



*Second National People of Color Environmental
Leadership Summit - Summit II*

**ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE UNITED STATES
THREATS TO QUALITY OF LIFE**

FACT SHEET

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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE UNITED STATES

THREATS TO QUALITY OF LIFE

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Introduction

In the real world, all communities are not created equal. Government and industry are major perpetrators of environmental injustice.¹ After much prodding from environmental justice activists and advocates, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) acknowledged its mandate to protect all Americans. The EPA defines environmental justice as: “The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socio-economic groups should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.”²

Today, millions of Americans are concerned about the threat of exposure to chemical and biological agents. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 (terrorists attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, and the plane crash in Pennsylvania) and the Anthrax scare heightened concern and worry. However, toxic chemical assaults are not new for many people of color who are forced to live next to and often on the fence line with chemical industries that spew their poisons into the air, water, and ground. These residents experience a form of “toxic terror” twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. When chemical accidents occur, government and industry officials tell residents to “shelter in place.” In reality, locked doors and closed windows do not block the chemical assault by polluting industries on the nearby communities.

Global Environmental Racism. Race is a potent factor in sorting people into their physical environment and explaining social inequality, political exploitation, social isolation, and quality of life. Racism influences land use, industrial facility siting, housing patterns, infrastructure development, and “who gets what, when, where, and how much.” Environmental racism refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color. Increased globalization of the world’s economy has placed special strains on the eco-systems in many poor communities and poor nations inhabited largely by people of color and indigenous peoples.³ Globalization makes it easier for transnational corporations and capital to flee to areas with the least environmental regulations, best tax incentives, highest profit, and cheapest labor.⁴

Poverty and Pollution. Poverty and pollution are intricately linked⁵. Poor people are disproportionately exposed to hazards⁶ in their environment that in turn makes them sick due to the lack of clean and fresh water, and adequate food, shelter, fuel and air.⁷ Poverty impacts health⁸ because it determines how much resources poor people have and defines the amount of environmental risks⁹ they will be exposed to in their immediate environment. An estimated 40 percent of world deaths can now be attributed to various environmental factors, especially organic and chemical pollutants.

Inadequate Sanitation. More than one billion people in developing countries live without adequate shelter or in unacceptable housing, more than 1.4 billion lack access to safe water, and more than 2.9 billion people have no access to adequate sanitation and all of these are necessary for good health.¹⁰ Lack of sanitary conditions contributes each year to approximately 2 billion diarrhea infections and 4 million deaths, mostly among infants and young children¹¹ in developing countries.¹² In the United States, inadequate sanitation accounts for 940,000 diarrhea infections and about 900 deaths each year.

Toxic Production. Approximately 80,000 different chemicals are now in commercial use with nearly six trillion pounds produced annually in the United States.¹³ More than 80% of these chemicals have never

been screened to learn whether they cause cancer, much less tested to see if they harm the nervous system, the immune system, the endocrine system or the reproductive system.¹⁴ The current U.S. approach is also not based on real life exposures since people and animals are not exposed to one chemical in isolation, but rather are exposed to an array of toxic chemicals.¹⁵

Corporate Welfare. Corporations routinely pollute the air, ground, and drinking water while being subsidized by tax breaks from the state. Many states have a "look-the-other-way environmental policy" that subsidizes threats to human health and the natural environment. For example, Louisiana is a leader in doling out corporate welfare to polluters. In the 1990s, the state wiped off the books \$3.1 billion in property taxes to polluting companies. The state's top five worst polluters received \$111 million dollars over the past decade.

Cancer and the Environment. Of the 80,000 pesticides and other chemicals in use today, 10 percent are recognized as carcinogens.¹⁶ There are more than 8 million Americans who have cancer.¹⁷ Cancer-related deaths in the U.S. increased from 331,000 in 1970 to 521,000 in 1992, with an estimated 30,000 deaths attributed to chemical exposure.¹⁸ The fraction of cancer deaths caused by occupational exposures vary from four percent to over 20 percent due to the lack of data on the carcinogenic potential of most industrial chemicals and the absence of effective public health surveillance systems for occupational disease.¹⁹

Toxic Wastes and Race. Nationally, three out of five African Americans and Latino Americans live in communities with abandoned toxic waste sites.²⁰ Discrimination influences land use, housing patterns, and infrastructure development. Zoning ordinances, deed restrictions, and other land-use mechanisms have been widely used as a "NIMBY"²¹ (not in my backyard) tool, operating through exclusionary practices.²²

Brownfields. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that there are between 130,000 and 450,000 brownfields²³ (abandoned waste sites) scattered across the urban landscape from New York to California. Most of these brownfields are located in or near low-income, working class, and people of color communities.²⁴

Childhood Lead Poisoning. Lead poisoning continues to be the number one environmental health threat to children²⁵ in the United States, especially poor children, children of color, and children living in inner cities. An estimated 1.7 million children aged 1 to 5 years have blood lead levels of 10 ug/dl or greater.²⁶ Over 28.4 percent of all low-income African American children are lead poisoned compared to 9.8 percent of low-income white children. Many children living near smelting and mining communities also have elevated blood lead levels. The World Health Organization estimates the effect of lead poisoning to be about 1 to 3 points of IQ lost for each 10 ug/dl lead level. At higher levels, the effect may be larger. Lead affects almost every organ and system in the body—including the kidneys and the reproductive system.

Toxic Public Housing. A 2000 study by *The Morning News* and the University of Texas-Dallas found that some 870,000 of the 1.9 million (46 percent) housing units for the poor, mostly minorities, sit within about a mile of factories that reported toxic emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency.²⁷

Home Ownership. Homeowners have been the most effective groups to use "NIMBY" (Not in My Back Yard) tactics and practices in keeping locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) out of their communities. However, many people of color do not have back yards or enjoy the advantages of home ownership. A little over 46 percent of African Americans and Latinos own their homes compared with 73 percent of whites in 1999. Similarly, over 33.9 percent of African American and 26.1 percent of Hispanic loan applicants were rejected compared with 18.5 percent of white loan applicants. If blacks and Hispanics owned homes at the same rate as whites of similar age and income, their homeownership rates would have been 61 percent in 1998 versus 72 percent for whites.²⁸

Housing Discrimination Rate. Test audits conducted in two-dozen large metropolitan areas found that black and Latino testers seeking to rent apartments faced discrimination by landlords 53 percent of the time,

while black and Latino testers seeking to buy a home faced discriminatory treatment by real estate persons 59 percent of the time.²⁹ African American households, on average, must pay a discrimination “tax” of roughly \$3,700.³⁰ The total cost of current discrimination amounts to about \$3 billion per year for all Black households, owners and renters.³¹ The current generation of blacks has lost \$82 billion due to discrimination. Of this total, \$58 billion was lost as a result of lack of housing appreciation, \$10.5 billion from paying higher mortgage rates, and \$13.5 billion from the denial of mortgages.³²

Uninsured Households. There are 42.6 million Americans, including 10 million children, without health insurance today. The uninsured rate for African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans is more than one and a half times the rate for white Americans. A 2001 Commonwealth Fund survey discovered that Hispanics and African Americans, were most likely to be uninsured, as 46% and 33% of working-age Hispanics and African Americans, respectively, lacked insurance for all or part of the 12 months prior to the survey.³³ In comparison, one-fifth of both whites and Asian Americans ages 18-64 lack health coverage for all or par of the previous 12 months.³⁴

Insurance Redlining. Insurance redlining kills black neighborhoods. In a recent study, black, Latino, and white testers presented themselves as homeowners to the offices of three major insurance companies in nine cities.³⁵ Overall, the black and Latino testers were discriminated against 53 percent of the time in such areas as coverage and premium rates.³⁶

Toxic Foods. Food borne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325 000 hospitalizations, and 5 000 deaths in the United States each year.³⁷ Known food borne pathogens account for 14 million of the illnesses, 60,000 hospitalizations and 1,800 deaths.³⁸ In other words, unknown agents account for approximately 81% of food borne illnesses and hospitalizations and 64% of deaths.³⁹

Toxic Schools. More than 600,000 students in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan and California were attending nearly 1,200 public schools that are located within a half mile of federal Superfund or state-identified contaminated sites.⁴⁰ No state except California has a law requiring school officials to investigate potentially contaminated property and no federal or state agency keeps records of public or private schools that operate on or near toxic waste or industrial sites.⁴¹

Geography of Air Pollution. Air pollutants adversely affect the health of 4 to 5 billion people worldwide. A growing world population is burning more fossil fuels, emitting more industrial pollution and driving more automobiles. The number of automobiles is increasing three times faster than the rate of population growth. According to National Argonne Laboratory researchers, 57 percent of whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics live in 437 counties with substandard air quality.⁴² In the heavily populated Los Angeles air basin, the South Coast Air Quality Management District estimates that 71 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in areas with the most polluted air, compared to 34 percent of whites. Air pollution costs Americans \$10 to \$200 billion a year.⁴³

Asthma Epidemic. The number of asthma sufferers doubled from 6.7 million in 1980 to 17.3 million in 1998.⁴⁴ Over 4.8 asthma sufferers are children.⁴⁵ Asthma hits poor, inner-city dwellers, and people of color hardest. African Americans and Latino are almost three times more likely than whites to die from asthma.⁴⁶ In 1995, more than 5,000 Americans died from asthma.⁴⁷ The hospitalization rate for African Americans and Latinos is 3 to 4 times the rate for whites.⁴⁸ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that asthma accounts for more than 10 million lost school days, 1.2 million emergency room visits, 15 million outpatient visits, and over 500,000 hospitalizations each year. Asthma cost Americans over \$14.5 billion in 2000.⁴⁹

Transportation Racism Transportation and civil rights have been linked for more than a century. The 1896 U.S. Supreme Court *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision codified “Jim Crow” segregation. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision, transportation in many metropolitan area is still “separate and unequal.”⁵⁰ Transportation investments have contributed to and exacerbated racial segregation and inner-city⁵¹ disinvestments.⁵² Public transit has received roughly \$50 billion since the creation of the Urban Mass Transit Administration over thirty years ago.⁵³ People of color riders (Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native

Americans) account for nearly 60 percent of all transit passengers.⁵⁴ Roadway projects have received over \$205 Billion since 1956.⁵⁵ Other than housing, Americans spend more on transportation than any other household expense.⁵⁶ The average American household spends 18% of its annual income, or more than \$6,200, on transportation. Many low-income families often spend more than one-third of their income on transportation. Americans spend more on driving than on health care, education or food.

Pedestrian Fatalities. The pedestrian fatality rate for blacks and Hispanics is higher than that of whites. The rate differences by race/ethnicity may be due in part to differences in walking patterns.⁵⁷ National studies show that blacks walk 82 percent more than whites, and Hispanics walk 58 percent more than non-Hispanic whites.⁵⁸ Walking is 36 times more dangerous than driving.⁵⁹ The most dangerous metro areas for pedestrians were Tampa, Atlanta, Miami, Orlando and Jacksonville.⁶⁰ In metro Atlanta, pedestrian fatality rates for blacks and Hispanics are two to six times greater, respectively, than for whites.

Job-Related Illnesses. An estimated of 137 American workers die from job-related diseases every day.⁶¹ This is more than eight times the number of workers who die from job-related accidents. Fear of unemployment acts as a potent incentive for many workers to stay in and accept jobs that are health threatening. This practice amounts to "economic blackmail." Workers are often forced to choose between unemployment and a job that may result in risks to their health, their family's health, and the health of their community.

Sweatshops. The Department of Labor estimates that more than half of the country's 22,000 sewing shops violate minimum wage and overtime laws.⁶² Many of these workers labor in dangerous conditions including blocked fire exits, unsanitary bathrooms, and poor ventilation. Government surveys also reveal that 75% of U.S. garment shops violate safety and health laws.⁶³

Migrant Farm Workers and Pesticides. Between 3-5 million migrant farm workers labor in the U.S. fields at low wages and unsafe, unsanitary, and unjust work conditions. Farm work is the second most dangerous occupation in the United States. Farm workers suffer from the highest rate of chemical injuries of any workers in the United States. EPA estimates that pesticide exposure causes farm workers and their families to suffer between 10,000 to 20,000 immediate illnesses annually, and additional thousands of illnesses later in life.⁶⁴ Of the 25 most heavily used agricultural pesticides, 5 are toxic to the nervous system; 18 are skin, eye, or lung irritants, 11 have been classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as cancer-causing; 17 cause genetic damage; and 10 cause reproductive problems (in test of laboratory animals).⁶⁵ Annual use of the pesticides causing each of these types of health problems totals between one and four hundred million pounds.⁶⁶ Farms employing less than 10 workers are exempt from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Over 85% of migrant farm workers work on farms with fewer than 10 employees. Over 80% of migrant farm workers in the U.S. are Latinos

Migrant Children. An estimated 250,000 children of farm workers in the U.S. migrate each year, and 90,000 of them migrate across an international borders; half of all migrant children have worked in fields still wet with pesticide and more than one third have been sprayed directly; over 72.8% of migrant children are completely without health insurance.

Toxics on the U.S.-Mexico Border. All along the Lower Rio Grande River Valley *maquiladoras* dump their toxic waste into the river, from which over 95 percent of the region's residents get their drinking water. Shantytowns or *colonias* are home to 1 of every 5 residents of the 14 Texas counties along the U.S.-Mexico border. Of the 11 million border inhabitants, about 50% live in the three twin cities of: Ciudad Juárez – El Paso; Mexicali – Calexico; and Tijuana – San Diego. In 1998, about 3,000 *maquiladoras* were in operation within the country of Mexico, of which 2,400 were situated in the border region. In 1997, *maquiladoras* employed more than 900,000 people working at more than 3,000 plants, mainly along the border. Heavy exposure to toxics is not limited to workers. The *maquiladoras* produce large quantities of hazardous waste, little of which finds it way back to the country of origin for proper disposal. In addition, the air and water of local residential communities is fouled by toxic emissions in the air and untreated industrial waste.

Federal Facilities Cleanup and Military Toxics. Enforcing environmental compliance at federal facilities is

critical to our environmental security.⁶⁷ The federal government owns one third of all land area in the United States and operates approximately 15,880 facilities nationwide.⁶⁸ There were 160 federal sites listed on the EPA Superfund National Priorities List as of August 1995.⁶⁹ Clearly, federal government activities create a major impact on our environment and public health. Military exemptions from laws and lax enforcement by regulatory agencies have produced over 27,000 toxic “hot spots” on 8,500 military properties.⁷⁰ DoD sites comprised 81% of federal sites on the Superfund National Priorities List (or 129 of 160 sites) as of August 1995.⁷¹ DoD accounted for 71% of EPA enforcement actions against federal agencies in FY 1997 and 64% in FY 1998. In 1997, 79 of the 124 federal facilities reporting to the Toxic Release Inventory (61%) were DoD facilities.⁷² The cost to cleanup DoD training ranges may exceed \$100 billion.⁷³ When one considers nuclear weapons production at Department of Energy facilities, the environmental and health cost of federal defense activities is even higher.⁷⁴

Navy War Games on Vieques. The U.S. Navy has used the tiny island of Vieques, Puerto Rico as a bombing range since 1941. Fifty years of military exercises including the use of bombs, artillery shells, depleted uranium ordnance, Agent Orange and napalm have left local communities with serious health problems, destroyed ecosystems, and left “*more craters per square kilometer than the moon*”. Seventy-two percent of the island 9,000 residents live in poverty. The unemployment rate is 50%, and fishing is the only significant industry. Residents voted overwhelmingly for the Navy to leave the island. The Puerto Rico Department of Health found the Vieques cancer rate to be 26% higher than the rest of Puerto Rico from 1985-1989, and one source reports a 300% increase in cancer over the past 20 years. Medical studies have documented health impacts in fishermen and children that could be tied to noise from Navy ship-to-shore shelling. Testing of Vieques children showed accumulated levels of heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, bismuth, mercury, and lead in stool samples. Soils are degraded and contaminated, and both Navy and independent testing of bombing areas have found at least 10 toxic constituents including metals, benzene, and chloroform. Dust clouds carry pollutants toward civilian communities, where effective concentrations of particulates have exceeded federal air criteria.

Radioactive Colonialism. Radioactive colonialism operates in energy production⁷⁵ (mining of uranium) on Native and indigenous peoples lands.⁷⁶ For example, the U.S. government has approved a nuclear dump in Yucca Mountain, sacred to the Western Shoshone. Over 1,000 atomic bombs have been exploded on Western Shoshone lands in Nevada, the “most bombed nation on earth.”

Climate Justice. Climate justice looms as major environmental justice issue of the 21st century.⁷⁷ The United States emits one quarter of the world’s gases that cause global warming. People of color are concentrated in cities that failed EPA’s ambient air quality standards. Global warming is expected to double the number of cities that currently exceed air quality standards. A study of the fifteen largest American cities found that climate change would increase heat-related deaths by at least 90 percent. People of color are twice as likely to die in a heat wave. Global warming will increase the number of flood, drought and fire occurrences worldwide. Also, low-income people typically lack insurance to replace possessions lost in storms and floods. Only 25 percent of renters have renters insurance. Climate change will reduce discretionary spending because prices will rise across the board. Low-income families will have to spend even more on food and electricity, which already represent a large proportion of their budgets. Indigenous people are losing traditional medicinal plants to a warming climate, and subsistence households are suffering from the loss of species that are unable to adapt.

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