

Race and Environmental Injustice

By Reeve Basom

What does race have to do with the environment?

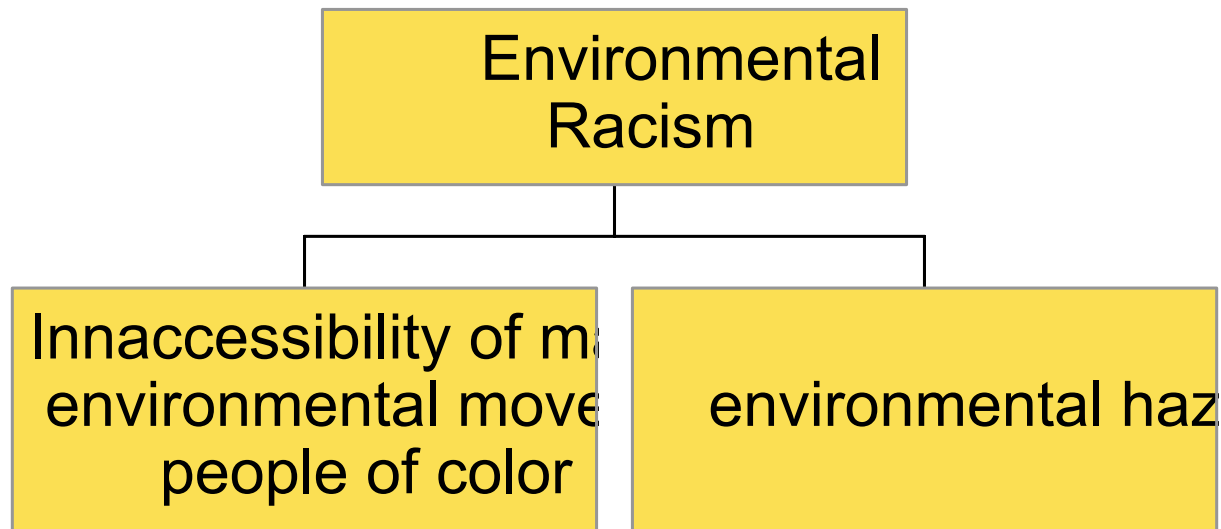
- Environmental injustice refers to the unequal distribution of environmental hazards.
- Minority and low-income communities are disproportionately burdened by environmentally degrading practices.
- However, race is the most significant factor in predicting the distribution of environmentally hazardous facilities and practices.



Environmental racism is:

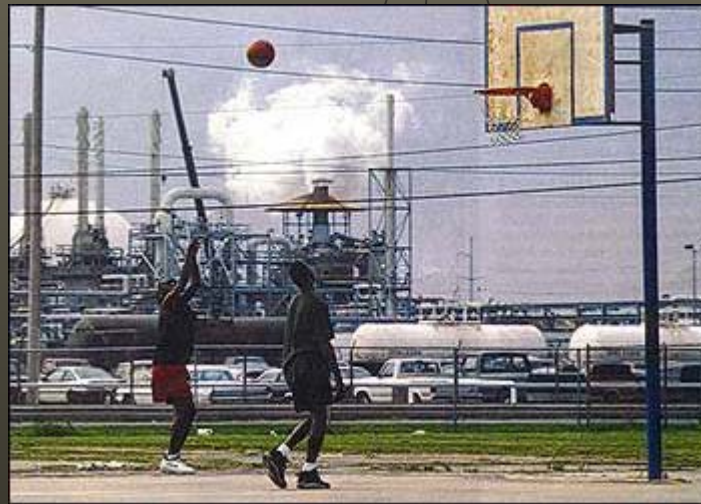
“Racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the unequal enforcement of the environmental laws and regulations. It is the deliberate targeting of people-of-color communities for toxic waste facilities and the official sanctioning of a life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people-of-color communities. It is also manifested in the history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement.” -Dr. Benjamin Chavis

Two main components of environmental racism



Environmental justice demands two basic rights

- Freedom from pollution
- Freedom to participate in environmental decision making



Mainstream Environmentalism

- Environmental Elitism
 - Mainstream environmentalism is dominated by upper and upper-middle class whites
 - Narrowly defined issues, i.e. concerned with large scale conservation and regulation
 - Mainstream environmentalist discourse has not historically included social justice...

Elitism perpetuates environmental racism by:

- De-emphasizing immediate, community level issues that dominate the ecological priorities of many communities of color.
- Emphasizing issues that are inaccessible to those who are struggling for basic environmental justice and who therefore do not have the privilege of participating in a discourse that is concerned with larger-scale issues.

TABLE 1.1 Type of Environmental Groups and Issue Characteristics That Appeal to Black Community Residents

Issue Characteristic	Type of Environmental Group		
	Mainstream	Grassroots	Social Emergent Coalition
Appeal to urban mobilized groups	-	+	+
Concern about inequality and distributional impacts	-/+	-/+	+
Endorse the "politics of equity" and direct action	-/+	+	+
Focus on economic-environment trade-offs	-	-/+	+
Champion of the political and economic "underdog"	-	-/+	+

-: Group is unlikely to have characteristic.

+: Group is likely to have characteristic.

-/+ : Group in some cases may have characteristic.

Source: Adapted from Richard P. Gale, "The Environmental Movement and the Left: Antagonists or Allies?" *Sociological Inquiry* 53 (Spring 1983): Table 1, p. 194.

Inaccessibility of mainstream
to people of color

under-represent

job blackmail
-trade-off between
and employe

path of least resi
-disproportionate

Exposure to environmental hazards

- Disproportionate siting of hazardous facilities in people-of-color communities
 - Environmental job blackmail
 - Official unresponsiveness
- * Connects back to the manifestations of environmental elitism

What is the evidence for environmental racism?

- A 1993 survey found that 87% of studies done on the distribution of environmental hazards have revealed disparities based on race.

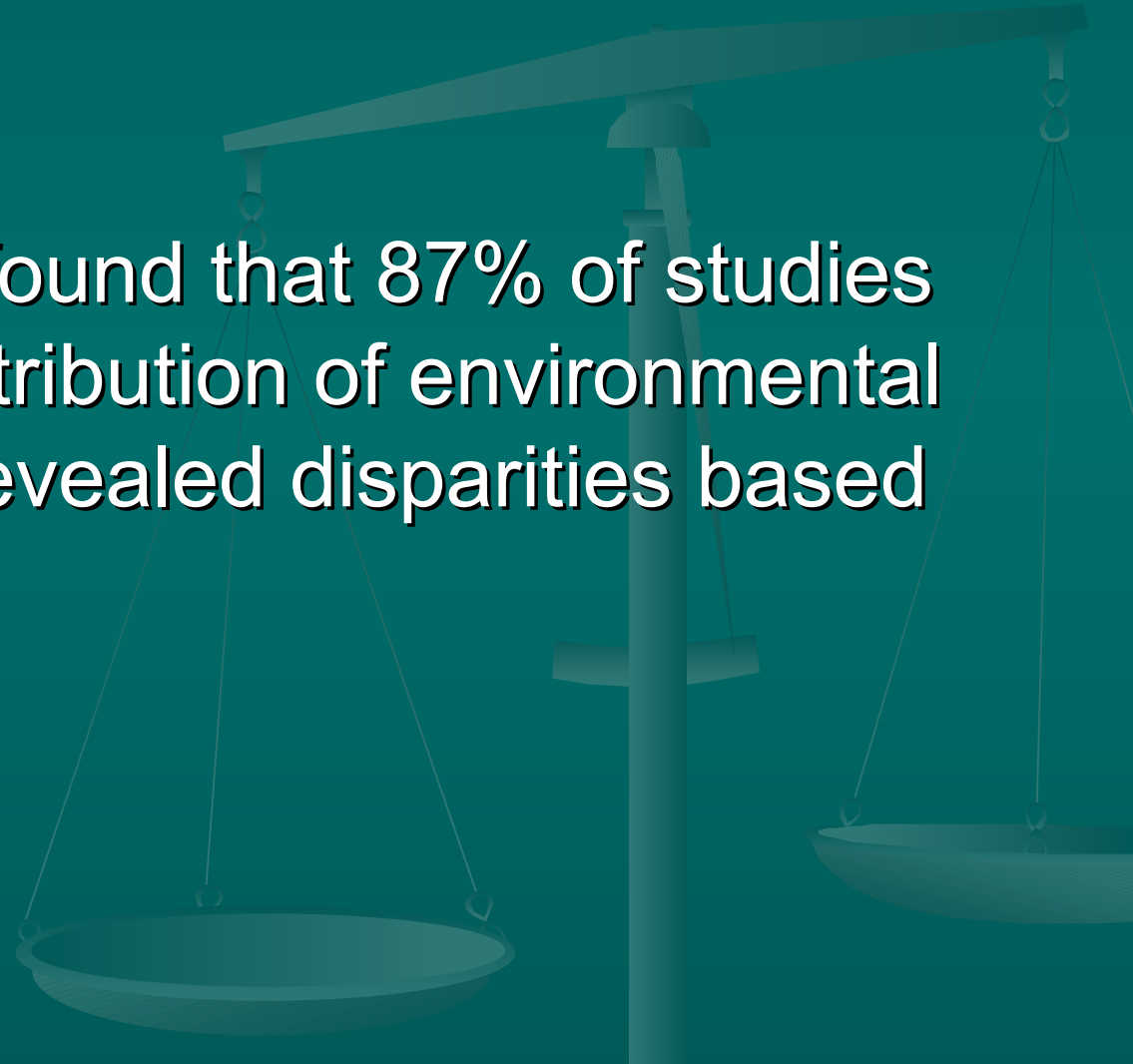


Table 1. Selected Studies of Racial and Income Disparities in the Distribution of Environmental Hazards, 1967-1993

Year	Author	Type of Hazards	Geographic Focus	Disparity Race	Income
1967	Hoffman et al.	Pesticides	Chicago, Ill.	Yes	Yes
1971	CEO	Air pollution	Chicago, Ill.	Yes	Yes
1972	Davis et al.	Pesticides, blood level	Dade County, Fla.	Yes	Yes
1972	Freeman	Air pollution	Kansas City/St. Louis/D.C.	Yes	Yes
1974	Burns	Pesticides	Southern states	Yes	Yes
1975	Krivan	Air pollution	Washington, D.C.	Yes	Yes
1976	Zuppan	Air pollution	New York, N.Y.	No	Yes
1976	Bruch	Air pollution	New Haven, Conn.	Yes	Yes
1977	Berry et al.	Pollution/pesticides, etc.	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1977	Kutz et al.	Pesticides	National	Yes	Yes
1978	Asch and Seneca	Air pollution	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1980	SRI	Toxic fish	National	Yes	No
1981	Puffer	Toxic fish	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1983	U.S. GAO	Hazardous waste	Southeast	Yes	Yes
1984	Greenberg and Anderson	Hazardous waste	Puger Sound, Wash.	Yes	Yes
1985	McAllum	Toxic fish	Puger Sound, Wash.	Yes	Yes
1985	NOAA	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1986	GOULD	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1987	UCC and PDA	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1987	Golober	Air pollution	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1988	ATSDR	Lead	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1989	Belliveau et al.	Toxic releases	Richmond, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1990	Falf	Air pollution	Detroit, Mich.	Yes	Yes
1991	Cater-pokras et al.	Lead	National	Yes	Yes
1991	Brown	Toxic releases	St. Louis, Mo.	Yes	Yes
1991	Costner and Thornton	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1991	Kay	Toxic releases	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1991	Mann	Air pollution	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1991	Wenette and Nieves	Air pollution	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1992	Fitton	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Goldman	Toxic air/waste	National	Yes	No
1992	Holtzman	Waste incineration	New York, N.Y.	Yes	Yes
1992	Kelkar	Hazardous waste	New Jersey	Yes	Yes
1992	McDermott	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Mohai and Bryant	Hazardous waste	Detroit, Mich.	Yes	Yes
1992	Nieves	Toxic waste/pollution	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Nieves	Hazardous waste	New York, N.Y.	Yes	Yes
1992	Roberts	Hazardous waste	Pinewood, S.C.	Yes	Yes
1992	Unger et al.	Hazardous waste	Michigan	Yes	No
1992	West et al.	Toxic fish	Southeast	Yes	Yes
1993	Been	Hazardous waste siting	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1993	Burke	Toxic releases	Ohio	No	No
1993	Bowen et al.	Toxic releases	National	Yes	No
1993	Greenberg	Incinerators (large)	National	Yes	Yes
1993	Hamilton	Incinerators (large)	National	Yes	Yes
1993	Zimmerman	Hazardous waste siting	National	Yes	Yes
1993	Zimmerman	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	No

Source: Derived from Benjamin A. Goldman, *Not Just Property: National Wildlife Federation, 1993*.

Justice (Washington, D.C.: National Wildlife Federation, 1993).

Achieving Sustainability with Environmental

“Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”

- Published in 1987 by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice
- Race is the most significant variable in the national distribution of hazardous waste facilities
- As the number of people of color in a community increases, so does the probability of a waste facility within the community

Continued...

- Communities with one waste facility have double the minority population than communities with zero facilities
- In communities with at least two hazardous waste facilities, the minority representation triples that of non-facility communities.
- Three-fifths of African Americans live in communities where abandoned toxic waste sites are located.
- Nearly half of all Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites

The case of King and Queen County, VA

- County is 50/50 black and white
- 5 landfills sited between 1969 and 1990
- 4 in predominantly black communities, 1 in a predominantly white community



- All five communities raised opposition
- Only the protests of the white community were successful
- Courts recognized the disproportionate burden placed on the communities of color but held that racial discrimination had not been a factor in siting decisions

Environmental Job Blackmail

- People of color are not only more likely to have potentially hazardous jobs, but workers of color have higher rates of actual exposure to and consequential health problems as a result of work place hazards.
- Studies have shown that morbidity and mortality rates as a result of occupational hazard exposure are significantly higher for workers of color than white workers, often within the same industries.



St. James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment voice their opposition to Shinetech, 1998 (Photo by Environmental Justice Resource Center)

Lead Poisoning

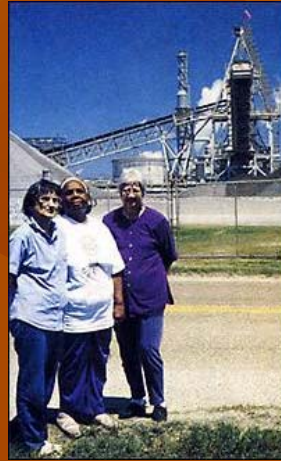
- Issue with wide acknowledgement of race as a factor
- 1993 estimates: 50% of children suffering from lead poisoning in the U.S. are African American
- Exposure levels are higher for African Americans than for whites both within and outside of urban areas **and** regardless of income level

Farmworkers and pesticides

- Agriculture accounts for 80% of pesticide usage in the U.S.
- 1990 Dept. Of Labor national survey results: 77% of farmworkers identified as minorities
- Serious health risks
- Underreported illness/poisonings



Environmental Justice Movement



- Has emerged and gained recognition within the last three decades
- Increasing success in integration of social justice into the environmentalism framework

Warren County, NC Protests

- Early grassroots environmental justice campaign in protest of a PCB landfill in a predominantly black community
- Helped spark the EJ movement
- Prompted study, “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”
- “Environmental racism” coined by Chavis



United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice

- 1987- published “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States”
- One of the first comprehensive studies documenting the condition of environmental racism in the U.S.

First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit

- Convened in 1991 in Washington, DC
- Representation of diverse ethnicities, faiths, disciplines, locations, etc.
- 3 main concerns
 - General environmental/social crisis
 - Particular types of pollution impacting communities of color
 - Historical and cultural experience of people of color in relationship to the environment



Results of Summit

- Networking
- United front with solidified goals
- 17 Principles of Environmental Justice

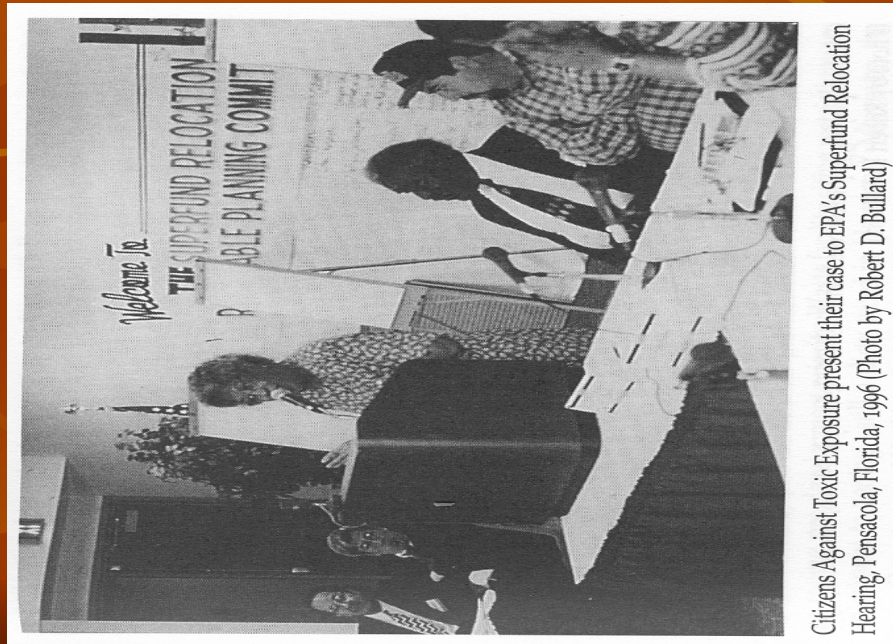


Injustices within environmental policy: the EPA

- Granting of local permits without investigating the equity of approved plan
- Higher penalties for infractions of environmental law in white communities than in minority communities
- Longer wait for hazards in minority communities to be placed on the Super-fund clean up priority list
- In 1992, EPA published a report to address the issue of environmental injustice
 - No new findings
 - Omissions and misrepresentations
 - Environmental Racism discounted and obscured*

New EPA Initiatives

- 1997 Environmental Justice Implementation Plan
- Office of Environmental Justice
- Office of Civil Rights
- Programs to increase participation of minorities



Federal Policy

- 1993 NEJAC (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council)
 - Integration of EJ into federal policy
- 1994 Executive Order 12898 (Clinton admin.)
 - Requiring all federal agencies to incorporate EJ as part of their mission



Synopsis

- Environmental racism as key component of environmental justice
- Grassroots
- Influence of civil rights
- Environmentalism + social justice
- New environmental discourse

Concluding example: Chester, PA



- 60 % minority
- Dumping grounds for Delaware County (including Haverford, Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr)
- Releases 90% of all toxins produced in the county
- Grassroots movement took the PA Dept. of Environmental Protection to court under the Civil Rights Act
- Received federal approval to proceed as “environmental racism suit”
- Community still struggles, but is an example of increasing official acknowledgement of environmental racism

???Questions???

- How can we reconcile the two viewpoints: 1) intrinsic rights of nature - we must be less anthropocentric, and 2) basic human rights are the first environmental priority?

Image sources

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