

*Harvey L. White*

## **RACE, CLASS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS**

When we talk about environmental justice, we mean calling a halt to the poisoning of our poorest communities, from our rural areas to our inner cities. We don't have a person to waste and pollution clearly wastes human lives and natural resources. When our children's lives are no longer damaged by lead poisoning, we will stop wasting the energy and intelligence that could build a stronger and more prosperous America.

—President Bill Clinton, June 14, 1993

As these remarks by President Clinton suggest, environmental hazards represent major health concerns for urban and rural communities. Arguably, they are one of the greatest health risks facing this country for all Americans—Euro-Americans, people of color, rich and poor, old and young. In several respects, environmental hazards pose a greater health threat than the dreaded **AIDS** virus.

In relation to **AIDS**, individuals can take steps to protect themselves. They can either restrict their exposure to the virus by abstaining from risky sexual and drug-related activities or other activities that constitute mediums through which the virus is transmitted. In other words, they can isolate themselves almost completely from transmittal mediums. Or, if they choose to expose themselves to these mediums, there are protective measures readily available that can be employed to minimize the risk of contracting **AIDS**.

In contrast, when environmental hazards exist there is virtually nothing that individuals can do to protect themselves. Most crucial, they cannot limit their exposure to the mediums that transmit environmental hazards, which are the air, food, and water necessary for survival. Furthermore, there are no measures that are readily available, which can easily be employed, to minimize the risk of coming in contact with environmental hazards.

**Table I. 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	
1971	CEO	Air pollution	Chicago, Ill.		Yes
1972	Davis et al.	Pesticides, blood level	Dade County~ Fla.		Yes
1972	Freeman	Air pollution	Kansas City/St. Louis/D.C.	Yes	Yes
1974	Burns	Pesticides	Southern states	Yes	
1975	Kruvant	Air pollution	Washington, D.C.	Yes	Yes
1975	Zupan	Air pollution	New York, N.Y.	Yes	
1976	Bruch	Air pollution	New Haven, Conn.	No	Yes
1977	Berry et al.	Pollution/pesticides, etc.	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1977	Kutz et al.	Pesticides	National	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	
1983	U.S. GAO	Hazardous waste	Southeast	Yes	
1984	Greenberg and Anderson	Hazardous waste	New Jersey	Yes	Yes
1985	McAllum	Toxic fish	Puget Sound, Wash.	Yes	
1985	NOAA	Toxic fish	Puget Sound, Wash.	Yes	
1986	Gould	Hazardous waste	National		Yes
1987	UCC and PDA	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1987	Gelobter	Air pollution	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1988	ATSDR	Lead	Urban areas	Yes	Yes
1989	Belliveau et al.	Toxic releases	Richmond, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1989	Pfaff	Air pollution	Detroit, Mich.		Yes
1990	Cater-pokras et. al	Lead	National		Yes
1991	Brown	Toxic releases	St. Louis, Mo.	Yes	
1991	Conner and Thornton	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1991	Kay	Toxic releases	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	
1991	Mann	Air pollution	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	
1991	Wernette and Nieves	Air pollution	Urban areas	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	
1992	Ketkar	Hazardous waste	New Jersey	Yes	
1992	McDermott	Hazardous wane	National	Yes	
1992	Mohai and Bryant	Hazardous waste Toxic	Detroit, Mich.	Yes	Yes
1992	Mohai and Bryant Nieves	Hazardous waste Toxic waste/pollution	Detroit, Mich. National	Yes	Yes
1992	Roberts	Hazardous waste	New York, N.Y.		Yes
1992	Unger et al.	Hazardous waste	Pinewood, S.C.	Yes	Yes
1992	West et al.	Toxic fish	Michigan	Yes	No
1993	Been	Hazardous waste siting	Southeast	Yes	Yes
		Postsiting of hazards	Southeast	Yes	Yes
1993	Burke	Toxic releases	Los Angeles, Calif.	Yes	Yes
1993	Bowen et al.	Toxic releases	Cuyahoga, Ohio	No	Yes
		Toxic releases	Ohio	Yes	No
1993	Greenberg	Incinerators (large)	National	Yes	No
1993	Hamilton	Hazardous waste siting	National	Yes	Yes
1993	Zimmerman	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	No

Source: Derived from Benjamin A. Goldman, *Not Just Prosperity: Achieving Sustainability with Environmental Justice* (Washington, D.C.: National Wildlife Federation, 1993).

## **Race, Class, and Environmental Hazards**

Once environmental hazards are in the mediums that transmit them, the very life-sustaining functions that individuals must perform may put them at risk of exposure to life-threatening toxins. Thus, it is almost impossible to protect oneself from environmental hazards because individuals have virtually no control over the quality of the air they breathe, the food they eat, or the water they drink. They are almost completely dependent on someone else to protect them from environmental hazards. Consequently, every individual experiences risk from the toxic pollution that threatens our planet.

Yet not all individuals are equally at risk. Studies of environmental hazards indicate that there are significant racial and economic disparities in the distribution of risks (see table I). Racial disparities were found in 87 percent of the studies and income disparities were found in 74 percent. Disparities were found to exist in a variety of areas (i.e., exposure to toxins and solid waste, siting of hazardous facilities, and occupational health), all regions of the country, and in both urban and rural communities.<sup>1</sup> In other words, if you are African American, Native American, Latino, or poor, you are likely to be at risk from environmental hazards more frequently.

Research also suggests that people of color and the poor are often more severely exposed to potentially deadly and destructive levels of toxins from environmental hazards than others. The nature of the endangerment experienced by some of these individuals is life-threatening. For others, particularly the young, it can be debilitating. Findings from this research constitute convincing evidence that this pattern of exposure transcends almost every aspect of their lives: the places where they *work*, *live*, play, and *learn*; and in the *foods* they eat.

The scholars who conducted the studies listed in table rare from thirteen different professional fields and used a variety of research methods to complete their work. Their findings are more than just a persuasive body of evidence; they also suggest the need for concern about environmental injustice in the United States. The following is an overview of data from these and other studies.

## **Racial and Socioeconomic Disparities in the Workplace**

Whatever the health effects are of environmental hazards on those who live near facilities that generate them, the impact on workers is likely to be more severe. Workplace exposure is generally more direct, continual, and concentrated.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that as many as 50,000 to 70,000 workers in the United States die from occupational diseases annually, and new cases of work-related illnesses are believed to be between 125,000 and 350,000 each year.<sup>3</sup> The EPA has concluded that workplace exposure to environmental hazards poses greater health risk than any other known factor. As in other instances, however, this risk is not evenly distributed.<sup>4</sup>

It is no secret that the poor and people of color are usually hired for the worst jobs. These hiring practices have many consequences. Exposure to environmental hazards is just one, albeit an important one. Individuals in these racial and economic groups often occupy the most strenuous and hazardous jobs. Such jobs are also likely to be those that pose the greatest risk of exposure to chemicals and substances that can be detrimental to one's health.

African Americans and other people of color, in particular, have been found to bear a disproportionate share of the occupational risks emanating from environmental hazards in the workplace. For instance, researchers have learned that African Americans have a 37 percent greater chance of suffering an occupationally induced injury or illness, and a 20 percent greater chance of dying from an occupational disease or injury, than do white workers. Black workers are almost twice as likely to be partially disabled because of job-related injuries or illnesses.<sup>5</sup>

Studies of industries where large numbers of African American workers are employed reveal a significantly disproportionate exposure to cancer-causing substances (African American workers in these industries also have elevated levels of several types of cancer). A study of 6,500 rubber workers, in a tire manufacturing plant in Akron, Ohio, found that 27 percent of African American workers had been exposed to dust, chemicals, and vapor particles that contained toxins; only 3 percent of the white workers experienced similar exposure.<sup>6</sup>

In a study of 59,000 steel workers, it was revealed that 89 percent of nonwhite coke plant employees had been assigned to the coke oven area (one of the most hazardous aspects of steel production), while only 32 percent of white employees had worked in that area of the plant. Nonwhite employees in the coke plant experienced double the expected cancer-related death rate.<sup>7</sup>

A U.S. Public Health Department study of chromate workers found that the expected cancer mortality rate for African Americans was an alarming 80 percent; it was 14.29 percent for whites.<sup>8</sup> Similar findings were discerned in a cancer mortality study of coastal Georgia residents. This study discovered that African American shipyard workers had a lung cancer death rate two times higher than expected.<sup>9</sup>

The pattern of industrial exposure described above has been observed in the agricultural sector as well, where an estimated 313,000 farm workers in the United States may suffer from pesticide-related illnesses each year.<sup>10</sup> Ivette Perfecto calculates that 90 percent of the approximately two million U.S. farmworkers are people of color.<sup>11</sup> For a great many years, researchers have found that most farm pesticide exposures occur among low-income Latino and African American migrant workers.<sup>12</sup> Agriculture has become the third most dangerous occupation in the United States. According to the National Safety Council, the death rate in agriculture is 66 per 10,000, while the industrial average is only 18 per 10,000.<sup>13</sup> Workers in this sector, who are mostly low-income individuals of color, have some of the most dangerous and least-protected jobs.

The findings described above and those from other studies led the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to conclude that “minority workers tend to encounter a disproportionately greater number of serious safety hazards because they are employed in especially dirty and dangerous jobs.”<sup>14</sup> NIOSH’s conclusion is supported by data indicating that mortality from acutely hazardous work exposure among men of color is 50 percent higher than it is among white men.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the workplace, people of color, particularly those who are economically distressed, are also exposed more frequently and severely to environmental hazards where they live, learn, and play.

### **How Safe Is It ‘Where We Live, Learn, and Play?’**

Many studies have examined the siting of facilities that are considered to be environmental hazards.<sup>16</sup> Although economics, or the class variable, was discerned to be an important factor, the conclusion drawn in these and most other studies is that environmental hazards are located disproportionately in communities where people of color and the poor live, learn, and play.

In counties that rank the worst across all industrial toxin measures, people of color comprise more than twice the

percentage of the population than is the average for the rest of the country. For example, the largest hazardous waste landfill, which receives toxic materials from forty—five states and several foreign countries, is located in predominantly African American and poor Sumpter County in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt.<sup>17</sup> In Houston, Texas, six out of eight municipal incinerators are located in principally African American neighborhoods. One of the other two is located in a mainly Latino neighborhood.<sup>18</sup>

Cancer-causing asbestos, found to be prevalent in Chicago housing projects, is believed to be a serious problem common to most of the nation’s inner-city housing, where a large percent of the residents are people of color and poor).<sup>19</sup> Particularly disturbing is emerging evidence suggesting that children of color from low-income families often experience more severe and frequent exposures to environmental hazards than adults.

Recent reports indicate that children of color who are poor not only are more likely to live in homes with peeling lead paint,<sup>20</sup> they are also more likely to play in parks that are contaminated and attend schools that contain toxins.<sup>21</sup> For instance, African American children in New York City’s West Harlem play at a park built above a massive sewage treatment plant. Improper removal of asbestos from New York’s inner-city schools made national headlines in 1993 and caused long delays in the start of the school year.<sup>22</sup>

A similar set of exposures occurred in Dallas, Texas. Soil on the playground at a West Dallas Boys Club, which is in an African American neighborhood that is home to more than 1,200 youth, was so contaminated with lead that outside activities had to be suspended. Health officials discerned that the lead level at the Boys Club was sixty times the level considered potentially dangerous to children. A nearby schoolyard had a similar level of contamination, and a day care facility was forced to close because of the lead problem. Some children in the neighborhood have suffered irreversible brain damage because of the severe and frequent exposure to lead.<sup>23</sup> More than a third of the children in some areas of the community were found to have elevated blood-lead levels.

Nationally, African American children living below the poverty line are exposed to lead levels dangerous enough to cause severe learning disabilities and other neurological disorders at nearly nine times the national rate for more economically advantaged children.<sup>24</sup> Herbert Needleman reports that as many as percent of low-income African American children have blood-lead levels associated with adverse effects on the nervous

system.<sup>25</sup> It has been estimated that under most recent standards, 96 percent of African American children who live in inner cities have unsafe amounts of lead in their blood. Even in families with annual incomes greater than \$15,000 85 percent of African American children in cities are estimated to have unsafe lead levels, compared to 47 percent of white children.<sup>26</sup>

### The Location of Hazardous Facilities

Clearly, then, race and income are major factors in the location of hazardous facilities. In most instances, both of these factors come into play. The seminal 1987 study by the Commission for Racial Justice found that three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste facilities in the United States are located in predominantly low-income, Black communities. It also found that three of every five African Americans and Latinos live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites; most have levels of poverty higher than the national average. Similarly, in Detroit, a person of color's chance of living within a mile of a hazardous waste facility is four times greater than a white American's. The proportion of people whose income is below the poverty line is also higher among those residing within a mile of a commercial hazardous waste facility in Detroit.<sup>27</sup>

Almost every study of environmental hazards has concluded that there are racial and income disparities in the location of these facilities. The findings of the subset of studies in table I, which focused on hazardous waste facilities, support this conclusion (see table 2). All of these studies found racial disparities and all but three discerned income disparities. Only one (Zimmerman, 1993) reported findings that questioned the prevalence of income disparities in the location of environmental hazards. Although pervasive, this disparity in the exposure to environmental hazards is not limited to facility siting decisions.

**Table 2. Studies on the Siting of Environmental Hazards**

Year	Author	Type of Hazard	Geographic Focus	Disparity	
				Race	Income
1983	U.S. GAO	Hazardous waste	Southeast	Yes	
1984	Greenberg and Anderson	Hazardous waste	New Jersey	Yes	Yes
1987	UCC and PDA	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1991	Costner and Thornton	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Fitton	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Kerkar	Hazardous waste	New Jersey	Yes	
1992	McDermott	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	
1992	Mohai and Bryant	Hazardous waste	Detroit, Mich.	Yes	Yes
1992	Nieves	Toxic waste/pollution	National	Yes	Yes
1992	Unger et al.	Hazardous waste	Pinewood, S.C.	Yes	Yes
1993	Been	Hazardous waste siting	Southeast	Yes	Yes
1993	Hamilton	Hazardous waste <b>Siting</b>	National	Yes	Yes
1993	Zimmerman	Hazardous waste	National	Yes	No

\*Income disparities were not addressed in these studies.

Source: Derived from Benjamin A. Goldman, *Not Just Prosperity: Achieving Sustainability with Environmental Justice* (Washington, D.C.: National Wildlife Federation, 1993)

## A National Pattern

The poor and people of color are exposed disproportionately to environmental hazards where they live in every region of the country (see table 1). This exposure comes from a variety of sources. In Los Angeles, automobile pollution is worse in low-income African American and Latino neighborhoods. The Latino and African American communities of East Los Angeles, Huntington Park, and Watts in California are also home to metal plating and furniture manufacturing plants that emit toxic chemicals.<sup>28</sup>

The predominantly African American and Latino south side of Chicago boasts the largest concentration of municipal and hazardous waste dumps in the country. One housing project in Chicago is built on an abandoned landfill and surrounded by nine industrial facilities known to emit toxins.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, carbon monoxide from traffic and sulfur dioxide from factories and power plants have been found to reach their highest levels in air in African American and low-income neighborhoods in Washington, D.C.<sup>30</sup>

Native Americans also experience frequent and severe exposure to environmental hazards; many also have incomes at or below the United States average on their lands. The 1987 Commission for Racial Justice report discovered that approximately half of all Native Americans live in communities with an uncontrolled toxic waste site. Water contamination, uranium mill tailings, chemical lagoons, and illegal dumps are cause for major concern in many of these communities.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Navajo teenagers living in uranium districts suffer from reproductive organ cancers at seventeen times the national rate.

The disproportionate location of environmental hazards in communities where people of color live led the Commission for Racial Justice to conclude:

The possibility that these patterns resulted by chance is virtually impossible, strongly suggesting that some underlying factor or factors, which are related to race, played a role in the location of commercial waste facilities.<sup>32</sup>

Several attempts have been made to explain why communities where people of color and the poor live are selected more frequently for the siting of environmental hazards. One explanation offered relates to a set of syndrome behaviors.<sup>33</sup>

### Syndrome Behaviors and Siting Decisions

Several syndromes prevail that make the siting of environmental hazards in communities where people of color and the poor live politically and economically expedient. Besides the **N I M B Y** (Not in My Backyard) behaviors

often discussed in the media, four other syndromes have been discerned:

- **NIMEY** (Not in My Election Year);
- **NIMTOO** (Not in My Term of Office);
- **PIITBY** (Put It in Their Backyard); and
- **WIMBY** (Why in My Backyard).

The **NIMBY** syndrome has caused politicians to wither in the face of their constituents. Siting delays associated with this syndrome have been extremely costly for several companies seeking to develop commercial facilities. **NIMBYS** organize, march, sue, and petition to block developers they think are threatening them. They use the political and legal systems to cause interminable delays. As Richard Andrew found in his study of 179 attempts to site hazardous waste facilities across the United States, of the 25 percent rejected and the 53 percent delayed, **NIMBYism** was significant in almost every instance.<sup>34</sup> When practiced, **NIMBY** behavior has resulted in effective campaigns against environmental hazards.<sup>35</sup>

Any mention of environmental hazards usually results in **NIMBY** behaviors in affluent communities, which in turn, lead to **NIMTOO** and **NIMEY** behaviors by elected officials. Pressure for a solution to problems in siting environmental hazards forces these officials to look for a compromise, likely **PIITBY**.

This **PIITBY** compromise often results in a decision to place environmental hazards in communities where the poor and people of color live. Circumstances both internal and external to these communities encourage their selection as sites for these facilities. The priority exhibited in site selection is one such circumstance. Principally, sites given the most attention will be those that affect more affluent communities. Such communities have the resources, knowledge, and contacts to sustain the symptoms of the **NIMBY** syndrome. Accordingly, residents from these communities are more likely to be proactive. They are, generally, the driving force that causes politicians to exhibit both **NIMTOO** and **NIMEY** syndrome behaviors.

The **NIMBY**, **NIMTOO**, **NIMEY**, and **PIITBY** syndromes are seen less frequently in communities where people of color and the poor live. These communities are more prone to exhibit the **WIMBY** syndrome. That is, they are usually more reactive than proactive in their response to environmental hazards. The **WIMBY** syndrome emanates from the social, economic, and political realities that often surround poor communities and people of color.

People of color and low-income individuals usually do not have the resources, or contacts, to initiate or sustain

the proactive behavior found in more affluent communities. Nor do they have the contacts in government and industry necessary to become involved during the preplanning and planning stages for the siting of environmental hazards. These factors and others have led to a “knowledge and information” gap among people of color about environmental risks.

Perhaps, because of the tradition of having landfills and other waste facilities in their communities, there is also more “social acceptance” for facilities that represent environmental hazards.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the activism or **WIMBY** syndrome exhibited by low-income individuals and people of color tends to be prevalent after facilities have been constructed or other crucial decisions have been made.

The **WIMBY** syndrome is, moreover, far more congenial to the **NIMTOO** and **NIMEY** political behaviors than the **NIMBY** syndrome. For elected officials and other politicians, it is safer to investigate “why something was done” than to intervene “while something is being done.” The “why” is less likely to affect voter decisions. Most of the politically sensitive decisions will have already been made when symptoms of the **WIMBY** syndrome become apparent. Decisions about zoning, building permits, and franchise licenses can occur with little or no public outcry.

The greatest concern is often raised by low-income groups and people of color after facilities are operational. Residents then learn that environmental hazards are not just irritants to be tolerated; they pose serious health threats. An examination of health statistics reveals that counties with the worst rank across all of the industrial toxin measures are usually the counties with the worst mortality from all diseases. These are counties with large numbers of people of color; many counties can also be described as economically distressed.<sup>37</sup> In addition to risks that emanate from the siting of environmental hazards and ambient air pollutants in their communities, the poor and people of color are generally more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards through the foods they eat.

### **Environmental Hazards and Food**

The risks that individuals experience from environmental hazards through their food intake is easily illustrated by focusing on accidents at two nuclear facilities. The first facility is the U.S. government’s Savannah River nuclear weapons plant in South Carolina. The other is the little-known Peach Bottom nuclear facility in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Researchers have found an alarming correlation between increases in cancer and infant mortality rates in several African American communities and accidents at these facilities.<sup>38</sup> Radioactive contamination of food products has arisen as the likely medium through which

individuals were exposed to environmental hazards that occurred because of these nuclear accidents.

Evidence of possible food contamination from the Savannah plant surfaced after it was learned in 1987 that several serious nuclear accidents had occurred at the facility. These accidents were described as among the worst ever documented, yet they were kept secret for over twenty years. Radiation from the plant appears to have been particularly hazardous for African Americans in the region. For instance, South Carolina’s nonwhite male cancer rate rose 35 percent faster than in the rest of the country following the first accident at the nuclear plant. In two states surrounding South Carolina (Georgia and North Carolina), the nonwhite male cancer rate increased 28 percent faster than in the rest of the nation.

Following the accidents, the staple foods consumed by African Americans and the rural poor who live in the South were found to be contaminated. Radiation levels in catfish and bream caught in the Savannah River were more than 100,000 times higher than average for fresh fish in New York City.<sup>39</sup> The radiation concentration in collard greens in the area was fifty times higher than the levels in vegetables in New York City, and it was thirty-three times higher in poultry; grains were forty times more contaminated, and milk contamination was eight times higher near the plant than it was in New York City.<sup>40</sup> Anyone who is familiar with southern cuisine knows that fish, collards, rice, and chicken are the main ingredients for what is affectionately referred to as “Soul Food.”

The first tragedy at the Savannah nuclear plant is that the accident happened; still worse, people were not warned about the dangers associated with eating contaminated food. Equally tragic results are thought to have emanated from accidents at Peach Bottom. This nuclear facility is located in a rural milk-producing region of Pennsylvania. Major markets for this milk include Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. Milk consumed in these two cities has exhibited some of the highest readings for radiation contamination on the East Coast. Researchers have learned that there was a positive correlation between the distribution of contaminated milk produced in the area surrounding Peach Bottom and high infant mortality rates in Washington and Baltimore, cities with large populations that are poor and mostly people of color. This correlation could be just a coincidence. But the month after the facility was closed—due to negligent behavior—Washington’s infant mortality rate dropped to the national norm for the first time since the plant began operating in the mid-1960s.<sup>41</sup>

The possible food contamination from the nuclear facilities mentioned above may not be an everyday occurrence. An important observation, however, is how siting decisions may contribute to contamination in food

and its distribution, an area often overlooked by risk assessment studies.

Other evidence suggests that the health of those who are poor and people of color may be routinely at risk from environmental hazards transmitted through the foods they eat. Health risk from contaminated food is generally greater for low-income groups that are mostly people of color than for individuals from other socioeconomic groups. In Detroit, for example, people of color and low-income groups were found to consume the greatest amounts of fish contaminated by municipal and industrial toxins dumped into Michigan's surface water.<sup>42</sup> These findings echo a 1989 report by the Kellogg Foundation, which noted that potentially cancer-causing or nerve-destroying substances, like PCB, now found in many fish are at critical levels in the blood of one-fourth of the children age five and under in some cities.<sup>43</sup>

The disproportionate risk exposure that people of color and low-income groups frequently experience because of food contamination is not, however, limited to the inner cities. Studies of dietary preferences among the Navajo suggest that they also regularly consume food products contaminated with both radiation and lead.<sup>44</sup> The Chippewa take similar risks with their food supply. Mining activities adjacent to their lands threaten toxic contamination of the fish, deer, and wild rice that make up a major portion of the food supply for the Chippewa.

### Reasons for Food Contamination Disparities

Why are the poor and people of color more at risk of consuming toxins in the foods that they eat? Explanations have been offered for this disparity that include a malicious conspiracy, the profit motive, and cultural insensitivity. The first two explanations have been widely discussed by scholars and others seeking to address the misery often inflicted by racism and unregulated capitalism. The malicious conspiracy theory purports that there has been a deliberate attempt to cover up the fact that foods frequently consumed by the poor and people of color contain higher levels of carcinogens than those consumed by other groups. According to Jay Gould and Benjamin Goldman, in their book *Deadly Deceit*, there has been a governmental cover-up that appears to have included outright falsification of data.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the cover-up asserted by Gould and Goldman, Bullard argues that the malicious conspiracy also includes environmental blackmail. That is, people of color, because of economic constraints, are forced to accept circumstances and conditions that may be hazardous to them, their families, and their communities.<sup>46</sup> This includes consuming food that may contain toxins.

The profit motive theory emanates from, but is not limited to, the Marxist analysis of environmental justice issues. Proponents of this explanation argue that environmental concerns represent a threat to the earning

power of capitalists.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the environmental injustice inflicted on people -of color and the poor has become a mechanism for recouping profits that have been lost because of environmental regulations. As Ivette Perfecto contends, environmental injustice inflicted on people of color and the poor is another form of expropriation permitted under capitalism:

Expropriation is allowed to occur either (i) because it is hidden from view from those expropriated (the marvel of the capitalist system of class exploitation), or (a) because those expropriated have no right or political power to resist the expropriation. Race and the environment thus can be formulated as two sides of the same coin.<sup>48</sup>

The profit motive theory suggests that the falsification of data and economic blackmail that allow people of color and the poor to be more at risk of having toxins in the foods they eat are merely forms of expropriation used by the capital-owning classes. It also represents an important attempt at intersecting race and class variables.

Discussed less frequently is the cultural insensitivity theory for environmental injustice. This explanation suggests that the disproportionate risk experienced is, at least in part, the result of policies designed to protect the public. That is, these policies are usually based more on the dietary preferences and eating habits of select groups of European Americans. For instance, the Detroit fish case, mentioned above, involves policymaking that uses an average consumption rate for the state of Michigan in its standards-setting process. This process does not consider the variations in the levels of consumption by subgroups of the Michigan population. Thus, because of the lack of cultural sensitivity, the disproportionate risk experienced by people of color, the rural poor, and other low-income groups is said to often be the result of benign neglect.

Whether the result of overt or covert racism, putting economic profits over the health of people, or benign neglect, this disproportionate risk can and does lead to disastrous results. An injustice exists even if it is merely a coincidence that:

- the food, air, and water that people of color and those who are poor consume are more contaminated;
- nonwhite workers are 50 percent more likely to be exposed to hazards in the workplace; and
- hazardous waste facilities are located disproportionately in communities where people of color and the poor live.

A society that allows such a pattern of coincidences to

persist have failed to equally protect its citizens. This failure, itself, constitutes environmental injustice.

### Environmental Justice as a Policy Concern

Environmental justice received official recognition as a federal policy concern in the United States in 1993 when the Clinton administration established by executive order the President's Council on Sustainable Development. This concern was further recognized in 1994 with the signing of Executive Order 12898, which created the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council to the EPA. The action taken by the president calls for the development of environmental justice strategies throughout a number of organizations. For instance, the executive order mandates: (i) the coordination of government agencies in addressing environmental justice problems and (a) the support of grassroots community participation in human health research, including data collection and analysis when practical and appropriate.

Table 3. Principles of Environmental Justice

1. Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
2. Environmental justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias. -
3. Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
4. Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
5. Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination.
6. Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and containment at the point of production.
7. Environmental justice demands the right to participate as partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation.
8. Environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.
9. Environmental justice protects the rights of victims of environmental injustice - to full compensation and reparations for damage as well as quality health care.
10. Environmental justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the

Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.

11. Environmental justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the U.S. government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
12. Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.
13. Environmental justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
14. Environmental justice opposes the destructive operations of multinational corporations.
15. Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
16. Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations, which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
17. Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and re-prioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

*Source:* The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, Washington, D.C., 27 October 1991.

Although significant, the president's administrative measures constitute only one portion of the effort that has made environmental justice a policy concern. Legislative initiatives at the state and federal levels have also helped to focus attention on the strong evidence supporting charges that people of color and the poor suffer disproportionately from environmental hazards. As a result, legislation has been initiated in ten states and at least five bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress that address environmental justice concerns.<sup>49</sup> These initiatives are partially a response to the mounting body of evidence on the disproportionate impact of environmental risks, but they are also the result of grassroots organizing efforts by individuals affected by these hazards.

Hundreds of individuals involved in these struggles met in October 1991 at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, where they outlined seventeen "Principles of Environmental Justice" (see table 3). These principles declare clean air, land, water, and food to be a fundamental right. They affirm the right of all workers to a safe and healthy environment. The right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making is also demanded.

Although participants at the summit included some of the leading researchers contributing to the body of literature on environmental justice, the principles were formulated by members of grassroots and indigenous organizations. The principles call for the strict

enforcement of informed consent, and a halting to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color. Though speculative at the time, this admonition now seems appropriate with recent revelations that approximately 9,000 Americans, including children and newborns, were used in 154 human radiation tests sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy. Many of those tested were people of color and the poor.<sup>50</sup>

A diverse body of research and researchers suggests that low-income individuals, particularly those of color, have been asked to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens associated with environmental hazards. The result has been the elevation of environmental justice to the policy level. Prominent individuals and organizations have become champions for environmental justice. Nevertheless, people of color and low-income groups continue to experience more frequent and severe exposure to risks from environmental hazards than do other groups in U.S. society.

## Notes

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