



## SchwartzReport

# The great disruption: Climate change provoked migration and its effect on American healthcare

Stephan A. Schwartz<sup>1</sup>

California Institute for Human Sciences, Encinitas, CA, USA



Since March of 2009, in these pages, I have been warning you about the civilization altering massive disruption of people because of climate change provoked migrations, both internal migrations within countries and international migrations forcing people to leave their homeland for another country.<sup>1</sup>

In that first paper I pointed out something which is not often noticed by the media, saying, “Migrations come in two varieties: glacial and volcanic. The 1994 Tutsi flood that poured out of Rwanda and the several million non-Islamic Sudanese forced from their villages by the progovernment Janjaweed militias are volcanic migrations—violent ejections of populations based on immediate crisis. The volcanic time frame is short term, because just as the Rwandans—both Hutu and Tutsi—came back as soon as it was possible, those ejected by a volcanic migration do not surrender their allegiance to their homeland and always hope to return. Theirs is the commonsense response of simple people caught in the ravenous jaws of some greater political purpose. In contrast, glacial movements represent a general surrender of allegiance to the old land and an embrace of the new home, and typically take place over several generations. The Irish diaspora to the New World resulting from the Corn Laws and the Potato Famine in the 19th century—a migration that profoundly changed America—is an example of this process. The movement of Hispanics into North America is another. Mostly because of their timing cycle and because each decision to move seems so personal and un rushed, true migrations often occur beneath public awareness until they are largely a fait accompli that has reshaped the world that is the migration’s goal. The response is really more about the change wrought than the migration that produced it.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 15 years since I wrote that, it has all become the threatening reality I feared humanity would face. In 2022 the International Panel on Climate Change reported that already 3.3 billion people around the world are “highly vulnerable to climate change.” Further, they said, one billion people could be exposed to “coastal-specific climate hazards by 2050.”<sup>3</sup> And the United States is, and is going to be, heavily impacted. On the January 25, 2023 the Census Bureau published a survey stating that 3.2 million adults had already been displaced or evacuated as a result of a range of climate change associated natural disasters in 2022.<sup>4</sup> And this is just the beginning of what is coming.

Investigative reporter at *Politico*, Abrahm Lustgarten, delved into the topic of U.S. climate migration in great depth using data from across the country as well as from abroad in places like Guatemala and Africa in order to write his book, *On the Move*. What he discovered in his research confirmed what I had written looking at much the same research. Climate change migrations are not going to be caused by one thing, but rather from a spectrum of changes caused by the alterations in the climate. In an interview with Craig Thompson for *EcoWatch*, *Lustgarten said*:

“...we will see a future projection of a movement of population from the South and the most extreme areas affected by both heat and sea level rise towards the North, which according to the specific risks that I mapped is the least affected part of the United States. We see current migration that’s sort of unmeasurable coming out of those high-risk areas already. People leaving Florida, people leaving the Gulf Coast, people leaving wildfires in California, anecdotally leaving heat in the Southwest, but it’s very difficult to measure.... this is a pessimistic scenario that universally all of the economists that I spoke with warn

E-mail address: [saschwartz@earthlink.net](mailto:saschwartz@earthlink.net).

<sup>1</sup> Scientist, futurist, award-winning author of both fiction and nonfiction Stephan A. Schwartz, is the co-founder of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness, the Association of Post-materialist Science, The Society for Consciousness Studies, a Distinguished Associated Scholar at California Institute for Human Science; Distinguished Consulting Faculty of Saybrook University, and a BIAL Foundation Fellow. He is a columnist for the journal EXPLORE, and editor of the daily web publication Schwartzreport.net in both of which he covers trends that are affecting the future. For over 40 years, as an experimentalist, he has been studying the nature of consciousness, particularly that aspect independent of space and time. Schwartz is part of the small group that founded modern Remote Viewing research and is the principal researcher studying the use of Remote Viewing in anthropology and archaeology. In addition to his own non-fiction works ©prefaces, and introductions. In addition to his experimental studies he has written numerous magazine articles for Smithsonian, OMNI, American History, American Heritage, The Washington Post, The New York Times, as well as other magazines and newspapers, and written and produced numerous nationally broadcast documentaries. His work has been covered worldwide by numerous magazines, newspapers, and television productions, and he is the recipient of the Parapsychological Association Outstanding Contribution Award, the U.S. Navy’s Certificate of Commendation, twice awarded OOOM Magazine’s (Europe) 100 Most Inspiring People in the World Award (2018–2023), and the 2018 Albert Nelson Marquis Award for Outstanding Contributions as well as being ranked by GPScholars as a Top Scholar. Schwartz is also listed in multiple *Who’s Who*.

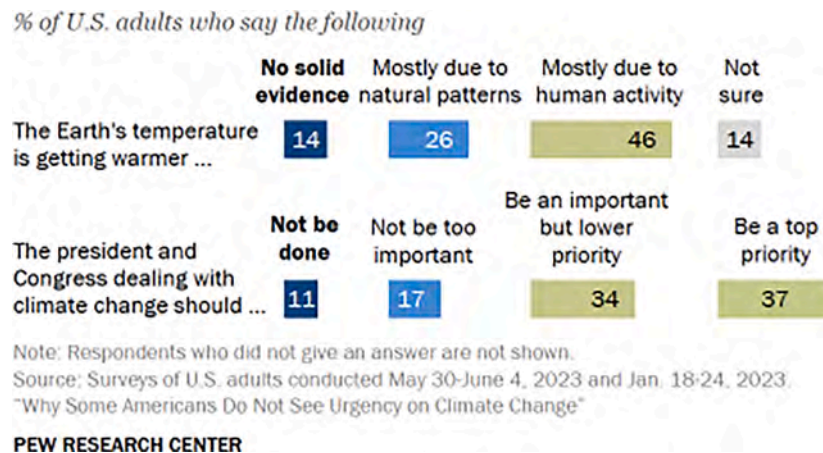


Fig. 1. 14% of Americans say there is no solid evidence that climate change is happening.

about...<sup>5</sup>

I cite Lustgarten's quote about what he concluded from his extensive research which confirms my own conclusion to make this point: Every competent scientist who has looked at the data has effectively reached the same determination. Climate change is going to cause massive migrations both internal movements, and internationally between countries. And yet, although the scientific world is very clear on this, a large number of Americans don't seem to get it or comprehend what is coming. According to the Pew Research Center, which studied this issue in depth, "Overall, 46% of Americans say human activity is the primary reason why the Earth is warming. By contrast, 26% say warming is mostly caused by natural patterns in the environment and another 14% do not believe there's evidence the Earth is warming at all (Fig. 1)."<sup>6</sup>

What this is telling us is that over 133,320,000 Americans either think climate change is just a natural pattern, no big deal, or don't think there is any evidence for it at all. Pew's study revealed the reasons for this.

"When we talked with people about their views of climate change, most of the 32 interviewees explained that the Earth is warming mostly because of natural cycles of the environment, not human activity. Participants often supported their view by pointing to the planet's history of warming and cooling as evidence of these natural cycles happening now.

"The emphasis on natural cycles was cited as a reason why humans have a limited role in affecting climate change. A few interviewees were skeptical of whether climate change is happening at all, with the two most skeptical interviewees saying that climate change is a hoax used only for political gains."<sup>7</sup>

Part of this can be explained by the fact that 54% of Americans can't read above 6th grade level, and 43% can't read above 5th grade, e.g. My friends walk along the path.<sup>8</sup> They also can't calculate percentages or fractions or covert fractions to decimals. That means nearly half the American population could not read and fully comprehend the Pew study I just cited.

This largely willful ignorance, coupled with America's astonishing political corruption arising from the Supreme Court's 21 January 2010 Citizens United decision that basically legalized the bribery of politicians and led to the petroleum industries pouring billions of dollars into such bribery in the 14 years since are, I think, the two reasons the country has prepared so poorly for what is coming. From Maine, to Virginia, to North Carolina, to Louisiana, to Texas, and California, the coastlines of the United States are being nibbled away by rising river which are submerging deltas, and protective coastal swamps. In Florida insurance companies are abandoning the state making obtaining home insurance almost impossible. The same is happening in Northern California, Colorado, and Oregon, not because of sea rise but because of fires.

*ProPublica* put a research team to work to appraise the effect this will

have forcing people to move. They found, "Eight of the nation's 20 largest metropolitan areas — Miami, New York and Boston among them — will be profoundly altered, indirectly affecting some 50 million people. Imagine large concrete walls separating Fort Lauderdale, Florida, condominiums from a beachless waterfront, or dozens of new bridges connecting the islands of Philadelphia. Not every city can spend \$100 billion on a sea wall, as New York most likely will. Barrier islands? Rural areas along the coast without a strong tax base? They are likely, in the long term, unsalvageable."<sup>9</sup>

So how many are going to be affected either by sea rise, lack of water, or rising temperatures? The numbers are gobsmacking. The National Academia of Sciences of the United States of America, and one could hardly find a more definitive information source, looked at the issue and concluded, "We demonstrate that depending on scenarios of population growth and warming, over the coming 50 years, 1 to 3 billion people are projected to be left outside the climate conditions that have served humanity well over the past 6000 years. Absent climate mitigation or migration, a substantial part of humanity will be exposed to mean annual temperatures warmer than nearly anywhere today."<sup>10</sup>

There are so many ways I could discuss this trend, but since *Explore* is a journal focused on healthcare and medicine, in this paper let me focus on that. As I have written several times the thing that stands out about American healthcare is how poorly it ranks in its quality and yet how, by orders of magnitude, it is the most expensive system in the developed world. The World Health Organization put it this way on 7 February 2000: "The U.S. health system spends a higher portion of its gross domestic product than any other country but ranks 37 out of 191 countries according to its performance."<sup>11</sup> And things are getting worse not better. According to The Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, "The United States ranks 11th in the 2022 World Index of Healthcare Innovation, down from 6th in 2021 and 4th in 2020."<sup>12</sup> Three years later in 2023, Statista ranked the U.S. 69th in the world.<sup>13</sup> So no matter who is doing the ranking, the U.S. has not a healthcare system so much as an illness profit system of which it should be ashamed. But that is just the beginning of what we are going to face as a country as climate change advances.

Start with a woman's right to choose issue. What could abortion possibly have to do with climate change, and migrations? Quite a lot as it turns out. Right wing politics in the United States has caused strong negative climate change implications. The Supreme Court's Dobbs decision which sent the abortion issue back to the states laid the groundwork for 22 states controlled by Republicans to do something medically bizarre. These states have taken away a woman's right to control her own body in consultation with her physician and given that power to politicians, as I have described at length previously in these pages.<sup>14</sup>

The United States already has the worst maternal and infant mortality in the developed world.<sup>15</sup> Now, thanks to what the Republican

Texas: 25  
 Tennessee: 15  
 North Carolina: 12  
 Kansas: 10  
 Missouri: 10  
 California: 9  
 Georgia: 9  
 Florida: 8  
 Oklahoma: 8  
 Alabama: 7  
 Minnesota: 6  
 Mississippi: 6  
 New York: 6  
 Pennsylvania: 6  
 West Virginia: 5  
 Arizona: 4  
 Illinois: 4  
 Indiana: 4  
 Kentucky: 4  
 South Carolina: 4

Fig. 2. Hospital closings.

controlled states have done after the Dobbs decision, OB/GYNs have been leaving Red States rather than losing their medical licenses or even being sent to prison for even advising a woman facing a health threat in her pregnancy to go to another state to terminate her pregnancy.

This is just one aspect of what is happening to healthcare for women and children. There is also a growing crisis in pediatric care. As the leading pediatric journal notes, “Pediatric inpatient unit capacity is decreasing in the United States. Access to inpatient care is declining for many children, particularly those in rural areas. PICU beds... Policy and surge planning improvements may be needed to mitigate the effects of these changes.... As pediatric care has become regionalized and pediatric hospitalizations have declined, there are reports of community hospitals closing or decreasing pediatric services.”<sup>16</sup> So it’s not just women at increasing healthcare risk. It is now also children of both genders in the U.S. who are at greater risk. And why is this happening independent of the abortion issue? The answer is the bizarre financial structure of healthcare in America, the only developed democracy without universal birthright single payer healthcare. As Beckers Hospital Review reported, “Since 2005, 192 hospitals in rural America have shut down, and the COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated rural hospitals’ risk of closure. Eight rural hospitals closed in 2023, as many as in 2022 and 2021 combined, according to the report. This followed a landmark 18 rural hospital closures in 2020, more than any year in the previous decade.”<sup>17</sup> It is also revealing to observe in which states these hospitals closing are occurring (Fig. 2).

What stands out about this list? The states where these closings are occurring are overwhelmingly Republican controlled. Why are Republican controlled states having so many closings? Because those states allocate the least amount of money for healthcare. We have an illness profit system, and profit is the point of running a hospital. Rural hospitals don’t make enough money to be profitable (Figs. 3 and 4). The fact that this creates what are called medical deserts and the loss of such medical centers leaves these rural communities without adequate healthcare facilities. This may be tough on the lives of people in those areas but that is not the relevant issue for the corporations that own the

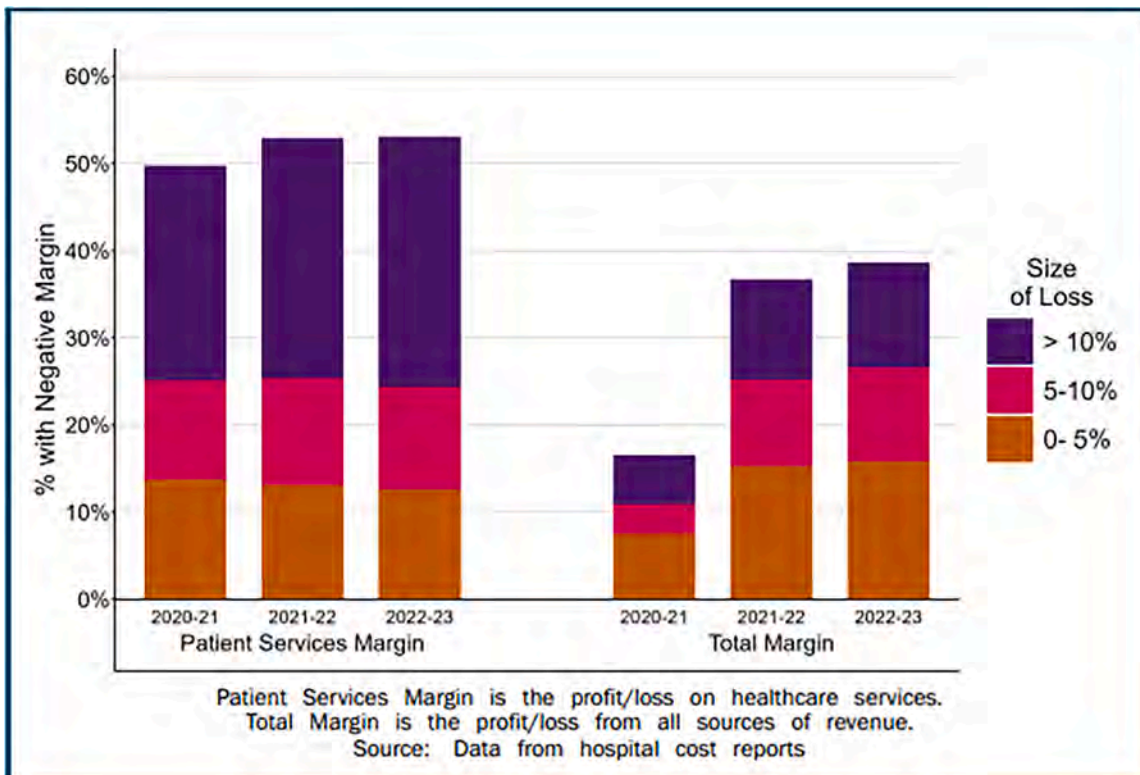


Fig. 3. Percentage of rural hospitals losing money.

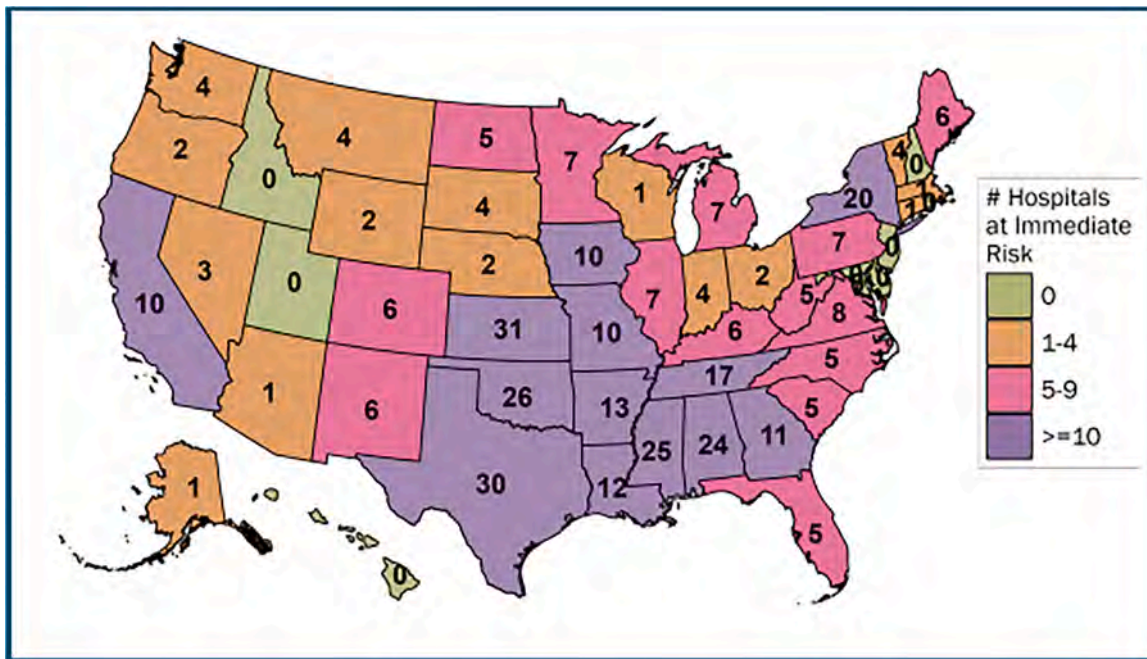


Fig. 4. Rural hospitals at *immediate* risk of closing.

hospitals.<sup>18</sup>

If that were not bad enough, it is also relevant to mention that the Association of American Medical Colleges estimates, "... the physician shortage (in the U.S.) as ranging between 13,500 and 86,000 by 2036. The AAMC estimates a shortage of between 20,200 and 40,400 primary care physicians, and a shortage of between 10,100 and 19,900 physicians in surgical specialties.<sup>19</sup> So it is not just hospital closures. It is that the United States has a deficit of physicians running into the thousands.

What is the relevance of all this with climate change driven migrations? It is very relevant because with millions of displaced persons and families driven from their homes where, in the places they are driven to, are they going to get the healthcare they may desperately need.

The point I have been trying to make throughout this paper is that in the near future the world, very much including the United States, is going to face forced migrations of individuals and families by the millions driven from their homes by some aspect of climate change, be it sea rise, water shortage, forest fires, or unlivable temperatures. We as a country are not doing anywhere close to what is needed to get ready for this crisis.

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