

**BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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## **Environmental Racism?**

Is there such a thing as environmental racism? If so, what is it? "Environmental racism refers to any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race or color," maintains Dr. Robert D. Bullard, perhaps the leading advocate for this position. This has been called the "disparate impact" test.

But this proposition is indefensible.

**Problems of Definition.** Much of the original support for the theory of environmental racism arose from studies of the siting of hazardous waste facilities. Yet demographic researchers from the University of Massachusetts found that the census tracts containing hazardous waste facilities are no more likely than other tracts to have higher than average percentages of blacks or Hispanics. In addition:

- Reasons for siting a facility may include low population density, transportation access, existing infrastructure, geophysical conditions and even climate — none of which are racial.
- Many sites condemned as examples of environmental racism were built before minorities or poor people moved into the neighborhood.

Furthermore, environmental dangers from waste sites are not confirmed by scientific evidence.

- It is often irrelevant from a human health perspective how close one is to a site; there must be actual or realistically potential human exposure.
- Living next door to a state-of-the-art waste handling facility is likely to expose an individual to less health risk than drinking a morning cup of coffee.

**What Is a "Minority Community"?** The definitions used in published reports vary widely. In one instance the term may refer to a county, in another to a particular neighborhood or postal ZIP code area. It seems that an effort often is made to maximize the apparent racial disparity of hazardous waste siting decisions or pollution events, even if the connection is tenuous at best.

For example, the *National Law Journal* reported as evidence of environmental racism that "small fines in minority areas have been lodged against industrial giants" and cited a \$22,000 air pollution penalty against Procter & Gamble Co. in Staten Island, N.Y. However, Staten Island, overall, is 85 percent white. It is also the site of Fresh Kills, the world's largest landfill, which takes in garbage and waste from the other boroughs of New York with much higher minority populations.

In other cases, the *National Law Journal* cites county population as conclusive evidence of racial discrimination. For example, in one North Carolina case, siting a facility in "the county with the highest percentage of minority residents in the state" was declared environmental racism.

The lack of a consistent definition for minority community is not the only shortcoming for this position.

**Moving to Areas With Pollution.** In many industrial regions, including most of those now said to contain physical evidence of environmental racism (the South Side of Chicago, for example), minorities were given their first access to the American Dream. Employers motivated to make a profit (regardless of their personal racism or lack thereof) hired the best workers they could find at the lowest wage they could pay. This often worked to the benefit of the economically disadvantaged, especially minorities, giving them their first opportunity to enter the industrial workplace and achieve a decent standard of living. Workers preferred to live close to their employment, for obvious reasons. Thus, they often moved to the general vicinity of the pollution sources. In fact, this century has witnessed the largest internal migration in American history as rural-born African-Americans moved to industrial urban areas. Even with the pollution and the low-wage jobs, their lives greatly improved. It is ironic that the very economic forces that helped to spawn the civil rights movement would be condemned as environmental racism today.

**Cancer Deaths and Environmental Racism.** It has been suggested that the higher-than-average cancer death rate in some minority communities is evidence of envi-

ronmental racism. Yet in the most careful studies of even the worst areas, such as Louisiana's so-called Cancer Alley south of Baton Rouge, it turns out that cancer *incidence* rates are normal, sometimes even below national averages. Only the cancer *death* rate is high. Thus, lack of timely medical attention is the root of this local problem, not environmental contamination. Spending money on expensive cleanup programs will not reduce the cancer death rate; only preventive medical attention can do that.

In the final analysis, most money spent for environmental cleanup has only a minimal effect on public health. Indeed, one of the least healthy conditions known to researchers is unemployment. Simply creating jobs in minority communities can correct for past environmental degradation.

**The Search for Environmental Racism.** Environmental racism is a growth industry within the federal government and the environmental movement. For example, President Clinton issued an Executive Order in February 1993 that directed agencies to consider the possibility of environmental racism in all matters. In response, the Environmental Protection Agency is examining its programs for any evidence of racism. Furthermore:

- The head of the Justice Department's Environmental and Natural Resources Division has professed a strong interest in the issue.
- The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law have established regional and national environmental racism projects.
- In the 103rd Congress, Rep. Cardiss Collins (D-IL) introduced legislation that would have granted the equivalent of veto power over industrial siting decisions to any minority community within two miles of a proposed site.

- Vice President Al Gore was quoted in the *Boston Sunday Globe* as declaring that "Race is the single most accurate predictor of the location of hazardous waste sites."

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**Putting Environmental Issues in Perspective.**

From a minority point of view, environmental problems may be fairly insignificant compared to the larger economic and civil liberty issues. While over 400 people were murdered in Washington, D.C., last year — a majority of them young male African-Americans — not a single person died because of groundwater contamination from a hazardous waste site.

In any event, because of the stringent standards imposed through many environmental laws and regulations, it has become nearly impossible to achieve official cleanup goals. For example, some regulations establish a target of lowering environmental risks to no more than one in one million (that is, one out of every one million exposed individuals is statistically likely to develop cancer as a result). However, every baby born in the United States today incurs a statistical risk of four in one million of being struck and killed on the ground by a crashing airplane — four times as great a risk as those environmental standards!

America already has over-politicized environmental issues. It would be inappropriate to divert even more resources to uncertain or nonexistent "problems." However, if the government assumes its proper role and explores property rights-based solutions to pollution, a decentralized, self-policing process can arise. In other words, respect for private contract and property rights would do much to eliminate apparent "racism."