

Creating The Healthiest Nation: Environmental Justice for All

DEFINITIONS

Fair treatment means no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of negative environmental consequences from policies

Meaningful involvement allows people to participate in decisions and make contributions with the power to influence agency decisions. Public concerns must be considered, and decisionmakers should seek out those affected by policy.

Environmental racism is any environmental policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages — whether intentionally or unintentionally — individuals, groups or communities based on race or color. It's a form of environmental injustice administered and reinforced by government, economic and political structures and institutions. Environmental racism benefits white people while shifting costs to people of color. Disregarding racism as a contributor to health disparities ignores social history and the experience of affected individuals and perpetuates inequity.

Climate justice highlights the uneven burden of the negative consequences of climate change. The impacts of climate change are global, immediate and affect public health in many ways. They can: harm the water supply; expand the range of vector-borne disease; and increase the severity, frequency and duration of extreme weather events. Many of these consequences, like lower air and water quality, disproportionately burden communities of color and low-income communities.

We all deserve to live in a healthy environment. Everyone should have access to: clean air and drinking water; healthy and affordable homes and public spaces like parks and playgrounds; and safe and affordable transportation options for all modes, such as walking, biking, rolling and using public transit. Social factors, such as race and income, should not determine the quality of one's health or the level of one's exposure to toxins. Unfortunately, health disparities based on race, national origin and income are a reality in the United States, both historically and today. Disproportionate

of color. Environmental justice is a public health issue that needs to be addressed by policymakers in all levels of government, business and communities.

BACKGROUND

In 1982, a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) land fill in a predominantly African-American community in rural Warren County, North Carolina, sparked community protests, resulting in over 500 arrests. PCBs are human-manufactured chemicals with a variety of adverse health effects on people's immune, reproductive, nervous and endocrine systems. This community's grassroots activism is often regarded as the beginning of the environmental justice movement, though environmental injustice has existed for far longer.

The Warren County protests introduced the concept of environmental racism into the public sphere and prompted a 1983 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The study showed that three out of four off-site commercial hazardous waste disposal areas in eight Southern states were located in predominantly African-American communities, even though African-Americans made up just 20 percent of the region's population.

The momentum generated by the protests led to further studies that showed race to be the No. 1 variable in predicting where waste facility sites are located. The social justice and environmental movements came together and converged on Washington, D.C., in 1991 for the First National People of Color Leadership Summit. This historic, four-day event broadened the movement and led to a formal declaration of 17 Principles of Environmental Justice.

The movement spread, and, in the face of mounting evidence of environmental injustice and pressure from activists, the Environmental Protection Agency acted. The agency established the Office of Environmental Equity (later renamed the Office of Environmental Justice) and a special council to investigate. In 1994, President Bill Clinton issued an executive order mandating that all federal agencies incorporate environmental justice into their work and programs.

Climate Change is a Risk Multiplier

Climate change is an environmental justice issue today that threatens life as we know it. Risk for adverse effects of climate change may be increased by: 1) living in areas particularly vulnerable to climate change; 2) already having existing health risks compared to other groups; 3) being uninsured or living with limited access to health care services; 4) having limited availability and accessibility to public health information and resources; and 5) having a low ability to relocate or rebuild after a disaster.⁵ Climate change will continue to exacerbate the uneven distribution of harmful health risks

be magnified when local public health systems are underfunded and underdeveloped.⁸

Environmental justice also connects to transportation, as proximity to major roadways is an indicator of public health outcomes. The health impacts of traffic emissions inequitably burden low-income communities and communities of color. Major roadways are a source of noise pollution and hazardous air pollutants like particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and ozone. Exposure to these pollutants is linked to asthma, cardiovascular disease and death. A substantial proportion of asthma-related morbidity is a consequence of near-roadway pollution.¹⁰

Low-income communities and communities of color have more high-speed, high-traffic roads and poorer pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.¹¹ Environmental conditions like traffic volume and street design make pedestrian injury and fatality more common in low-income neighborhoods. Streets with traffic-calming features, such as traffic islands and circles,

CASE EXAMPLE: WE ACT'S DIRTY DIESEL CAMPAIGN

In the late 1980s, West Harlem community advocates formed the nonprofit WE ACT for Environmental Justice. They sought to build healthy communities in Northern Manhattan by ensuring that people of color and low-income residents

