

Policymakers have devoted attention to issues of environmental risk to further improve understanding of the disproportionate burden of environmental racism, inequity and justice among low-income, black communities. The theory that sources of environmental risk may be concentrated among racial and ethnic minorities has prompted disagreements among researchers. Uncertainty regarding the existence, sources and extent of environmental inequity, poses important consequences for the environmental justice movement.¹² This paper explores issues of environmental risk to shed light on the pervasive problem of discriminatory behaviors affecting housing segregation, affordable housing and underlying structural inequities present in African American communities. The Hill District and Homewood-Brushton serve as two neighborhood case studies that have historically endured issues of environmental risk.

Historically, countless African American communities have been affected by exposure to environmental hazard. In 1953, a historical plantation in Norco, Louisiana was bought by Shell corporation and transformed into a chemical plant. Local communities, mainly African American sharecroppers, suffered chemical accidents and health concerns for decades, while Shell corporation and government officials remained indifferent.⁷ African Americans have been forced to live in polluted neighborhoods and endure conditions that have detrimental effects on their environments and socioeconomic opportunity.² Communities that are most affected by pollution also have deteriorating housing, increasing poverty, growing unemployment and collapsing infrastructure.⁷ Issues of environmental justice among African American communities are invariably tied to quality of life issues, such as adequate access to housing, health care and healthy food.⁷ Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, communities were prompted to action with the publication of *Silent Spring*, an environmental science book documenting the detrimental effects of pesticides on the environment and public health. White middle-class neighborhoods responded

with protests of “not in my backyard” while communities of color became the path of least resistance.² However, in 1982, the Commission for Racial Justice organized hundreds of African Americans from Warren County, North Carolina to protest against plans to locate a polychlorinated biphenyl disposal landfill near their rural community. Subsequent civil disobedience resulted in arrests and national media coverage. This prompted the Environmental Justice Movement.

A central question in the debate then becomes why environmental risk is more a function of race rather than poverty? There are several reasons why marginalized black communities endure a disproportionate burden of environmental harm.⁶ Bullard explains that polluting industries rely on the “path of least resistance” by identifying landfills and toxic waste sites in minority neighborhoods that are low-income economies and politically insignificant.⁵ Black communities often times lack long-term, organized agency and have limited access to financial resources to fight against facilities that threaten the health of their communities.⁵ There are fewer advocates that pressure governments on behalf of minority communities and they tend to be less aware of resources that can protect their communities.⁵ The primary focus on minority communities has been issues related to criminal violence, drug activity, poverty and unemployment rates rather than environmental risk. Structural barriers embedded in policies and practices contribute to persistent systematic and institutional disadvantages for marginalized communities. For example, low educational attainment, high unemployment rates and overall reduced upward mobility constrain the ability of people to leave situations they do not like essentially forging patterns of segregated housing.⁶

Environmental inequity is largely embedded in issues of environmental justice and racism. Although the terms are distinctive in their meanings, environmental equity, justice and

racism are used interchangeably thus requiring theoretical clarification.¹ Environmental equity refers to equal protection from and distribution of environmental hazards, risks and costs across a population.¹ The term often refers to the unequal environmental burdens facing low-income and minority populations such as exposure to toxins and living near landfills or polluting industries. Analysis of equity illustrates to policymakers that subgroups are unequally affected by public problems thereby refocusing the attention away from aggregate environmental data.¹² Environmental justice addresses the varying impact of implemented policies on subgroups of populations. The purpose is to ensure just processes and outcomes in communities that receive less rapid response or priority. For example, improving agency evaluations of hazardous waste sites in minority communities that are low-income. Environmental racism refers to discriminatory behaviors that disproportionately affect minority communities. Literature suggests that in communities where environmental inequity is identified, environmental racism or racist attitudes are the cause of inequity.¹ Established social and economic conditions such as residential location and education can expose minority populations to contaminants to a much larger extent. For this reason, studies suggest that minority communities are disproportionately affected because of race and class.

Environmental inequity has disproportionately affected African American communities for many years, suggesting a pattern of discriminatory behavior.² Political pressure from environmental justice groups in combination with numerous research studies has prompted policy analysts and policymakers to consider the distribution of environmental risks across minority populations. Despite risk reduction efforts improvements in low-income black communities are inadequate, as race and class remain significant indicators of exposure to environmental risk.² The Hill District has experienced similar patterns of risk exposure and

serves as a representative case study for communities deeply affected by environmental inequity. A predominantly poverty stricken, black neighborhood located in Pittsburgh, the Hill District faces significant environmental risks as a byproduct of a post-industrial restructuring, structural barriers, governmental indifference.

A broad analysis of environmental inequity contextualizes issues of segregated housing and development policies in cities such as Pittsburgh. Studies indicate that of the 50 U.S. metropolitan areas with the largest populations of African Americans in 2010, Pittsburgh was ranked as the 17th most segregated.⁸ According to 2010 U.S. Census data Beltzhoover, the Hill District and Homewood have populations that are more than 80 percent black, while neighborhoods such as Lawrenceville, Point Breeze and Oakwood have populations that are 80 percent white. Legal segregation and housing discrimination predominantly affect African American communities in Pittsburgh, which tend to be poorer and have less access to resources.⁸ High levels of residential segregation have also been attributed to lasting consequences such as persistent income inequality and low educational attainment for minority students.⁸

Protests in Warren County prompted questions about the number of other low-income, black communities that were disproportionately affected by hazardous waste sites located in their communities.³ In a 1983 study conducted by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) the racial and socio-economic statuses of residents living near toxic waste sites were examined in southeastern United States. Results indicated black communities were the majority population affected in three of the four communities studied.³ Some argued that although the GAO study was comprehensive for one region, it was limited in its scope and failed to examine the relationship between locations of waste facilities and racial and socio-economic statuses throughout the United States.³

In response to the limited scope, the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ presented a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between toxic waste sites and race. Three of the five largest landfills in the nation are located in predominantly black communities. Race proved to be a more significant indicator than socioeconomic status in the location of waste facilities.² Follow-up studies on the location of environmental toxins in Detroit revealed blacks are disproportionately represented in neighborhoods located near hazardous waste facilities.⁴ Bryant and Mohai concluded race was a more significant predictor than income of an individual's relative location to toxic waste sites, suggesting the closer a community is to a waste facility, the higher percentage of African Americans.⁴

Numerous research studies have shed light on the pervasive problem of environmental racism; however, communities of color continue to face discrimination from federal agencies. A report by the Center for Public Integrity found that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has never made a formal finding of discrimination despite twenty-two years of receiving complaints. The report stated the EPA's Office of Civil Rights takes one year to determine if a case is worthy of investigation, while 95 percent of allegations of discrimination by African American communities are denied.

In a similar pattern of government indifference towards African American communities, the Hill District has historically been excluded from the federal housing authority's post-war investments through practices of mortgage redlining.¹³ While white residents benefitted from low rate mortgages to invest in housing, the Hill District was subjected to segregation, increased disinvestment and out-migration.¹³ Deteriorating houses were demolished and replaced with public housing projects and urban renewal plans. In the 1950s, community residents protested city government's plans to demolish the Lower Hill District and replace existing houses and

businesses with a cultural district for wealthier Pittsburgh residents.¹³ At the center of the development project was a Civic Auditorium surrounded by theaters and art complexes. Four-hundred and thirteen buildings were demolished and over eight thousand community residents were forced to relocate with little compensation for their housing loss.¹³ Thirteen hundred buildings spanning ninety-five acres of land were demolished, which left the community with no commercial district and economic opportunity.¹³ Plans to construct an art district surrounding the Civic Arena were replaced by a large parking lot to accommodate commuters and event-goers.

The Hill District has failed to recover from patterns of mortgage redlining, out-migration, urban renewal and disinvestment. The Hill District is centrally located near Oakland and Downtown, which are two neighborhoods possessing strong job markets and housing sectors. Despite the potential for development, the community suffers from one of the lowest average incomes in Pittsburgh and physical deterioration of housing.¹¹ Median income is less than \$15,000 and residents spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing.¹³ Housing in the Hill District is one-fourth public housing, making residents increasingly vulnerable to displacement as developers spur urban renewal projects. Only 29 percent of homes in the Hill District are owner occupied, while many of the remaining houses are tax delinquent or in poor condition. Hence, few residents benefit from community development and the subsequent increases in property value. Residents continue to face challenges of how to attract economic investment into the community while preserving the original cultural fabric of the neighborhood and livelihood of existing residents.¹³

Plans to ensure mutual benefit in the development of the Hill District have been thwarted by discriminatory policies put forth by the City of Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Penguins have exclusive rights to develop the site of the former Civic Arena.¹¹ The franchise plans to revitalize

the area with 1,200 apartments of which only 20 percent would be affordable for lower-income residents earning sixty to 80 percent of the area's median income.¹¹ According to the Hill District Consensus Group, this means a resident of the Hill District would need to have a yearly income of \$39,100 to afford a one-bedroom apartment. The Consensus Group proposed a plan of 30 percent of affordable housing for low-income residents who are earning 50 percent or less of the median income. Despite agreement amongst city officials and community leaders, housing developers were indifferent towards increasing affordable housing.

Patterns of housing policies embedded in racially segregating Pittsburgh have been affecting black people over the past four decades, which led to the forced migration of the city's black population to the suburbs. Pittsburgh's black population has declined from 102,000 in 1980 to 79,789 in 2010, indicating a 22 percent drop.¹¹ Discriminatory racial dimensions in Pittsburgh's housing policy have forced black residents to move to Penn Hills and other more affordable suburban communities. Councilman Daniel Lavelle argues black residents have been "priced out" of the city due to over-priced housing in East Liberty and East End neighborhoods.¹¹

Homewood-Brushton suffers another dimension of environmental inequity found in its high concentration of vacant properties. Homewood has Pittsburgh's largest number of vacant, abandoned and tax-delinquent properties. According to reports by the Urban Institute, poverty is particularly pervasive in Pittsburgh's African American communities. Nearly one in three African American residents are considered poor by state standards, accounting for 80 percent of Pittsburgh's total population living under the poverty line. Economic disparities between black and white populations have historically been persistent in the region, evidenced by Pittsburgh's

high levels of residential segregation.⁸ In a neighborhood such as Homewood where 45 percent of the population is living in poverty, many residents have been economically marginalized.⁸

While government regulations imposed in the 1970s have largely driven lead-based paint from the market, lead contamination continues to affect the health of populations in major cities across the country. In Pittsburgh, lead poisoning is a serious health hazard, with effects that extend beyond contaminated water. Elevated lead-levels in the soil of specific neighborhoods, such as Homewood, indicate how economically, politically, and culturally marginalized communities bear a disproportionate amount of the environmental hazards that Pittsburgh face as a city. In 2014, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Departments of Health conducted blood tests on lower-income children in selected cities to monitor exposure to lead. Children are particularly susceptible to the negative neurological and biological effects of lead poisoning and are more likely to be exposed to contaminated soil in parks, school playgrounds, and older homes.⁸ Compared to other cities in the study, Pittsburgh tests revealed exceptionally high lead exposure in 660 of the 7,935 children in the sample.⁸

In addition to increasing exposure risks, race and class differences across neighborhoods may affect how government responds to pollution and local health issues. The soil in Homewood is particularly likely to contain elevated lead levels, as compared to other Pittsburgh neighborhoods. Whereas only 25 percent of the neighborhood's population was African American in 1950, by 1960 the figure had increased to 70 percent, rising to 98 percent by 1990.⁸ This prompted white flight that, alongside racial polarization, has eroded Homewood's tax base and led to economic decline.⁸ According to a recent report by the Urban Institute, poverty is particularly pervasive among Pittsburgh's African American communities.⁹ Nearly one in three African American residents are considered poor by state standards, accounting for 80 percent of

those living below the poverty line. Economic disparities between black and white populations have historically been persistent in the region, evidenced by the city's high levels of residential segregation.⁹ In neighborhoods like Homewood, where 45 percent of the population lives in poverty, ill-maintained homes, parks, and schools make residents more vulnerable to lead contamination, as well as other environmental problems.

As part of a study investigating environmental issues faced by disadvantaged neighborhoods, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh have conducted preliminary tests of the soil in Homewood. Measurements were collected at three sites—the Westinghouse High School, Homewood-Brushton YMCA, and Homewood Senior Center—using soil test reports made by Pennsylvania State University's Agricultural Analytical Services Laboratory. These tests revealed that Westinghouse High School has approximately 100 times the acceptable concentration of lead in its surrounding soil, while the YMCA and Homewood Senior Center have roughly 10 times the acceptable concentration.

Lead paint deposits from dilapidated structures that once stood on vacant lots may be one of the primary sources of soil contamination in Homewood, which currently contains the largest number of vacant, abandoned, and tax-delinquent properties in Pittsburgh. Indeed, with 44 percent of its 5,138 parcels of land being vacant lots—twice the citywide rate—Homewood is particularly susceptible to contamination risks.⁹ Further research on lead contamination in Pittsburgh may reveal how environmental hazards differ across neighborhoods. This research should attend closely to variation by race and class. Citywide research that assumes contamination is uniform across neighborhoods only provides a partial picture of the risks and impacts; the city's changing demographic situation calls for more nuanced studies of the health issues facing our increasingly heterogeneous population.

Efforts to address housing discrimination and lack of affordable housing by Pittsburgh City Council culminated in legislation that made it illegal for landlords to discriminate against tenants based on source of income.¹⁰ Low-income residents primarily receive housing through subsidies provided by the Section 8 voucher program.¹⁰ However, the program is plagued by discriminatory practices. Landlords often refuse to accept Section 8 vouchers because of “hassles” associated with annual inspections, strict rules for property conditions and tenant issue. Discriminatory practices disproportionately affect groups that are overrepresented in Section 8 programs such as minority communities, disabled persons and families with children.¹⁰ The Housing Authority reports that 41 percent of low-income residents who received vouchers were forced to return them unused because landlords refused to accept them.¹⁰ Pittsburgh City Council also passed legislation to keep council members informed of urban renewal and its impact on affordable housing in Pittsburgh.¹⁰ Affordable Housing Impact Statements require developers to formerly submit development plans with an analysis of how projects create or preserve affordable housing units.¹⁰

Low-income, African American communities share a disproportionate burden of environmental risk. Analysis of risk without attention to underlying issues of environmental inequity and racism provide an inadequate understanding of the environmental justice movement. Neighborhoods such as the Hill District and Homewood-Brushton represent case studies of existing environmental inequity as a result of governmental indifference and discriminatory practices. To improve these neighborhoods, government officials and multiple stakeholders must systematically address the myriad of problems that have historically afflicted the Hill District and Homewood. They must have a vested interest in bringing attention to problems that are often times based in systemic patterns of lack of empathy. Resources must be

brought together to redevelop these communities to ensure better schools, safer environments, new housing, less crime, and more business—and it must be achieved simultaneously. The environmental movement sheds light on layers of injustice found in black communities located near toxic waste sites, housing discrimination and systematic segregation. Policymakers must take a more active role in improving conditions for black communities that continue to endure disproportionate environmental risk.

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