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Environmental justice and environmental racism.

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DEFINITIONS: Environmental justice is the fair treatment of all individuals in terms of issues related to the environment, particularly environmental hazards; environmental racism involves patterns of racial prejudice with regard to such issues

The issues of environmental justice and environmental racism have become increasingly important elements in debates regarding industrial and government environmental practices that have impacts on low-income and other disadvantaged communities. Although the goals of a clean environment for all and an end to racist practices are attractive to many people, achieving these goals can be difficult because human beings tend to desire both justice and manufactured goods that are linked to environmental degradation.

When the modern environmentalist movement emerged in the mid-twentieth century, most Americans involved in environmental activities were White and members of the upper or middle classes. Issues such as [conservation and preservation](#) of natural resources attracted relatively little attention from members of low-income and minority groups compared to civil rights and the improvement of economic conditions. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, as concerns mounted about [lead poisoning](#), the dangers of hazardous waste dumps, and the effects of soil and [water pollution](#), minority leaders began to take notice and associate such issues with civil rights. Importantly, researchers found that garbage dumps and other contaminated sites were disproportionately located near communities with higher-than-average percentages of minority group residents. A 1983 study of landfill and incinerator sites in Houston, Texas, for example, showed that these facilities were usually found near Black American neighborhoods. This and other studies led to a grassroots movement during the 1980s to address the problem known as environmental racism.

Activists contend that [institutional racism](#) continues to prompt governments to issue permits for waste facilities or other environmental hazards in low-income and minority areas. In some cases, communities have welcomed such facilities as sources of employment. In addition,

members of these communities are less likely to possess the knowledge and the resources to oppose regulatory decisions. Through public protests and political pressure, activists seek to bring national attention to the problem, with the hope of influencing the decisions of local and national policy makers.

Grassroots organizations can point to some successes. Residents of one California community successfully pressured their town council to implement a program to screen for environmental lead poisoning. When citizens in Halifax County, Virginia, learned that the federal government was considering their community as the location for a nuclear waste depository, they formed a group to fight the proposal. More than fourteen hundred residents, both Black and White, voiced their opposition at a public meeting, and shortly thereafter, government officials dropped the county as a potential depository site. In 1986, the residents of Revilletown, Louisiana, received cash settlements and relocation assistance from a nearby chemical manufacturer after they sued the company for damages to health and property caused by emissions from the chemical plant. These and other victories indicate the potential power of grassroots movements that seek environmental justice.

Such successes do not mean that these movements are without their critics, however. Some argue that the concept of environmental justice is so broad and vague that it cannot serve as a guide for policy makers. Moreover, they maintain that the available evidence regarding environmental racism is flawed. They contend that studies have failed to determine whether harmful facilities have been located in already existing minority communities or the communities coalesced around the facilities.

Proponents of environmental justice reject these arguments as further evidence of injustice and racism. They claim that major corporations that hope to maximize profits have a vested interest in attacking the movement, which, if successful, would significantly raise their costs of production and waste disposal. Activists also complain that the national news media consistently ignore environmental racism, favoring instead sensational stories that do not examine the deeper institutional causes of the environmental disasters featured in the headlines. Finally, proponents also fault the mainstream [environmental movement](#) for its

fixation on preservation issues.

Despite continuing debates over the meaning of environmental justice and the reality of environmental racism, some politicians have perceived the issues involved as deserving of legislation. In 1992, two members of the US Congress sponsored the Environmental Justice Act, which would have required the [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#) to identify and monitor areas with high levels of toxic chemicals. The measure failed, but the legislators' effort brought heightened attention to the issue. Two years later, President Bill Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, which required federal agencies to pursue environmental justice and acknowledged the existence of environmental racism. The order had limited impact, but it drew more attention to the issue.

One major problem regarding accusations of environmental racism centers on the matter of proof. Courts require evidence that the alleged racism is intentional, and in most cases this is impossible to prove. However, in 1997 a federal judge ruled that suits can be filed on the basis of “[disparate impact](#),” which means that the effect of racial discrimination, regardless of the intent, can be used to assess responsibility. This decision was a victory for activists, as it gave them increased opportunities to pursue remedies in the courts. However, some observers noted that the ruling might prompt industrial interests, many of which would not be guilty of polluting, to avoid siting their facilities in minority communities out of fear of expensive lawsuits.

The issue of environmental justice has garnered support because the stated goals of advocates—a clean environment for all and an end to racist industrial and government practices—are attractive to many people. Achieving those goals has proven difficult, however. People tend to desire both justice and the manufactured goods that cause environmental degradation. While most people oppose racism, they have no desire to relocate polluting industries or other environmental hazards into their own neighborhoods. In addition, as the debate about disparate impact indicates, conflicts over environmental racism may have the unintended consequence of denying low-income people jobs that they desire. However, by the twenty-first century, the concept of environmental racism had expanded beyond

concerns over waste dumps and polluting industrial facilities that may bring economic benefits along with health risks. It came to include other issues such as minorities' higher levels of exposure to vehicle pollution and natural disasters, all inextricably linked to systemic discrimination and segregation.

Issues of environmental justice have continued to earn attention, often in relation to notable crises. For example, the lead contamination in the Flint, Michigan, water supply that began in 2014 and generated a national scandal was connected to environmental racism due to the city's large Black population and the perception that state officials overlooked the problem. Similarly, in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, which caused a particularly severe amount of damage in the city of Houston, Texas, some commentators focused on the disparate impact of the natural disaster due to social and economic inequality in the city. Those in wealthier neighborhoods had more resources to rely on in surviving and recovering from the hurricane, while those located in low-income neighborhoods (many with communities of color) faced greater struggles. For instance, because low-income neighborhoods often contain more unstable and even dangerous buildings and facilities, they are more deleteriously impacted by the pollutants spread through excessive flooding.

In 2018, the EPA released a report showing evidence that people living in neighborhoods of color were at greater risk for being exposed to polluted air. When the global coronavirus disease 2019 ([COVID-19](#)) pandemic spread throughout the United States in 2020 and was found to disproportionately affect Black communities, some experts suggested environmental racism was one of the many interconnected factors responsible. Greater exposure to [air pollution](#) and other factors impacting overall health outcomes was suggested to make Black Americans more susceptible to complications from the respiratory illness. Included as one of the many executive orders issued by the Joe Biden administration inaugurated in January 2021 was an order aimed at more directly addressing environmental racism, which included the establishment of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

The EPA put out an especially expansive environmental justice study in September 2021 that,

through advanced analysis, had determined that racial and other underserved communities are likely to experience disproportionately more negative impacts of [climate change](#) . Focusing on six impact categories, such as air quality and health, extreme temperature and health, and coastal flooding and property, in every state except for Hawaii and Alaska, researchers found that Black Americans, who are found more likely to die from polluted air, are 40 percent more likely to reside in areas projected to see the highest increases of deaths related to extreme temperature. In terms of adverse effects of flooding and sea level rise, it found that in addition to American Indian and Alaska Native peoples being nearly 50 percent more likely to live in areas where the greatest amount of land is estimated to become inundated with rising seawater, Hispanic and Latino Americans are 50 percent more likely to live in coastal areas projected to experience the highest increases in traffic delays due to high-tide flooding; these groups were also likely to see the highest temperature-related loss of working hours.

In September 2022, the administration of President Joe Biden announced the formation of the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights. This office, created as part of the Environmental Protection Agency, identified environmental justice and civil rights as its primary mission. The move was intended to institutionalize the United States government's continuity of effort in these realms. The office is supported by permanent staff members and a director confirmed by the Senate and has the authority to develop policies that can be implemented nationwide in coordination with other government agencies in order to provide support to communities that have historically borne the brunt of environmental injustice.

In 2025, during Trump's second presidential term, he dismantled much of the EPA's environmental justice department, cutting staff and grants, as well as removing or censoring key data that related to race and the environment. Some of Trump's attempted changes were blocked, and his grant cuts faced a class action lawsuit led by multiple states and environmental organizations. Those that opposed his decision argue that major changes to the EPA will make it more difficult to assess which communities continue to be harmed by environmental changes and to provide them with necessary aid and improved infrastructure.



Pollution disproportionately affects communities of color.

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