Environmental Justice Policy Brief

SisterLove Inc. is the oldest sexual and reproductive health organization in the Southeast. Advocating for sexual and reproductive health includes advocating for our communities to be healthy as well, including environmentally, specifically free from the dangerous historical effects of environmental racism and the present climate change.

Environmental racism is a term that was coined by Civil Rights leader Benjamin Chavis.[[1]](#footnote-0) Who described it as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from the leadership of the ecology movements”. Despite the terminology being coined by a Black person, Black people are still some of the most left behind when it comes to the movement. Black communities are targeted, with some communities being historically known as sites of disposal for hazardous pollutants, chemicals, and other types of harmful waste.

A 1983 report by Congress’ General Accounting Office found that the racial distribution of people within hazardous waste areas with 75% of communities near landfill sites being predominantly Black.[[2]](#footnote-1) Since this report there has only been more evidence of all the environmental threats on the lives of Black people in the United States such as cancer and asthma. On top of dealing with actual racism, the communities we live, work and go to school in are exposing us to deadly toxins from the air we breathe to the water we drink. There is a disproportionate impact on environmental hazards on people of color and environmental justice is a response to these hazards.

Environmental racism is reinforced by lack of enforcement of zoning and environmental laws, leaving vulnerable communities in jeopardy of experiencing environmental warfare. The intentional neglect of companies, government officials and the enforcers of laws are the primary problem. It is well documented that communities of color are prime targets for key polluting industries, such as oil and gas, hazardous waste facilities and landfills. Accountability for the harms done in our communities is at most a fine, but even the fines that corporations face for their harm are lower if the abuse happens in low-income areas or Black communities.

A 2018 study by the Environmental Protection Agency found that people of color, on average faced a 28% higher health burden compared to the general population because of their proximity to facilities that release harmful pollutants.[[3]](#footnote-2) The numbers are even higher for Black people who were placed at a 54% greater health burden.[[4]](#footnote-3)

Indigenous populations also experience high rates of environmental warfare. Indigenous communities in the U.S. are subjected to large amounts of deadly nuclear and hazardous waste.[[5]](#footnote-4) Uranium mining on the land of the Navajo by Navajo men in the 1950s was purely for their economic gain and they were unaware of the health effects associated with mining. There were no federal health requirements or informed consent by the miners in their dealing with uranium.[[6]](#footnote-5) The U.S. government continues to engage in targeted warfare on vulnerable communities across the globe. Environmental racism and imperialism is a leading causes of death as many people have died of lung cancer and other respiratory illnesses.

Another form of environmental injustice is the occupation of our military on foreign lands. The fact that we are occupying, oppressing, and exploiting the lands and resources of other people is an injustice that cannot be left out of this conversation. Globalization has only created more avenues for the United States to enact this warfare in other countries. In the Global South, the safety laws and environmental practices are a bit more relaxed. End-of-life electrical waste, also known as e-waste, can be extremely harmful if not disposed of properly, a significant portion of e-waste is shipped to Asia and Africa for disposal, most of it illegally.

A popularized case of environmental racism is the case of Flint, Michigan. In 2014, the city of Flint changed its water source to the Flint river but failed to treat the water, subsequently exposing the majority of Black community members to dangerous levels of lead and other contaminants, like E.coli.[[7]](#footnote-6) City and state officials denied for months on end that there wasn’t a serious problem.[[8]](#footnote-7) Citizens of Flint have actually died from Legionnaires’ disease. Short of death, many community members have experienced hair loss and rashes. The World Health Organization says that high levels of lead are harmful to children and pregnant people, causing learning disabilities and other behavioral problems. Water quality is specifically an RJ issue because water pollution can lead to miscarriage, pre-eclampsia, adverse birth outcomes, cancers and problems with brain development.

In Louisiana there is an area that has been dubbed Cancer Alley.[[9]](#footnote-8) Efforts to industrialize has put Black people at risk of cancer and other respiratory conditions. The UN has even raised concerns about the industrialization of the area. There is a well documented link of causation between pollution of necessary resources, water and air, and certain health issues. Ancestral burial grounds are also at risk of being destroyed by future plans.[[10]](#footnote-9) Nothing is sacred. This also shows that existing regulations are not enough to protect us. Industry leaders and land developers are continuing their projects in complete disregard of the harm they cause.

Pregnant people living near oil and gas wells have a heightened chance of delivering a child with low birth weight and even premature births.[[11]](#footnote-10) Air pollution is specifically linked to pregnancy complications and pediatric health risks.[[12]](#footnote-11) This is demonstrated by the prevalence of asthma in Black children. Black children living with asthma in the U.S. is twice the rate of white children.[[13]](#footnote-12) Black folx are also 3 times as likely to die from asthma than those of other races and ethnicities.[[14]](#footnote-13)

It is easy to trace the links between physical health and environmental harms but there doesn’t exist enough research to show the link between environmental harms and their effects on a person’s mental health. We do know that there are social determinants of health and that where one lives is indicative of their wellbeing. It can be assumed that the same exists for those exposed to toxic chemicals or waste on a daily basis.

The government has tried to respond to concerns about environmental justice but falls short of abolishing the things, systems and operating procedures that perpetuate the harm.

A large part of environmental racism involves a cycle of economic injustice which forces marginalized people to live in areas where people are exposed to health threats just because of where they live. The industries that are enacting violence on these communities are also decreasing the value of the homes of community members. As far as climate change, areas with higher temperatures are actually areas that were segregated via a process called redlining. Redlining is a process through which banks and insurance companies refused loans, mortgages and insurance to Black people. Redlining cheated Black people out of wealth by infringing upon where they could live. We know that our neighborhoods have a significant impact on our health and overall wellbeing. Predominately Black communities tend to lack the amount of greenspace that exists in predominately white communities. Greenspace is describing areas with a lot of greenery, trees and parks. This also contributes to the hotter temperatures because concrete stores heat. Areas with more trees provide many benefits like reducing air pollution and providing shade.

In short, environmental racism is a physical manifestation of the culmination of racist, oppressive, classist policy practices that divest from communities predominately of color. There is a link between environmental and economic exploitation and the health of one’s community. Combatting environmental racism means that there needs to be a dismantling of oppressive structures. Under the previous administration, many of the environmental regulations have been rolled back, specifically related to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Power Plan.[[15]](#footnote-14) Trump ran on a xenophobic, ignorance fueled, classist, racist and sexist platform and made sure that those that belong to the groups that he didn’t identify with felt the brunt of his power and indifference to their existence.

In crafting policy solutions it must be rooted in the best interest of those most impacted. There should be protections built into the laws for communities to be free from hazardous waste and any other operations that may impact a person’s right to clean resources. Those who pollute our communities should be accountable to us to restore our communities to a livable state. Current practices should be considered a violation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Policy needs to explicitly prohibit future installments, integrations, or implementation of any programs related to all forms of hazardous waste, especially in Black or people of color communities. Discriminatory practices in urban planning and developing combined with the history of racist housing and redlining policies all contribute to the environmental inequities and health disparities that we see today.

When fining corporations for their violations, abuses and frankly warfare, there should be uniform penalties, ones that take in the harm caused and the fee is comparable to the harm done. Low-income communities and communities of color are already dealing with enough to just survive in a society that doesn’t value our lives as those with wealth and benefit from the systems of white privilege. Grassroot organizations and community members are organizing and mobilizing around the issues but policy is needed to strengthen these efforts.

Lack of representation prevents the voices of those most impacted from being heard. We must center the voices of those most impacted to help create equitable and sustainable solutions. Government officials and industry leaders do not want this waste in their backyards so they put it in ours. They don’t value our lives, values or families. The systemic way in which our lives are over-complicated by being over-policied, over-penalized while being underfunded is intentional and designed to keep us marginalized and seeing equitable outcomes.

1. Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis

https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/environmental-justice-movement [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/375289-epa-scientists-find-emissions-greater-impact-low-income-communities/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/375289-epa-scientists-find-emissions-greater-impact-low-income-communities/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1310/ML13109A339.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.540.5733&rep=rep1&type=pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086172 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086172 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/06/03/living-near-oil-and-gas-wells-tied-to-low-birth-weights-in-infants/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. http​​s://blackrj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/BlackRJPolicyAgenda.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2014-05/documents/hd\_aa\_asthma.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=15 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/375289-epa-scientists-find-emissions-greater-impact-low-income-communities/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)