

The waves yet to come

Managing risk in the
COVID-19 era

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BY SAMUEL CARTER
RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST



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ABOUT RESILIENT CITIES CATALYST

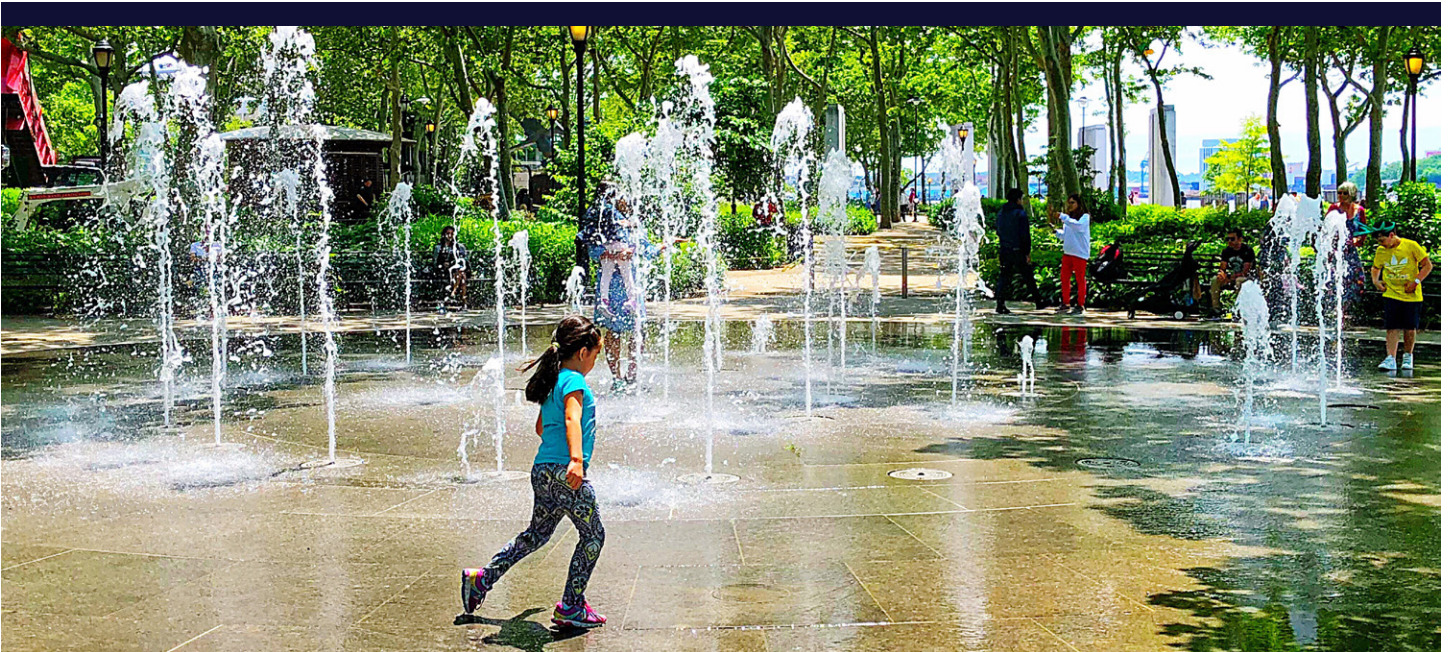
Building on the pioneering legacy of 100 Resilient Cities (100RC), senior 100RC executives have now established Resilient Cities Catalyst (RCC). RCC is a new non-profit designed to help cities build the capacities and partnerships needed to understand, prioritize, and concretely address their risks and chronic stresses as they pursue their strategic goals or recover from crisis.

RCC partners with city governments, businesses, neighborhoods, and community stakeholders around the globe to:

1. Develop an enabling environment to build strong partnerships between cities and their communities allowing them to drive policy, planning, design, finance, and institutional resources for resilience-building efforts.
2. Ensure that ideas are turned into meaningful action by addressing gaps between project plans, project implementation and desired impacts.
3. Share and replicate learnings through a growing community of practice.

ABOUT SAMUEL CARTER

Samuel Carter is a Founding Principal at [Resilient Cities Catalyst](https://www.resilientcitiescatalyst.org/). He designed and led efforts to support resilient recoveries after Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and the 2018 wildfires in California.



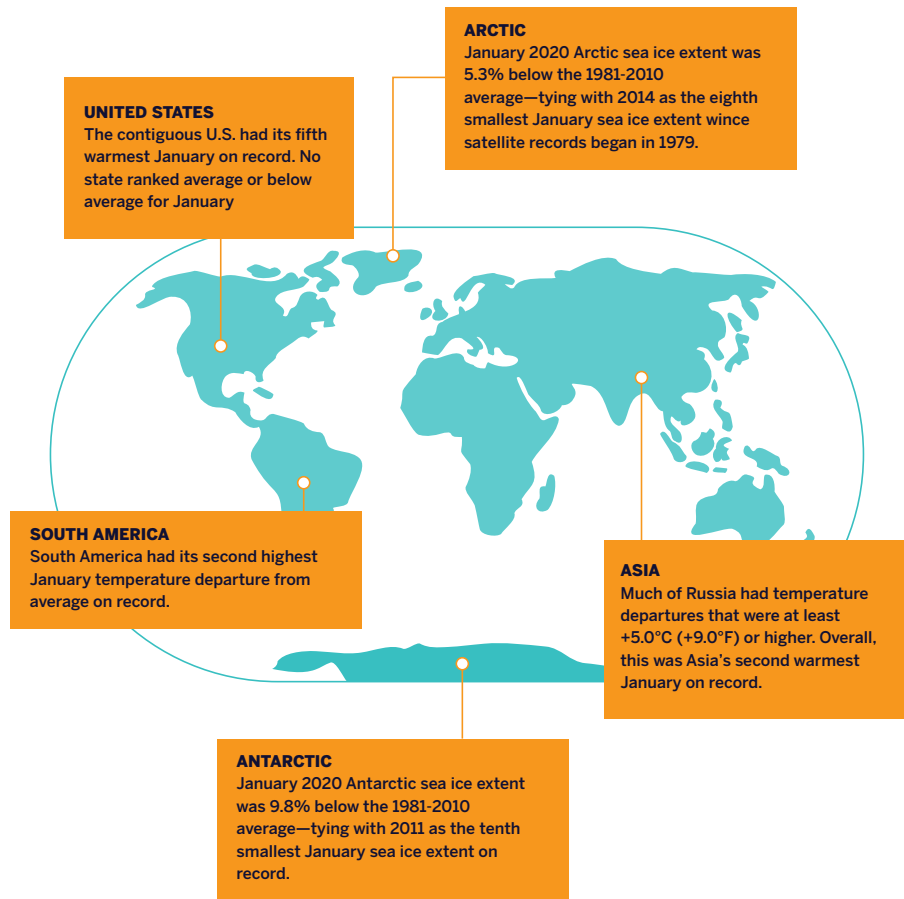
The COVID-19 crisis is pushing cities to their limits. Human and capital resources are nearing exhaustion, healthcare systems are overwhelmed, financial strain is laying waste to family incomes and stimulus packages alike. Across the country, low income urban residents are disproportionately bearing the weight of these compounding crises as COVID-19 exposes our most stark inequalities. Even before the pandemic hit, cities were under financial stress and grappling with a latticework of challenges related to housing, equity, transportation, and the economy. The immediate response to COVID-19 has been all-consuming, pushing aside many other critical issues. The waves are crashing, and we are just barely keeping our head above water. And now, summer is coming.

While times are dark, we have seen light in the incredible work cities, communities, and their partners are doing to meet residents' immediate needs. But we must not forget about other urgent and looming challenges that will inevitably compound the difficulty of managing the pandemic. Picture a hot summer day and think about city-dwellers flocking to public beaches, pools and parks to cool off or older people heading to the library or the mall for an air-conditioned walk.

January 2020 was the hottest month ever recorded, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists estimate that there is a 98% chance that 2020 will be one of the 5 hottest years on record.

We can expect longer, hotter, and more frequent heat waves, as well as more intense hurricanes and wildfires. But what if social distancing measures extend through the summer months? How can cities give residents access to the resources they need to keep cool while also keeping safe?

Global Average Temperature. January 2020 average global land and ocean temperature was the highest for January since records began in 1880.



Source: National Centers for Environmental Information (NOAA).
<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/202001>

Managing heat waves typically means establishing cooling centers and activating water features at playgrounds where families can gather and beat the heat. These are especially critical health interventions for low-income residents who lack air conditioning. Similarly, evacuation centers and shelters with centralized resources and supplies are critical in responding to hurricanes and wildfires. COVID19 calls our traditional approaches into question. How will any of this work in a prolonged era of physical distancing? Without these sorts of interventions, how will we care for each other—especially senior citizens, lower-income families, and other vulnerable members of our communities?

Heat is a silent killer. Every year, heatwaves kill untold thousands with thousands more hospitalized due to heat-related illnesses.

Last year, in a single week, heat killed 400 people in the Netherlands and sent 18,000 to the hospital in Japan. In the US, heat claimed upwards of 1,500 lives over the course of the summer as heat deaths triple or quintuple in cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas. Every year, these numbers inch ever higher as temperatures continue to soar. From Sydney to LA, this risk is compounded by droughts, dry conditions and the threat of wildfires.

How can our healthcare systems cope with an influx of heat patients when they are already overtaxed treating COVID-19 patients? How will we manage in a blackout? How can our first responders fight fires and the coronavirus at the same time?

We know that major destructive events weigh most heavily on the poorer and more marginalized among us. These everyday disparities will only be exaggerated by compounding shocks like what we expect to experience over the course of 2020. So what can city leaders and their partners do in the face of these unprecedented challenges?



Fires in California (left) and Sydney (right).



Start Planning

Cities need to take a clear-eyed look at the future and understand that the seasonal challenges coming down the pipeline may require new solutions. Early planning can

help with this. Identify and organize any spare capacity across agencies and with civil society partners to plan for these compounding events. Other cities may have ideas and experience to share. Local and state universities and institutions may have experts and scientists with time to help. For example, over the next few months, [Resilient Cities Catalyst](#) will be working closely with Columbia University's [Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes](#) to look at the compounding impacts in our cities' most vulnerable communities and [will be adding to our growing set of resources on COVID-19](#). Planning for these scenarios in advance can not only save lives: it will also ultimately conserve resources in an era of increasingly strapped budgets.



Build Strong Ties to Community Groups

If there's a bright spot already revealing itself through the COVID-19 crisis, it's the widespread community response and welfare infrastructure that has taken shape. Now is the time to take stock of these community lifelines and build the

relationships cities will need to reinforce and redeploy them to meet increasingly complex needs. Current efforts to manage COVID-19 and its corresponding impacts can build upon the strength and power of local community groups. Moreover, coordinating among these trusted partners, and scaling what works, can amplify impact even further. These community-based organizations—from faith-based groups to youth programs to neighborhood associations—are already doing critical work in communities everyday: their deep local relationships and expertise make them invaluable partners in responding both rapidly and effectively following a crisis. Across your city, people are banding together to help each other. They can help governments achieve their goals now. Cities need to work now to understand the power of community infrastructure, talk to community leaders, learn from them, and build trust today. By laying this groundwork, they will prove to be among your strongest partners in weathering the challenges to come.



Reimagine Your Toolkit

Federal agencies and other groups are discussing a number of good proposals to guide federal planning, and hopefully their response to a difficult summer will be strong and effective. But many

of the best solutions may ultimately emerge from local innovation. City leaders need to think differently about how to meet the needs of residents in the coming months. Cities should create space for these conversations to happen. How could we help residents--largely sheltering at home--to take steps now to weatherproof their apartments and homes? How might we repurpose additional hospital capacity to provide emergency shelter that's safe in a pandemic? Could we provide air conditioning units and deploy subsidies to make energy costs lower for seniors and other vulnerable populations this summer? What about beyond the summer? How can we invest in or repurpose our social infrastructure to ensure everyone's needs are accounted for, starting with the most vulnerable?

Resourcefulness is the essence of resilience, and it will take all sectors and actors working together to rise to the challenge of 2020. As exhausted as we are today--just approaching the crest of the perverse wave that is the COVID-peak-- the time is now to plan and act for the destructive waves still to come. ●