity also inequitably burdens families with low incomes, New Yorkers of color, recent immigrants, and households with children.

Lived Experience Can, and Should, Shape Better Energy Policies in NYC

To better understand the experiences of New Yorkers facing energy insecurity, the NYC Health Department and Columbia University — with the assistance of **Bronx Independent Living Services, South Bronx Unite, Indo-Caribbean Alliance, and Make the Road New York** — held four focus groups in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language with Bronx and Queens residents in the summer of 2025. Participants shared experiences with energy insecurity during extreme heat in the summer and possible solutions to reduce the consequences of energy insecurity.

Energy Insecurity Has Health and Financial Consequences

Focus group participants highlighted barriers to receiving bill assistance. Some participants were confused about how to apply for, qualify for, and receive utility assistance. Some households earned too much to qualify for help but were supporting someone and still needed assistance.

Another barrier was immigration status. Participants assumed they would not qualify for benefits if they were not citizens. While many assistance programs have citizenship requirements, if anyone in a household qualifies, the household may apply for assistance. Some participants were also afraid to bring up building conditions that were unsafe or illegal for fear of retaliation based on immigration status.

“In winter, I don’t turn on the heating at all. To warm up, I put on two or three pants and wrap myself well so as not to use [the heat] because the [bill] is very high.” — Queens resident

Participants also discussed building maintenance concerns, such as faulty equipment or landlords who did not address heating and cooling issues.

The rising and unpredictable costs of energy caused participants financial anxiety, stress, and health consequences. They coped by limiting their energy use and supplementing their heating and cooling through other unsafe and ineffective means. As a result, participants are choosing between paying bills and feeling comfortable and safe. One caregiver to a child with disabilities shared her stress about the cost of energy bills during extreme temperatures.

“I’m always concerned about cooling. ... that [heat] will affect [her] allergies and seizures, because [the energy bill] does get incredibly high. I have somebody who is ill ... and [having it cool] is usually a big concern, or just [to] regulate ... temperature so that she’s not [becoming] unregulated and uncooled ... that can spark many other things.” — Bronx resident

For some participants with chronic health issues, reducing or skipping heating or cooling was not an option, even when they could not afford the bill. To compensate for the financial burden, they cut other day-to-day expenses (for example, adjusting how they prepare food).

“When I cook, [I think about] how much I’m using and how much it’s going to cost. I cook for me and my son ... to save a little, [I only] heat up a little bit — fast — and it’s done.” — Bronx resident

Community-Proposed Solutions to Energy Insecurity

Solar Energy

Participants showed strong interest in using solar energy to meet energy needs while lowering costs but were concerned about equipment costs. They also didn’t feel empowered to control whether their building could get solar energy.

In-Building Cooling

Participants agreed that cooling was so important that it should be considered a basic right. They suggested that cooling spaces in residential buildings could provide better access, even when public cooling centers are closed.

“If you’re someone with COPD or certain ... conditions, air conditioners [are] crucial toward survival. I don’t think our system looks at it on that level.” — Bronx resident

Green Spaces

Participants also observed that access to parks and green spaces varied by neighborhood and wanted more green spaces in their area to take breaks from hot weather.

Rate Adjustments

Participants suggested lower rates for older adults on reduced incomes and for residents in areas that were historically hotter than other neighborhoods, partly due to lack of green spaces resulting from structural discrimination.

“If you have high industrial areas that create these urban heat islands, why are the people who are not living there actually privy to getting more discounts for Con Edison?” — Bronx resident

Community Engagement

Participants felt their voices were not heard by energy decision-makers. They wanted in-person educational outreach about energy issues in their primary language, which could help strengthen relationships between government and community leaders. Guidance on understanding energy bills in customers’ preferred language (including information about delivery costs, taxes, and terms) would help participants make informed decisions and advocate for themselves and their communities.

“Our languages aren’t out there as much, so it’s going to be hard to get to know different people in the community and get them out if we can’t even communicate with them in the first place.” — Bronx resident

Energy-insecure communities in NYC face many challenges that threaten their health and well-being. These community-generated solutions from fellow New Yorkers are fundamental to shaping energy policy and both individual and community interventions in an equitable and effective way.

The New York City Council passed a law in late 2025 to require landlords to provide air conditioning units to tenants who request them. As the law is implemented in the coming years, we will work with City agencies and others to address energy affordability, expand access to energy assistance programs, and ensure equitable access to green spaces and other resources.

For more information and resources, visit nyc.gov/health and search for [energy insecurity](#).