South Carolina
Energy
Justice
Coalition



The Energy Burden Crisis:

How Compounding Costs and Inequity Threaten South Carolina Households

KEY REPORT FINDINGS

Unprecedented Financial Strain

Systemic Program Failure

Severe Vulnerability Gaps

Shining a light on a path to energy justice in South Carolina

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The Real Cost of Keeping the Lights On in South Carolina

Executive Summary



This report shines a light on energy burden reduction as an essential part of the affordability crisis. The report examines fundamental inequities of our current energy landscape and the opportunities to address the issue while our state and nation considers changes to the power sector.

South Carolina is caught in the crosshairs of a compounding energy affordability and general affordability crisis, where households are being hit by overlapping inflationary shocks. South Carolina is also facing a critical energy crisis where households bear disproportionate financial weights just to keep their lights on, this is worse for low-to-moderate income households. Over the past several years, the skyrocketing costs of core living expenses, including housing, groceries, healthcare, and insurance, have severely degraded the financial resilience of families. When utility rate hikes and rising electricity costs are layered on top of this broader economic pressure, a high energy bill transforms from a manageable monthly expense into an immediate threat to household stability.

While the standard definition of an affordable energy burden sits at 6% of gross household income, a baseline survey we conducted reveals that 57% of all state respondents face severe energy burdens exceeding 15%. This issue is uniquely pronounced among Black communities and other People of Color, rural areas, individuals living with disabilities, and low-wealth populations who are routinely forced to choose between utility costs and basic survival needs. For this and other reasons, the South Carolina Energy Justice Coalition (SCEJC) reached out to everyday people navigating these systems to learn what they were experiencing.

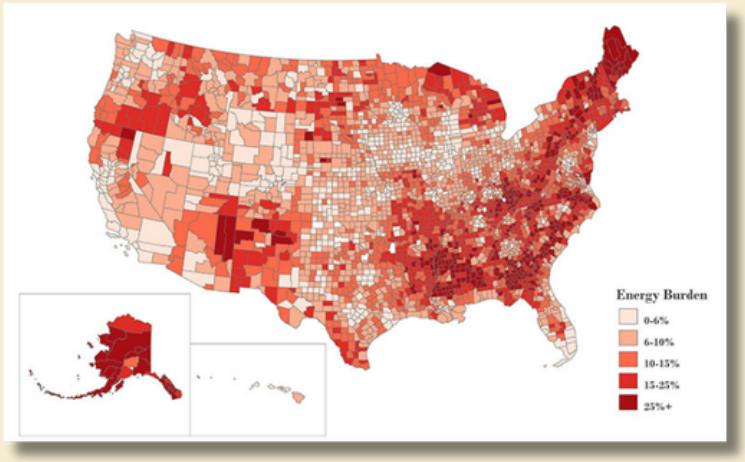
It is important to note that the energy hardship landscape manifests differently across South Carolina's geographic divisions. While urban centers frequently struggle with high absolute costs relative to income, rural communities (over 30% of SC is rural according to the Census) experience localized structural and demographic vulnerabilities that worsen energy insecurity. Therefore, in rural areas, demographic disparities take on a different shape. For instance, Black and White rural residents report experiencing energy hardships at similar rates, but rural Latino populations experience significantly heightened difficulty. This specific rural disparity is largely driven by language barriers, including an inability to navigate utility calls, bilingual notices, or relief program sign-ups, which effectively turns systemic communication failures into functional roadblocks to energy assistance.

Furthermore, within the broader population, there is a profound diversity in financial circumstances and security. Households do not experience economic issues uniformly, especially when factoring in the split incentives of renting versus owning, physical differences in rural and older housing stock, and regional variations in the cost of living. As South Carolina undergoes rapid industrial development, rising electricity demands, and extreme weather events, the division between those who benefit from the energy grid and those who shoulder its financial risks continues to widen. Without explicit action, households, especially low-income, rural, and marginalized ones, are likely to face increased energy burdens even more as we undergo changes to SC's energy system. However, with adequate analysis and targeted programs and policies, the energy crisis could be reduced markedly through investing in energy burden-reduction actions, systematically.

Communities provided a wealth of important insight, expertise, recommendations, and perspectives on the opportunities and challenges associated with energy burden. This report's primary purpose is to inform energy, environmental, and climate justice policy advocates, but should also be used by policymakers, utilities, regulators, and energy practitioners. Along with an inclusive public participation process, this report can be used to help make equitable, common-sense decisions about South Carolina's energy future that will center the communities most impacted.

Research Goals

Examining Energy System Functionality



Pursuing equity in the South Carolina energy system

Establish an Empirical Baseline

Document and track the exact percentage of household income spent on utilities among SC families to challenge traditional energy sector metrics with household-level data

Identify Systemic Gaps in Utility Assistance

Analyze the structural, linguistic, and regulatory barriers that lead to high application rejection rates, ensuring that relief programs are redesigned to be accessible, transparent, and linguistically inclusive

Examine the Intersection of Compounding Crises

Investigate how rising electricity costs directly interact with the broader general affordability crisis, detailing the specific financial sacrifices families must make regarding food, healthcare, and education

Map Geographic and Demographic Inequities

Quantify how energy burdens and utility practices uniquely impact vulnerable groups, including rural Latino households facing language barriers and residents living with disabilities, across varying utility territories

Inform Regulatory and Legislative Advocacy

Provide current, credible, and community-driven evidence to equip advocates, regulators, and lawmakers with the data necessary to place equity and energy justice at the center of South Carolina's energy decisions

Key Findings: Snapshot



56%

Black households had utility shutoffs and threats of shutoffs

30-40%

Average energy burden for Black and POC Households

60-75%

Of families forego necessities to pay electricity bills

89.5%

Denied energy assistance when they applied for it

8%

Disabled are 8% more likely to experience energy-related hardships than those without

40%

Reported employment disruptions due to energy issues

Key Findings



Unprecedented Energy Burdens:

Black and Indigenous/People of Color (IPOC) communities face an average energy burden of 30% to 45%, which is 5 to 8 times higher than the accepted 6% affordability threshold

Systemic Assistance Barriers:

An alarming 89.5% of respondents who proactively applied for energy assistance reported that they were not approved, highlighting a severe gap between program availability and actual access

Prevalent Utility Shutoffs:

Utility disconnections (shutoffs) and threats of shutoffs affect 45% to 56% of Black and IPOC households, peaking at 56% specifically within Black households

Severe Financial Tradeoffs:

Between 60% and 75% of families surveyed regularly forego essential human needs, such as food, medicine, and transportation, to pay electricity bills, with the highest sacrifice rate (75%) occurring in Black households

Disability Disparities:

Respondents living with disabilities are 8% more likely to experience energy-related hardships than those without, creating heightened health risks for individuals reliant on power for medical equipment, temperature regulation, and medication refrigeration

Collateral Quality of Life Costs:

High energy burdens directly damage non-utility sectors. 40% of participants reported employment disruptions due to energy issues, while others detailed driving miles to commercial locations *(like McDonald's)* or public libraries for Wi-Fi because running in-home internet alongside electric utilities was unaffordable

Policy Recommendations



Transforming policy recommendations into action represents a critical opportunity to build a more equitable, resilient energy landscape while simultaneously lowering energy costs, creating decision-making access, and ensuring no South Carolinian is left in the dark during energy planning.

Actionable Opportunities

1 Prioritize Comprehensive Energy Efficiency and Weatherization

Establish state-funded energy efficiency initiatives targeted households. Upgrading older appliances and implementing structural weatherization provides immediate cost-saving solutions, minimizes energy waste, and creates local jobs.

This must include structural frameworks to bypass the "split-incentive" barrier where landlords lack the motivation to upgrade rental properties

2 Overhaul Utility Assistance Approvals

Install a statewide Third-Party Administrator for assistance program uniformity.

Audit and restructure state-level utility assistance programs to discover why nearly 90% of applicants are being denied.

Loosen qualifying criteria, simplify documentation, and expand eligibility to mirror the varied financial realities across SC

3 Implement Inclusive, Data-Driven Regulatory Processes

Formally integrate equity impact assessments into the decisions of utility commissions.

State regulators must use disaggregated demographic and geographic data (incorporating metrics like race, Area Median Income, and regional factors) to ensure infrastructure investments for data centers and industrial developments are not funded on the backs of vulnerable ratepayers

4 Mandate Multi-Language Utility Accessibility

Require all major utility companies and cooperatives to offer comprehensive bilingual billing, consumer notices, and customer service to eliminate the language barriers disproportionately cutting off rural Latino households from relief

5 Enact Utility Shutoff Protections

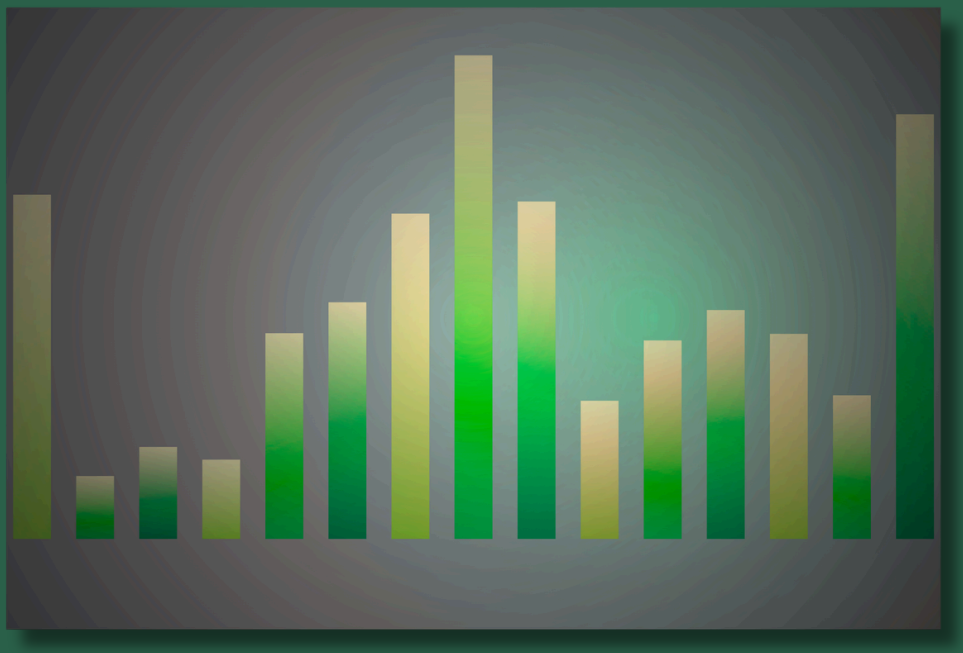
Prohibit energy disconnections during periods of extreme weather, for households containing medically vulnerable individuals, and people with disabilities who rely on power for life-saving infrastructure

Conclusion

The findings from our South Carolina Energy Burden Survey demonstrate that energy affordability is not an isolated utility issue. It is a fundamental pillar of economic and social stability. A household's ability to remain connected to the power grid should not be maintained through severe sacrifices in food, healthcare, and education.

As South Carolina plans billions of dollars in future infrastructure to meet shifting energy demands, the true metric of a successful energy system cannot simply be its generation capacity. Instead, success must be measured by whether the state's most vulnerable populations can safely afford, access, and rely on that power.

True energy justice requires moving this community-driven data from the page into regulatory action, ensuring that equity sits at the center of South Carolina's evolving clean energy transition.



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