Environmental Health Disparities in Minority Communities

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For

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Background and Problem

"If you want to learn about the health of a population, look at the air they breathe, the water they drink and the places where they live." Hippocrates' words from the 5th century B.C. still ring true in today's society where the environment in which people live has a direct, significant impact on how long they live and their quality of life.

During the early 1980s in the United States, the field of environmental health collided with civil rights and revealed the first environmental health disparity: hazardous waste facilities were more often cited in predominantly African-American communities, sparking a new wave of racism, called "environmental racism."\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\) This new field of health disparities saw much research, looking at the differences between these communities, compared to other US communities. The research revealed startling differences, such as higher rates of poverty; lower socioeconomic status (SES); higher incidences of chronic health diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory diseases; higher rates of violence, decreased mental health quality and a shorter lifespan.\(^3\) Out of this field emerged the environmental justice movement, defined as the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, culture, national origin, income, and educational levels with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of protective environmental laws, regulations, and policies."\(^4\) This movement has shone a spotlight on disenfranchised populations, particularly poor people and people of color. It documented that vulnerable populations were disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards and drew attention to the particularly vulnerable groups of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.
Fast forward thirty years from when the first environmental injustices were identified and not much has been accomplished to improve the environmental health disparities these communities continue to face each day. Place matters as far as health, and minorities continue to be exposed to environmental hazards like air pollution from both indoor and outdoor sources, noise from traffic, water pollution from environmental contaminants, hazardous materials from building materials containing lead, inadequate and unhealthy housing and high-hazard jobs resulting in injuries.\(^5,\!^6\)

In addition, a recent study by the National Poverty Center found that the economic gap is widening, creating a new category of poverty in the US, called 'extreme poverty,' which is defined by the World Bank as people living on $2.00 or less each day. Between 1996 and 2011, those living with these extreme economic conditions grew by 182.7% for African Americans, and 131.9% for Hispanics.\(^7\) This means that people without cash income have no economic resources to either fix their living conditions or move to a healthier community.

**Contributing Factors**

Some minorities are undocumented and are therefore invisible to the government and often to our communities. One such population is the hired farm workers. It is estimated that most are Mexican immigrant males, nearly two-thirds live in poverty and half are undocumented.\(^8\) These people work in farms across the US and are often paid based on what they individually harvest in a day, which is a fraction of the total income for the agricultural industry. For example, tobacco farm workers earn 0.3% of the income from the tobacco industry.\(^9\) This wage leaves them well below the US poverty line and between the lack of enforcement of federal wage laws, the theft of their wages...
by supervisors and the unsafe working conditions, this has been called modern day
slavery.

Most US laws and regulations are siloed, meaning that they are too focused or
narrow to be comprehensive and effective and cover a broad range of conditions. For the
same reason, agencies implementing these same statutes are also siloed and do not
collaborate within their own agencies, let alone external ones. This lack of
comprehensive strategy allows the compounded environmental conditions of minority
populations to be invisible and ignored. For example, 7.5% of African-Americans or 2.6
million people and 6.3% Hispanics or 2.2 million people live in the US in inadequate
housing. However, defining what is considered adequate housing, or even housing, is
conflicting and the federal agencies who have a piece of regulating health and
environment relative to housing (e.g., EPA, NIH, CDC) do not collaborate with each
other to research these problems and identify ways to resolve them.¹⁰

Considering these existing conditions, I propose that all people living in the US
should have equal access to a healthy living and working environment, regardless of their
ethnicity, country of origin or immigration status.

Arguments in Favor

Because we have such a diverse population in the US, the best approach to
environmental equality is a broad one that incorporates a variety of methods to engage
and involve people from each group, including policy professionals, advocacy
professionals, public health professionals, health care practitioners, and others to guide
business professionals and their conduct towards fairness and justice. In order to best
implement this approach, people must be given appropriate information in order to make
educated decisions; otherwise, the darkness of ignorance will allow those with knowledge to retain power over certain groups and strip away their rights.

Minority working groups often sacrifice their health and well-being for the good of the community, in order to stay in the community, while certain members of the community take advantage of them. Everyone is created equal and has value in God's sight and human beings should adopt that attitude, as well. If we truly shared our moral and ethical obligations to support our community, the environmental burden would be equally shared among all classes and cultures of people. And because everyone would be equally impacted, we would collectively reduce the environmental burden of everyone, for the good of the community.

Also, sharing an equal environmental burden would create transparency for the community and, particularly, the regulators. This, in turn, would allow collaboration among various agencies to communicate risks of activities (rather than the myopic view of focusing on specific chemicals) and would set environmental standards that were beneficial for the entire community. In addition, risks would be minimized to all who are in the community, instead of literally dumping it into the neighborhoods of those who are invisible to the larger community and have no voice. As stated earlier, current environmental standards are not focused on the bigger picture of doing no harm to the community or its environment. This model would not only allow but require changes be made to the content of our standards and those who enforce them.

**Arguments Against**

Within our society, the paternalistic model has created laws that have had tremendous positive influence on the both the environment and those who have been
negatively impacted by exposure to contaminants. Indeed, many local, state and federal laws have been passed since the creation of EPA and OSHA in the mid-1970s, aimed at protecting people, both where they live and work. People employed in mid- to large-sized corporations have seen environmental protection enhanced and workplace injuries reduced as part of these laws. Illegal dumping of hazardous chemicals is a thing of the past and entire communities are no longer forced to shut down while families lose everything due to extreme environmental exposure.

In a democracy, people have the right to vote on the laws they wish to have and the people for whom they want to represent them in the government. Voting allows people to have a voice and participate in the government. It also gives them the opportunity to change how the community operates by changing who is in power.

*My Position*

Every person in a society, no matter their ethnicity or legal status, has the God-given right to live and work in an environment that is safe. Laws described above, while benefiting many, only apply to mid and large-sized companies; small employers are exempt from OSHA requirements and often, people who are not legal residents in the US are employed by individuals or small companies. This leaves them unprotected by laws to which others enjoy the benefits. In addition, these laws are only as good as they are enforced, which means there is a threat of punishment if you are caught not following them. Also, as stated earlier, these laws are very myopic in their view of the community and the environment by regulating the wrong things. Instead of looking at what is best for the community, laws have been drafted and passed on specific chemicals and hazards rather than the big picture of doing no harm. Because these laws don't address this right
in the first place, more laws have to be developed to fill in the gaps where existing laws fail to protect people and the environment.

As an example of these types of laws which have been enacted, people vote to approve a measure that would tax a specific commodity and the money would be given to a specific cause. This tax penalizes those who use the commodity, which often are disproportionately poor, and gives the money to those who don't use the commodity. Instead, a giant step back should be taken to look at the bigger, broader picture of how a process impacts the community. Then appropriate, encompassing laws can be made that consider the specific impact on the community.

In addition, laws are written in legal terms, which require a great deal of education to understand and interpret them. Most minorities do not possess the level of education needed to make good use of their votes and therefore, do not participate in voting or are not eligible to vote. Existing environmental and safety laws do not apply to people who are not citizens, or at least legal residents, even though these people contribute, at a minimum, by paying taxes on goods and services.

All people must have the same environmental rights, no matter their country of origin or their immigration status. If every resident of our larger community is considered to be equal and treated equally, then each one will be a watchdog and advocate for their community, including those living and working in it.
References


