

## **Environmental Justice and Immigrant Health**

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## **Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice is a concept born out of the struggles of lower income communities and communities of color against disproportionate environmental burdens. The grassroots environmental justice movement in the United States grew in the 1980s from the recognition that the incidence of hazardous and polluting sites was higher in communities with fewer economic resources and political power. The environmental justice movement unites African Americans and Native Americans with immigrants of color, in particular Latinos and Asian Americans, but also immigrants from Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East. The movement redefined the environment as where people “live work, and play” and criticized the mainstream environmental movement for not adequately addressing environmental issues as experienced by people of color and the poor. An early instance of the use of the term “environmental racism” occurred in 1982 in the fight against the siting of a toxic landfill by a predominantly African American community in Warren County, North Carolina. In this case, a national faith-based organization, the United Church of Christ, supported the grassroots environmental efforts explicitly in terms of civil rights.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, numerous studies documented the disproportionate incidence of polluting facilities in poor and minority communities. The landmark 1987 report *Toxic Waste and Race* by United Church of Christ found that race was the most significant indicator of the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities across the country and that three of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in a community with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. In a 1993 study reviewing 64 empirical studies of environmental disparities by income and race, Goldman found that

all but one showed disparities by race and/or income. In 1999, the Institute of Medicine found that while the exposure of low income communities and communities of color to environmental health risks and their disparate health status has been well documented in the literature, there have been gaps in research that establishes the direct link between exposure and illnesses.

The environmental justice movement coalesced nationally in the early 1990s. The 1991 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC drew more than 500 delegates representing African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans from all 50 states as well as several other countries. Summit participants adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice, which are widely viewed as the guiding principles of the movement. The national momentum generated by the Summit led to President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order 12898, "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations." This order required all federal agencies to ensure that they do not discriminate in their environmental and public health programs.

### **Immigrants and Environmental Justice**

Immigrant communities, especially Latino, Caribbean, and Asian, are well represented in the environmental justice movement and share many of the characteristics of other environmental justice communities. In their 2001 book From the Ground Up, Cole and Foster include the farm worker movement of the 1960s as one of the foundations of the environmental justice movement. For example, the United Farm Workers, led by Cesar Chavez, organized to ban the use of hazardous pesticides.

In addition to the effects of racial discrimination and poverty, immigrant communities face additional challenges that can place them at risk for environmental injustice and exposure to environmental health risks. These factors include lack of proficiency with the English language, lower educational attainment, legal status, lack of access to health care, and specific cultural practices. The workplace is a significant factor in environmental health risks for immigrants. Certain industries, such as agriculture and janitorial services have high percentages of immigrant workers who face various occupational safety and health hazards. The urban and rural communities that immigrants live in also present environmental injustices. The remainder of this article will review the health impacts of environmental injustice on various immigrant communities where they work and where they live. Examples are drawn primarily from the experience of Latino and Asian immigrant communities, though other immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East experience similar conditions.

### **Where Immigrants Work**

Immigrant workers face environmental hazards in both urban and rural contexts. For example, Latino immigrants still comprise a large majority of the farm workers in the United States. In the fields, workers are exposed to pesticides and often are not provided with the proper training or equipment to safely use these products. Workers can then bring these residues back home, where their families and children can also face exposure.

In cities, Latina and Asian workers, predominantly women, make up a large portion of the workers in the textile and garment industry. In these factories, they are exposed to poor ventilation, fire hazards, and exposure to chemicals such as

formaldehyde and other dye preservatives. Likewise, Latina and Asian workers are concentrated in the microelectronics manufacturing industry. For example, in Silicon Valley 70 to 80 percent of the production workforce are Latinas and Asians. In the “clean rooms” for manufacturing chips and assembling circuit boards, workers are exposed to numerous toxic chemicals. Studies have documented high rates of occupational illnesses, including respiratory disorders, miscarriages, birth defects, and cancer.

### **Where Immigrants Live**

Rural Latino communities, where many farm workers live, can also host a disproportionate burden of polluting facilities. For example, in the early 1990s in California, the state’s three Class 1 toxic waste sites were located in three majority Latino towns – Kettleman City, Buttonwillow, and Westmorland. In Kettleman City, residents won a historic battle against the siting of a toxic waste incinerator in 1993, after winning a court case in which the judge determined that the residents (who were 40% monolingual Spanish speakers) were not meaningfully involved in the public process because of lack of Spanish translation.

More than 1.5 million Latinos in the US live in *colonias* along the US-Mexico border. These unincorporated communities often have substandard housing and lack access to potable water and sewage treatment, leading to risk of waterborn diseases such as giardiasis, hepatitis, and cholera.

In urban areas, Latinos also face environmental injustice. About 66% of Latinos live in areas where the air quality does not meet federal Clean Air Act standards. Air pollution from automobiles, factories, and power plants contribute to risks for asthma,

cancer, and other diseases. Though nationally Latinos have a lower asthma rate than Whites or African Americans, there are areas where Latino asthma rates have been found to be much higher. For example in New York City, Latinos have the highest rates of adult asthma (6.4%) of all ethnic groups, compared to 3.5% for whites and 4.6% for African Americans.

Latinos and Asians in urban communities have also had to deal with polluting facilities and the clean up and redevelopment of toxic waste sites. In Chicago's Little Village neighborhood, home to the largest Mexican American population in the US outside of East Los Angeles, residents have led a successful struggle to remediate a Superfund site, which had hosted an asphalt plant for over 70 years. The same community is surrounded by two power plants that contribute to about 2,800 asthma attacks and 40 premature deaths each year.

Asian immigrant neighborhoods also host disproportionately high numbers of polluting facilities and contaminated sites. For example, Laotian refugees have settled in large numbers in Richmond California in the San Francisco Bay area. Richmond, a city of over 100,000, is comprised of 36% African Americans, 26% Latinos, and 12% Asian. Richmond is host to over 350 industrial facilities. In July 1993 the accidental release of concentrated sulphuric acid by the General Chemical plant sent more than 20,000 residents to the hospital.

Housing conditions for lower income immigrant communities can also present environmental hazards. Lead paint in older homes contributes to lead poisoning. To the extent that Latino and Asian immigrants are also of lower income, they have less access

to lead free housing. Latino children are twice as likely to have elevated blood lead levels as White children.

The transportation system in urban communities also poses health threats to immigrants. Not only is a large portion of air pollution from transportation sources, but many times transportation facilities and heavily trafficked roads are located in immigrant neighborhoods. For example, five of the six transit bus depots in Manhattan are located in Northern Manhattan, which are predominantly lower income African American and Latino communities. In densely populated neighborhoods, such as Chinatown's in many cities, high levels of traffic and congestion contribute to pedestrian accidents and injuries.

### **How Immigrants Live**

Cultural practices also contribute to environmental health risks, such as lead and mercury exposure. In Latino communities, these practices include consumption of lead in candy imported from Mexico and eating food cooked or served in pottery with lead glazes. Some Mexican folk remedies, such as the lead-based *greta* or *azarcón* and mercury-based *azogue*, are used to treat indigestion. Commonly used cosmetic products used by Latinos have also been found to contain high levels of mercury.

Immigrant fishing and gardening practices combined with lack of English proficiency also contribute to consumption of contaminated fish and vegetables. Immigrant families often come from places where they practiced subsistence gardening and fishing. In the US, many immigrants continue these practices, in part because of economic necessity. In Richmond California, two Laotian families were growing

vegetables on an abandoned battery factory, which exposed them to lead. Warning signs were posted in only English and Spanish.

Immigrant anglers often depend on the fish they catch to feed their families. They are often fishing in polluted waters, where fish can be contaminated with mercury and other toxic chemicals. Often times state advisories warning anglers of contaminated fish are posted only in English.



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