

Environmental Racism: How Environmental Hazards Disproportionately Affect Communities of Color

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When people hear the word racism, they may first think of police brutality or the criminal justice system. However, there's another form of racism that, while it may be more subtle, is just as harmful: environmental racism. According to Greenaction, environmental racism is “the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color.” The perpetrators of environmental racism are policymakers and large corporations, who use institutional rules, regulations, and policies to target certain communities in order to use land in a way that is undesirable to more fortunate communities. While wealthy, primarily white, communities have the influence and resources to protect the land in which they live on, poorer communities of color do not have these resources and so are “disproportionately exposed to toxic and hazardous waste based upon race” (“Environmental Justice & Environmental Racism”).

Environmental racism is directly linked to racial segregation. “Residential segregation—which is itself a result of individual and systemic racism, including public policy choices at every level of government and exclusionary choices by financial actors—means that people of color are often concentrated in neighborhoods that have frequently been disempowered, both politically and financially” (Berkovitz 2020). Areas such as these that are heavily affected by pollution and industrial land use regulate low property values. This prevents people of color from establishing wealth and power through owning property. As a result, more land becomes cheaper for corporations to acquire. This has led to “gentrification, an increase in property values that often makes the area unaffordable to existing (generally lower-income) residents” (“Environmental Justice Factsheet”). Regarding issues of mining, oil and gas extraction, and river dumping, segregation and wealth disparities

allow white Americans to either purchase or inherit homes that are further away from these issues. However, concentrations of people of color, who do not have these resources, are unable to move away from hazardous sites. Energy companies often deny responsibility for disproportionately imposing pollution upon communities of color, claiming that toxic facilities were built first, and people moved to these areas later on. In reality, as NAACP's Environmental and Climate Justice Committee Board Chair Kathy Egland states, "studies of such areas show that industrial polluting facilities and sites have frequently been built in transitional neighborhoods, where the demographics have shifted from wealthier white residents to lower-income people of color."

Data regarding the location and health of communities of color supports the claim that environmental hazards disproportionately affect these communities. Robert Bullard has conducted many studies since the beginning of the environmental justice movement in the late 1980s. A study originally conducted in 1987 showed that race played a significant role in the association with hazardous waste facilities, followed closely by socioeconomic status. This followed a consistent, national pattern. This study has been revisited several times over the years, and based on accumulated data, has remained to be true for modern times. For the year 2000, it was found that people of color make up 56 percent of the population in neighborhoods within three kilometers of a Treatment, Storage, and Disposal Facility (TSDF). These areas that are within three kilometers of a TSDF are known as host neighborhoods. Neighborhoods outside of this three kilometer radius, known as non-host neighborhoods, housed only 30 percent people of color. Altogether, it was found that the percentage of people of color in host neighborhoods was 1.9 times greater than in non-host areas. The host neighborhoods had 1.5 times greater poverty rates than in non-host areas, and the mean annual household income rate was 15 percent lower. Areas with more than one facility showed similar trends, with greater concentrations of people of color and higher poverty rates than in areas with a singular facility. When race and socioeconomic status were analyzed in separate groups, race still proved to be a "significant and robust predictor of commercial hazardous waste facility locations" (Bullard 406). Several recent studies have based their findings on Bullard's research and other studies like his. In 2018, researchers

found that the process of gerrymandering (manipulating boundaries of an electoral district) is used to marginalize communities of color so that they are located closer to superfund sites (sites that require a long-term response to clean up hazardous contamination). The study found that “as the geometric complexity of the [congressional districts] decreased and the distance from superfund sites decreased, the percentage of African American population increased” (Kramar 34). Conclusively, institutional policies lead communities of color to be disproportionately exposed to hazardous sites.

The adverse health effects of living in toxic environments can be seen in people of color that live in those areas. Health Affairs states that “the poor and racial or ethnic minorities are disproportionately exposed to ambient air pollutants, which have been linked to respiratory and cardiovascular disease, adverse perinatal outcomes, diabetes, premature mortality, and other adverse effects.” This is greatly due to the fact that minority groups and people of low socioeconomic status are more likely to live near busy roads, leading to a greater exposure to air pollutants. The article also states that “studies have found higher levels of indoor pollutants such as lead-based paint and pollutants from industrial and transportation sources in poor, African American, and Hispanic households than in other households” (Morello-Frosch 881). People of color are also exposed to increased air pollution due to their greater proximity to oil and gas facilities. Around 1 million African Americans live within a half mile of these facilities. Because these facilities violate the EPA’s air quality standards, these people are at a high risk of developing cancer. According to the NAACP, these air quality violations have already caused 138,000 asthma attacks and 100,000 combined missed days of school among school children yearly. Due to the high concentration of people of color living in environmentally hazardous areas, minority groups are more at risk for certain illnesses.

Cases of environmental injustice have persisted largely due to limited action from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a federal agency that deals with the protection of human health and the environment. Since the beginning of the environmental justice movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, communities have used Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “as a means to address racial discrimination in the permitting and siting of

facilities that release hazardous pollutants and cause environmental health risks” (Huang 2012). Cases are supposed to be acknowledged by the EPA within 5 days, reviewed within 20 days, and either accepted or dismissed within 180 days. However, little progress was made between then and the mid 2000s, with most cases awaiting review for over four years. Progress has been made since then, with cases from 1993 to the mid 2000s being settled, but there are still cases from today all the way back to 2013 awaiting review. Based on the EPA’s database, 39 cases were settled in 2020, while an additional 168 from 2020 are still awaiting review.

Environmental racism is a more subtle form of racism, but has harsh consequences on people of color. Communities with a high minority concentration are more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards and increased pollution, resulting in adverse health effects for these groups. These issues persist largely due to the fact that they’re not being addressed in the first place. Change in affected communities can be brought about by prioritizing the voices of people of color in the environmental justice movement at local and federal levels. These individuals need to be included at every level of decision-making, and need to give informed consent to proposed policies. Additionally, policies regarding the placement of hazardous waste facilities need to be updated, and corporations need to be more closely regulated and held accountable for their actions. Reparations and healthcare must be provided to victims of environmental injustice, and public policy must be based on mutual respect and justice for all people. It seems such a simple thing, that everyone should be free from ecological distress, but some do not even have that freedom. Racism must be dismantled on every level, in the court system, in criminal justice, in healthcare, and of course, among the very environment in which one lives.

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