Pursuing Justice & Equity Through Integrated Policy Action

Written By: Lauren Gonzalez-Perez

Led By: Mathew Habib

Civil Rights Department

PIVOT Fellowship

November, 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Marginalized communities, particularly Hispanic and Latinx families, experience multiple crises at the same time, and these issues do not exist separately from one another. Housing instability, immigration barriers, environmental risk, weak animal protection systems, and persistent gender inequities overlap in daily life and reinforce one another in harmful ways. Unstable housing increases exposure to climate hazards, immigration status limits access to basic services and protection, economic strain contributes to family instability and animal neglect, and gender inequality restricts safety, income, leadership, and decision-making power.

When these pressures combine, they create cycles of insecurity that single-issue policies rarely solve. The purpose of this policy brief is to explain how these challenges intersect, particularly within Hispanic and Latinx communities, to present current evidence showing the social and structural impacts, and to outline coordinated, justice-centered policy strategies that address housing, immigration, climate action, gender equity, and animal welfare together rather than separately.

By approaching these topics as connected systems instead of isolated problems, this brief argues that meaningful progress requires policies that strengthen dignity, safety, and opportunity across all areas of community life.

1. Problem Definition

In many U.S. communities, particularly those with large Hispanic and Latinx populations, structural inequities manifest in multiple, interconnected ways.

Homelessness and housing unaffordability continue to escalate due to shortages of affordable rental homes and stagnant wages. Animal justice and shelter deficits remain under-addressed because of inconsistent regulations and insufficient public funding. At the same time, immigration barriers and fear of deportation discourage many families from accessing healthcare, education, and housing support.

Climate vulnerability disproportionately affects minority communities, who are more likely to live in flood-prone, heat-exposed, or polluted areas. Finally, gender inequality persists globally, limiting safety, pay equity, and representation for women, particularly women of color.

If left unaddressed, these combined issues erode individual dignity, trap families in intergenerational poverty, and weaken social cohesion.

2. Evidence-Based Context

Homelessness and Housing Affordability

The United States faces a critical shortage of affordable housing. The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) estimates a deficit of 7.3 million affordable rental homes for extremely low-income households (NLIHC, 2024).

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports that 771,480 people experienced homelessness on a single night in 2024, with 30% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, reflecting a rising trend (HUD, 2024).

The U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) also notes that exposure to extreme weather increasingly threatens unhoused individuals, linking homelessness directly to climate risk (USICH, n.d.).

Immigration (Hispanic and Latinx Communities)

Immigration remains a defining issue for Hispanic and Latinx communities. As of 2023, 10.9 million U.S. residents were born in Mexico, representing 23% of the foreign-born population (Migration Policy Institute, n.d-a).

Approximately 11 million people reside in the U.S. without legal authorization, nearly half originating from Mexico (Migration Policy Institute, n.d-b).

Research indicates that simplifying visa, asylum, and residency processes could significantly reduce unauthorized migration and encourage safer, regulated migration pathways (Migration Policy Institute, 2024).

Climate Change and Environmental Justice

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change emphasizes that equitable adaptation and mitigation strategies are essential for climate-resilient development (IPCC, 2023).

Climate change does not affect all communities equally. Low-income residents, minority communities, women, and socially marginalized groups often experience heightened vulnerability due to reduced access to resources, political influence, and decision-making power (Constable, 2024; UNFCCC, 2022).

Climate justice and social justice are therefore inseparable.

Gender Equality and Rights

UN Women (2024) reports that gender inequality remains a persistent global challenge, intensified by climate change, economic instability, and conflict. Women face structural barriers in accessing resources, leadership roles, and protection from violence.

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (2024) shows that communities with strong gender equity experience greater resilience, safer societies, and stronger governance outcomes.

Experts emphasize that policies must incorporate gender impact assessments and equitable funding to ensure women's full participation in leadership and climate adaptation (WEDO, 2016).

Animal Justice and Shelter Systems

Animal welfare is frequently overlooked in public policy. The absence of consistent national standards and funding for animal shelters leads to dramatic disparities in treatment quality, shelter capacity, and euthanasia rates.

Animal welfare advocates emphasize the need for federal shelter standards, integration of animal care into public health systems, and more humane, community-centered animal policy frameworks (World Animal Protection, 2024).

Improving animal welfare reflects broader values of compassion, community responsibility, and protection of vulnerable beings.

3. Policy Recommendations

A. Housing & Homelessness

1. **Expand and reform federal housing vouchers to better serve extremely low-income households, prioritizing immigrant and minority families (NLIHC, 2024).**
   Current voucher structures often fail to reflect local housing markets and qualification barriers. Reform should include adjusting payment standards regionally, increasing voucher amounts to match rent costs in high-cost areas, and streamlining application processes to reduce bureaucratic delays. Ensuring immigrant and minority families can access vouchers without punitive documentation requirements will improve housing stability for the most vulnerable.

2. **Establish and scale Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to maintain long-term affordability and prevent displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods.**
   CLTs remove land from speculative markets and empower community governance of

development. Federal seed funding and technical assistance grants can help municipalities and nonprofits launch new CLTs, while providing operating support to existing ones. Connecting CLTs with workforce housing strategies strengthens economic inclusion.

3. **Increase homelessness prevention funding, including rental assistance, legal aid for tenants, and mediation programs to reduce evictions (HUD, 2024).**
   Evidence shows that early intervention reduces homelessness more effectively than crisis responses. Expanding rental assistance, eviction diversion programs, and community-based mediation reduces both displacement and the cost burdens on courts and shelters. Legal aid programs must be expanded nationwide, especially in low-income communities where tenants are most at risk.

4. **Mandate "Housing First" approaches in federal homelessness grants, ensuring permanent housing remains the central solution (USICH, n.d.).**
   Housing First prioritizes stable housing as the foundation for addressing other challenges, such as health, employment, and social supports. Federal grants should require Housing First models, measure success by long-term housing retention, and support wraparound services.

B. Immigration Support & Reform

1. **Simplify legal pathways for visas, asylum, and permanent residency, particularly for Central American and Mexican nationals (Migration Policy Institute, 2024).**
   Lengthy, complex processes push migrants into irregular status. Reform proposals should include expanded visa categories, reduced processing backlogs through modernized electronic systems, and expanded asylum processing capacity at borders and within the U.S.

2. **Decouple immigration status from eligibility for essential services like emergency healthcare, education, and housing assistance.**
   Fear of enforcement deters families from accessing needed services. Policies should ensure that service providers are prohibited from sharing client information with immigration enforcement and that eligibility criteria are explicitly inclusive of documented and undocumented residents.

3. **Fund and expand community-based legal clinics, especially bilingual services, to guide immigrant families through legal processes.**
   Grassroots legal clinics increase access to representation, improve outcomes in immigration cases, and ensure families understand their rights. Federal funding should

support service expansion in high-need areas, including rural regions.

4. **Adopt humane border processing standards, prioritizing family unity, transparency, and oversight.**
Policies should mandate clear procedural protections, independent monitoring of detention and processing facilities, trauma-informed interviewing practices, and expedited family reunification where applicable.

C. Climate Justice & Resilience

1. **Target federal adaptation funding toward frontline and Latinx communities most exposed to heat, flooding, and pollution (IPCC, 2023).**
Climate vulnerability mapping should guide funding formulas. Invest in community-scale infrastructure, such as cooling centers, flood defenses, and urban greening projects that reduce heat islands and pollution risks.

2. **Require gender-responsive budgeting in climate action plans to ensure equitable benefits and participation (UN Women, 2024).**
Budgeting frameworks should evaluate the differential impacts of spending and ensure climate investments deliver measurable benefits to women and marginalized populations. This strengthens local resilience while promoting equity.

3. **Promote equitable green job initiatives, such as renewable energy apprenticeships in disadvantaged communities.**
Federal and state workforce development programs should fund apprenticeships, training grants, and employer incentives that connect marginalized communities to growing green sectors. This creates economic opportunities while supporting climate goals.

4. **Support local resilience hubs that combine housing, energy, and emergency services under community leadership.**
Resilience hubs provide multi-purpose community assets capable of emergency response, social support, and education. Grants should be tied to community-driven planning processes to ensure relevance and sustainability.

D. Gender Equity & Protection

1. **Pass stronger national legislation on gender-based violence, ensuring survivor services and legal support are well-funded (UN Women, 2024).**
Federal laws should establish consistent standards for survivor protections, fund crisis centers, and ensure legal representation and protective ordering systems are accessible to all, regardless of income or immigration status.

2. **Enforce pay transparency and equal pay laws, narrowing wage gaps for women and people of color (GIWPS, 2024).**
   This includes requirements for employers to publicly report wage data by gender and race/ethnicity, and penalties for discriminatory pay practices. Strong enforcement mechanisms empower workers and reduce systemic inequities.

3. **Invest in leadership, STEM, and entrepreneurship programs for women and girls in underserved regions (WEDO, 2016).**
   Expand federal and philanthropic funding for mentorship, scholarships, and incubator programs that increase representation in high-growth industries.

4. **Require gender impact assessments in all major federal and state policies, especially in climate and housing sectors.**
   Assessments should be mandatory, transparent, and conducted early in the policy design process. They would analyze how proposed policies affect women differently and recommend mitigations for inequitable outcomes.

E. Animal Welfare & Shelter Enhancement

1. **Adopt federal standards for humane shelter operation, tying compliance to funding eligibility (World Animal Protection, 2024).**
   Establish minimum care standards, intake protocols, and staffing ratios. Tying federal and state funding to compliance ensures consistent quality across jurisdictions.

2. **Create state-matched grants for no-kill shelters, foster networks, and spay/neuter initiatives.**
   Matching grants incentivize local investment and build capacity for community-based animal care networks that reduce euthanasia rates and improve overall welfare.

3. **Strengthen animal cruelty laws and ensure consistent enforcement across all states.**
   Federal guidance should set baseline cruelty definitions and penalties while supporting state-level enforcement training, data systems, and cross-jurisdiction cooperation.

4. **Incorporate animal welfare education in schools to promote empathy and community responsibility.**
   Curriculum supports long-term cultural shifts toward humane treatment, stewardship, and community care, linking animal protection with broader social justice values.

4. Conclusion

Homelessness, animal welfare, immigration support, climate justice, and gender equity are interconnected challenges that reinforce economic, social, and environmental inequality. From a Hispanic community perspective, these struggles intersect daily: economic precarity, environmental risk, social marginalization, and constrained opportunity reinforce one another.

A holistic, justice-driven policy framework that integrates housing stability, humane animal treatment, equitable immigration systems, climate resilience, and gender justice can address these crises collectively. With collaboration among community leaders, policymakers, and advocates, we can advance a unified vision of dignity, equity, and justice for all.

References

Constable, A. (2024). Gender, youth, and climate justice: Global patterns of inequity. UN Women Expert Paper. https://www.unwomen.org

Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. (2024). Women and climate change: Impact & policy response. https://giwps.georgetown.edu

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2023). AR6 Working Group II, Chapter 18: Climate-Resilient Development Pathways.
https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-18/

Migration Policy Institute. (2024). U.S. Legal Pathways for Mexican and Central American Immigrants. https://www.migrationpolicy.org

Migration Policy Institute. (n.d.-a). Mexican Immigrants in the United States. https://www.migrationpolicy.org

Migration Policy Institute. (n.d.-b). Profile of the Unauthorized Population in the U.S. https://www.migrationpolicy.org

National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2024). The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes. https://www.nlihc.org

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2024). Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR). https://www.huduser.gov

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2022).

Gender-differentiated impacts of climate change. https://unfccc.int

United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (n.d.). Homelessness Data & Trends. https://www.usich.gov

UN Women. (2024). Gender equality and climate justice. https://www.unwomen.org

Women's Environment and Development Organization. (2016). Gender equality and climate policy report. https://wedo.org

World Animal Protection. (2024). Global Animal Welfare Report 2024. https://www.worldanimalprotection.org