

What is Environmental Justice?

Many people of color, low-income and working-class people live in communities, especially in urban areas, that have a disproportionate share of pollution. Many workers of color are also doing jobs that are more hazardous than their white counter-parts, which expose them to more toxic chemicals that may cause illnesses and sometimes death. Many people call this “environmental racism” and “economic injustice.”

The Environmental Justice Movement has its roots in the Civil Rights Movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color or national origin. As far back as 1971, the President’s Council on Environmental Quality annual report acknowledged that racial discrimination adversely affects the urban poor and the quality of their environment. Many studies since then have concluded that in many cases, race, not income, is the primary factor in determining how land is zoned for industrial use and where polluting facilities are located.

Race also plays a role in the inequalities in the clean-up of contaminated sites and penalties. For example, action on clean-up at Superfund sites is 12% to 42% later in communities of color than in white communities. Penalties under hazardous waste laws in white communities are consistently 46 percent higher than in people of color communities.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “fair treatment.” This means that “...no group of people, including racial, ethnic or socioeconomic group, should bear a **disproportionate** share of the negative environmental consequences” of industrial and commercial operations or governmental programs and policies.

Environmental Justice seeks to eliminate and prevent disproportionate pollution burdens on and discrimination against people of color and low-income communities from industrial/commercial operations and governmental policies and practices; provide meaningful participation of communities and workers with government and industry decision-makers; and to obtain fair treatment and equal protection under environmental and civil rights laws.