Health risks from global warming can help drive city climate action, study finds

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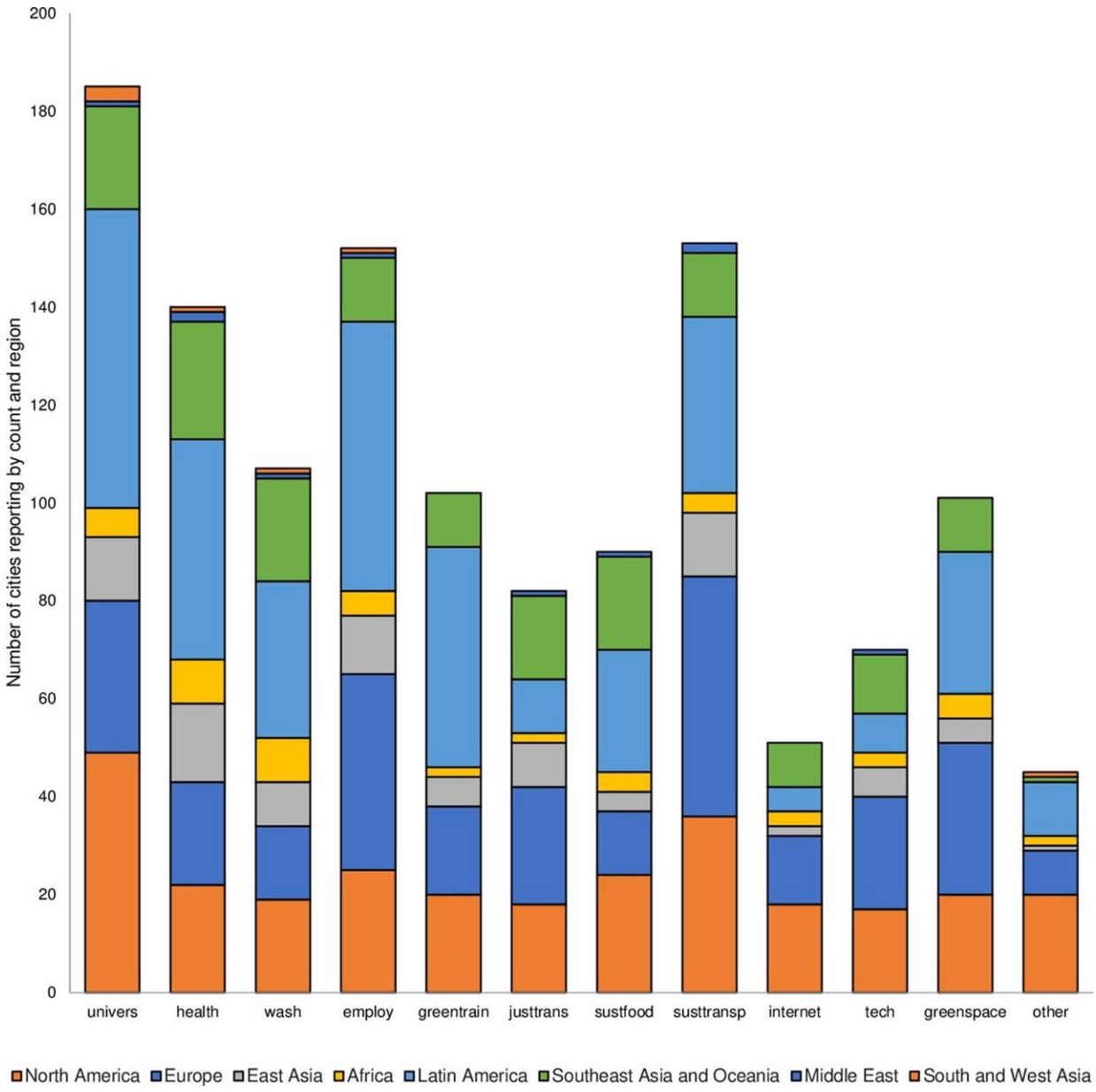

Count of green recovery Interventions in cities by CDP geographic region. Count of cities reporting each recovery intervention type (total n = 793 cities). Credit: *Nature Cities* (2024). DOI: 10.1038/s44284-024-00052-6

Cities around the world were more likely to maintain climate action and enact "green recovery" long-term plans after the pandemic if local decision-makers were more alert to the health risks of climate change, a new global study has shown.

The health benefits of tackling climate change, such as cleaner air and more access to green spaces, were key drivers in city officials' decisions to continue with climate plans despite funding shortfalls caused by the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, the study showed that enduring and ambitious climate action during the pandemic was more common in cities in the Global South than in Europe or North America, despite greater funding challenges.

Officials in these cities were also more likely to employ successful practices such as partnering with other cities to strengthen climate action plans, or with businesses to bolster sustainability initiatives.

Study first author Dr. Tanya O'Garra, from the Center for Environmental Policy at Imperial College London, and Middlesex University, said, "Nearly 60% of people live in cities worldwide, which can be economically beneficial for them, but city-dwellers are increasingly vulnerable to multiple crises caused by pandemics, conflict and climate change itself.

"City leaders often pave the way with ambitious climate action until calls to tackle these other threats can draw funds away from their climate

goals. Because these major challenges are so intertwined, this leaves their populations more vulnerable to all risks.

"If we find out how city officials can maintain action in the face of such challenges, we can help large populations, especially the poorest and most vulnerable to these interconnected risks, avoid the most serious consequences of climate change."

The research, conducted by researchers in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States and the U.K., is published in the journal *Nature Cities*.

Driving climate action

The team analyzed survey data provided by city officials on the Carbon Disclosure Platform (CDP) from 2021, and other sources, to assess how 793 cities globally responded to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of their climate actions, funding and green recovery efforts.

While they found that in the short term, the majority of city decision-makers kept up their climate commitments, green recovery plans were set up in only 43% of cities, suggesting the remainder of the cities are not investing in longer-term climate plans.

Many previous studies of local city-based climate plans have focused on North America and Europe, but in this study 48% of the cities assessed were in the Global South. The results show that, in general, decision-makers for Global South cities have higher ambition in climate action and promoted more green recovery efforts despite facing greater funding shortfalls than cities in Europe and North America.

The team identified two broad reasons underlying city officials' commitments to climate action. The first is exposure to environmental

stress: in cities where citizens experience more climate-related issues (for example, climate hazards like floods or droughts, or persistent issues like air pollution) officials are more motivated to pursue sustained climate action.

The second was early engagement with climate and sustainability: the more that city officials had already engaged in addressing climate and sustainability issues (for example, by joining climate networks, or by aligning economic development with sustainability), the more likely these issues had become embedded in city policies, processes and interactions, making them more likely to continue even under a crisis scenario.

Measuring motivations

The team are now conducting in-depth interviews with city planning and administration officials in a selection of the cities. Preliminary interviews with officials in Kochi, India, confirmed the credit for their resilience was due to many of the factors the team had identified in the data.

For example, interviewees identified the benefits of existing coordination between state and local bodies and engagement with different stakeholders in planning, including academics, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations and the public.

They noted that the pandemic also led to an increased focus on climate action in the city, which has also occurred after other natural disasters.

More information: Tanya O'Garra et al, Early engagement and co-benefits strengthen cities' climate commitments, *Nature Cities* (2024).

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