

# Introduction

The environmental justice movement has come a long way since its humble beginning in Warren County, North Carolina, where a PCB landfill ignited protests and more than 500 arrests. Although the demonstrators were unsuccessful in stopping the PCB landfill from being sited, they put “environmental racism” on the map and launched the national environmental justice movement. The Warren County protests also led the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice in 1987 to produce *Toxic Wastes and Race*, the first national study to correlate waste facility sites and demographic characteristics.<sup>1</sup>

The 1987 report was significant because it found race to be the most potent variable in predicting where these facilities were located—more powerful than household income, the value of homes and the estimated amount of hazardous waste generated by industry. The *Toxic Wastes and Race* study was revisited in 1994 using 1990 census data. The 1994 study found that people of color are 47 percent more likely to live near a hazardous waste facility than white Americans.<sup>2</sup>

## About This Report

In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice released its groundbreaking study *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. This year, the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries commissioned a new report as part of the twentieth anniversary of the release of the 1987 report. The 2007 *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty* report uses 2000 census data. The report also chronicles important environmental justice milestones since 1987 and a collection of “impact” essays from environmental justice leaders on a range of topics. This new report also examines the environmental justice implications in post-Katrina New Orleans and uses the Dickson County (Tennessee) Landfill case, the “poster child” for environmental racism, to illustrate the deadly mix of waste and race. *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty* is designed to facilitate renewed grassroots organizing and provide a catalyst for local, regional and national environmental justice public forums, discussion groups and policy changes in 2007 and beyond.

The Research Team was guided by the following questions: (1) What are the core or fundamental environmental justice issues surrounding waste and race? (2) What role has government played over the past two decades to address waste facility siting and related environmental disparities? (3) What progress has been made and what challenges exist? (4) What resources exist or need to be brought to bear to address the environmental justice issues? and (5) What policy and legislative changes are needed to address adverse and disproportionate impact of environmental and health threats to low-income and people of color populations and to ensure equal environmental protection for all?

It is important we make clear what this new report is and what it is not. We want to convey that this new report takes stock of what has happened (or not happened) over the past two decades, i.e., changes, milestones, accomplishments and the work that is still needed, in the EJ Movement. We also need to emphasize that the report “celebrates” the tenacity and endurance of the EJ Movement. While we emphasize that EJ is neither a Democrat nor Republican issue, we have chronicled the various government attempts by the Bush Administration to “roll-back” the hard-fought civil rights and human rights, environmental justice and health gains made over the past two decades.

## Roots of Environmental Justice—The World Since 1987

A new movement has taken root in the United States, and spread around the world, that defines environment as “everything”—where we live, work, play, worship and go to school, as well as the physical and natural world. This relatively new national movement is called the environmental and economic justice movement. Two decades ago, the concept of environmental justice had not registered on the radar screens of environmental, civil rights, human rights or social justice groups. Nevertheless, one should not forget that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. went to Memphis in 1968 on an environmental and economic justice

mission for the striking black garbage workers. The strikers were demanding equal pay and better work conditions. Of course, Dr. King was assassinated before he could complete his mission.



*United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice briefing to release Toxic Wastes and Race report at National Press Club, Washington, DC, 1987 (United Church of Christ)*

Environmental justice is defined as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic or socio-economic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programs and policies.” Simply put, environmental justice demands that everyone (not just the people who can “vote with their feet” and move away from threats or individuals who can afford lawyers, experts and lobbyists to fight on their behalf) is entitled to equal protection and equal enforcement of our environmental, health, housing, land use, transportation, energy and civil rights laws and regulations.

Clearly, the world is much different since the report was first published in 1987. The UCC report propelled an entire generation of social science researchers investigating the interplay between race, class and the environment. The landmark study also spawned a series of academic books, including *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* in 1990, the first to chronicle the convergence of two movements—the social justice movement and environmental movement—into the environmental justice movement. It also highlighted African Americans’ environmental activism in the South, the same region that gave birth to the modern civil rights movement. What started out as local and often isolated community-based struggles against toxics and facility siting blossomed into a multi-issue, multi-ethnic and multi-regional movement.<sup>3</sup>

Two year later, in 1992, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse* brought together papers from scholars, activists and policy analysts who had attended an environmental justice conference sponsored by Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources.<sup>4</sup> A half-dozen presenters from this historic gathering (later became known as the “Michigan Coalition”) pressured the EPA to begin addressing environmental justice concerns voiced by low-income and people of color communities from around the country. In July 1992, after much prodding from environmental justice advocates, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published

*Environmental Equity: Reducing Risks for All Communities*, one of the first EPA reports to acknowledge environmental disparities by race and class.<sup>5</sup>



*Environmental justice leaders, later known as the "Michigan Coalition," gather for group photo after the University of Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards, 1990 (University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment)*

It is no accident that the Commission for Racial Justice, under the leadership of Reverend Benjamin Chavis, also was the impetus behind the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. The 1991 Summit was probably the most important single event in the movement's history. The Summit broadened the environmental justice movement beyond its early anti-toxics focus to include issues of public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation and community empowerment. The meeting also demonstrated that it is possible to build a multi-racial grassroots movement around environmental and economic justice.<sup>6</sup>

Held in Washington, D.C., the four-day Summit was attended by more than 650 grassroots and national leaders from around the world. Delegates came from all fifty states, Puerto Rico, Chile, Mexico and as far away as the Marshall Islands. People attended the Summit to share their action strategies, redefine the environmental movement and develop common plans for addressing environmental problems affecting people of color in the United States and around the world.

On October 27, 1991, Summit delegates adopted 17 "Principles of Environmental Justice." These principles were developed as a guide for organizing, networking and relating to government and nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs). By June 1992, Spanish and Portuguese translations of the Principles were being used and circulated by NGOs and environmental justice groups at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

A decade later, in September 2002, the UCC helped facilitate the Second People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit or EJ Summit II in Washington, D.C. The EJ Summit II was planned for 500 delegates. However, more than 1,400 individuals participated in this historic event—a clear indication that the environmental justice movement is alive and well.

### Living and Dying with Pollution

In September 2005, the Associated Press released results from its analysis of an EPA research project showing African Americans are 79 percent more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial pollution is suspected of posing the greatest health danger.<sup>7</sup> Using EPA's own data and government scientists, the AP *More Blacks Live with Pollution*



*People of Color Summit delegates hold rally on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building, Washington, DC, 1991 (Photo by R.D. Bullard)*

study revealed that in 19 states, blacks were more than twice as likely as whites to live in neighborhoods where air pollution seems to pose the greatest health danger. Hispanics and Asians also are more likely to breathe dirty air in some regions of the U.S. The AP found that residents of the at-risk neighborhoods were generally poorer and less educated, and unemployment rates in those districts were nearly 20 percent higher than the national average.

The Associated Press analyzed the health risk posed by industrial air pollution using toxic chemical air releases reported by factories to calculate a health risk score for each square kilometer of the United States. The scores can be used to compare risks from long-term exposure to factory pollution from one area to another. The scores are based on the amount of toxic pollution released by each factory, the path the pollution takes as it spreads through the air, the level of danger to humans posed by each different chemical released and the number of males and females of different ages who live in the exposure paths.

Although the AP findings were important headline-grabbing news, they were not news to millions of African Americans and other people of color who have labored on the frontline for equal enforcement of the nation's environmental laws. The AP study results confirm a long string of reports that show race maps closely with the geography of pollution and unequal protection.

Historically, African American and other people of color communities have borne a disproportionate burden of pollution from incinerators, smelters, sewage treatment plants, chemical industries and even in their homes and neighborhoods.

#### *Toxic Homes and Childhood Lead Poisoning*

- Lead poisoning continues to be the number-one environmental health threat to children in the United States, especially poor children, children of color and children living in inner cities.<sup>8</sup>
- Black children are five times more likely than white children to have lead poisoning.<sup>9</sup>
- One in seven black children living in older housing has elevated blood lead levels.<sup>10</sup>
- About 22 percent of African American children and 13 percent of Mexican American children living in pre-1946 housing are lead poisoned, compared with 6 percent of white children living in comparable types of housing.
- Recent studies suggest that a young person's lead burden is linked to lower IQ, lower high school graduation rates and increased delinquency.<sup>11</sup>
- Lead poisoning causes about 2 to 3 points of IQ lost for each 10 ug/dl lead level.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Toxic Neighborhoods*

- The U.S. Government Accountability Office (formerly the U.S. General Accounting Office) estimates that there are between 130,000 and 450,000 brownfields (abandoned waste sites) scattered throughout the urban landscape from New York to California—most of which are located in or near low-income, working class and people of color communities.<sup>13</sup>
- More than 870,000 of the 1.9 million (46 percent) housing units for the poor, mostly minorities, sit within about a mile of factories that reported toxic emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>14</sup>
- More than 600,000 students in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan and California were attending nearly 1,200 public schools, with largely African Americans and other children of color, that are located within a half mile of federal Superfund or state-identified contaminated sites.<sup>15</sup>
- More than 68 percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant—the distance within which the maximum effects of the smokestack plume are expected to occur—compared with 56 percent of white Americans.<sup>16</sup>

## Waiting for Government to Respond

Getting government to respond to environmental justice problems in communities of color has not been easy.<sup>17</sup> Government has been slow to ask the questions of who gets help and who does not, who can afford help and who cannot, why some contaminated communities get studied while others get left off the research agenda, why industry poisons some communities and not others, why some toxic dumps get cleaned up while others are not and why some populations are protected and others are not.

Over the past two decades, grassroots community resistance emerged in response to practices, policies and conditions that residents judged to be unjust, unfair and illegal. For many communities of color, the environmental protection apparatus was judged to be broken and in need of fixing. Similarly, federal and state environmental protection agencies were seen as managing, regulating and distributing risks—instead of protecting public health and the environment in low income and people of color communities. Environmental justice networks and grassroots community groups are making their voices heard loud and clear. Grassroots groups also are winning on the ground and in some of the courts. They are making a difference in the lives of people from West Harlem to East Los Angeles.

Working together, environmental justice leaders, activists and academicians have assisted public officials in identifying "at risk" populations, toxic "hot spots" and research gaps. They also have worked with decision makers to correct these imbalances. If this nation is to achieve environmental and economic justice, the environment in urban ghettos, barrios, reservations and rural "poverty pockets" must be given the same protection as that provided to the suburbs. All communities, black, brown, red, yellow or white, deserve to be protected from the ravages of pollution and environmental degradation. No community should become the dumping grounds for other people's toxic waste.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. New York: United Church of Christ, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Goldman and Laura Fitton, *Toxic Wastes and Race Revisited*. Washington, DC: Center for Policy Alternatives, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> R.D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*. Westview Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. EPA, *Environmental Equity: Reducing Risks for All Communities*. Washington, DC: EPA, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> See Dana Alston, "Transforming a Movement: People of Color Unite at Summit against Environmental Racism," *Sojourner* 21 (1992), pp. 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> David Pace, "AP: More Blacks Live with Pollution," *Associated Press*, December 14, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. *Environmental Diseases from A to Z*. NIH Publication No. 96-4145. <http://www.nieehs.nih.gov>

<sup>9</sup> Alliance for Healthy Homes. "Children at Risk, Disparities in Risk: Childhood Lead Poisoning." [www.afhh.org/chil\\_ar\\_disparities.htm](http://www.afhh.org/chil_ar_disparities.htm) (accessed December 21, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Trust for America's Health, "Browse by Topic: Health Disparities – Lead," <http://healthyamericans.org> (Accessed December 15, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2000). *MMWR*, 49 (RR-14): 1-13; also National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), Health Disparities Research, [www.niehs.nih.gov/oc/factsheets/disparity/home.htm](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/oc/factsheets/disparity/home.htm) (accessed December 15, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Montague, "Pediatricians Urge a Precautionary Approach to Toxic Lead," September 29, 2005, *Rachel's Democracy and Health News*, #827 (September 2005), [http://www.rachel.org/bulletin/bulletin.cfm?Issue\\_ID=2513](http://www.rachel.org/bulletin/bulletin.cfm?Issue_ID=2513).

<sup>13</sup> R. Twombly. "Urban Uprising." *Environmental Health Perspective* Vol. 105, (July 1997): 696-701.

<sup>14</sup> "Study: Public Housing Is Too Often Located Near Toxic Sites." *Dallas Morning News*, October 3, 2000. See <http://www.cnn.com/2000/NATURE/10/03/toxicneighbors.ap/>

<sup>15</sup> Child Proofing Our Communities Campaign. March 2001. *Poisoned Schools: Invisible Threats, Visible*

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*Actions*. Falls Church, VA: Center for Health, Environment and Justice; See also <http://www.childproofing.org/mapindex.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See Clear the Air, Black Leadership Forum, Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice and the Georgia Coalition for the Peoples Agenda. *Air of Injustice: African Americans and Power Plant Pollution*. Washington, DC: Clear the Air (October 2, 2002),

<http://cta.policy.net/proactive/newsroom/release.vtml?id=23901> (accessed December 15, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005.