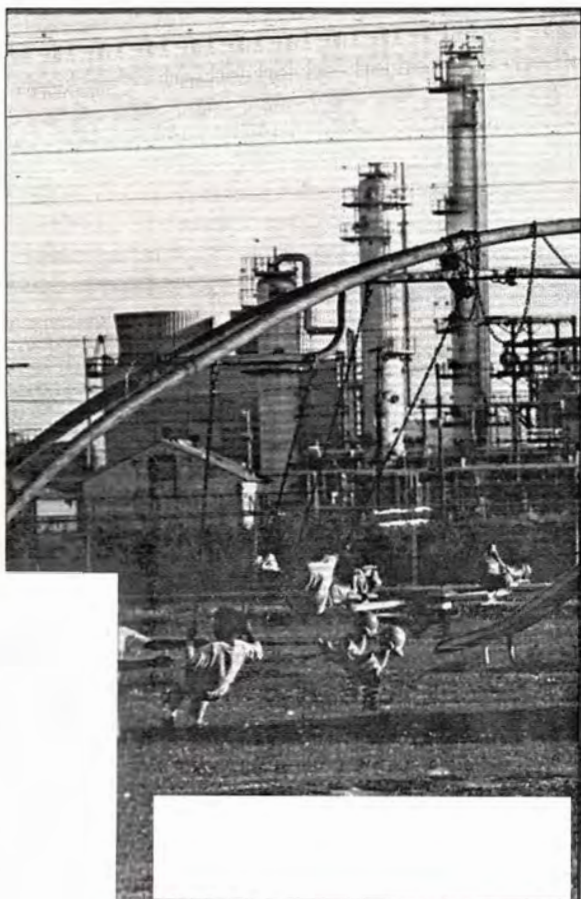




Serving A Diverse Society

EPA's Role In Environmental Justice



What Is Environmental Justice?

Environmental justice means that all people have an opportunity to live in a healthy environment. All people should be able to breathe clean air, drink clean water and consume uncontaminated foods.

Unfortunately, today, this is still a goal. Historically, the poor, immigrants, minorities, and some city dwellers have lived in polluted and less desirable areas. However, awareness and concern about inequities in the distribution of environmental hazards are increasing. Some examples of environmental inequities are:

Lead. Low income, African American children, particularly low income groups, consistently have higher than normal levels of lead in their blood. The primary pathway for this exposure is from ingestion of paint containing lead, often found in older housing. Almost two thirds of American housing units were built before 1970. Although the use of lead paint for houses was banned in the 1970s, older homes often contain paint with high concentrations of lead, lead in water from pipes and fixtures, and lead in dust and soils.

Waste Sites. Low income, quite often minorities, are more likely than other groups to live near landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste treatment facilities. Recent studies have found that the proportion of people of color in communities which have a commercial hazardous waste facility is approximately double that in communities without such facilities.

Air Pollution. In 1990, 437 of the 3,109 counties and independent cities in the U.S., failed to meet at least one of EPA's ambient air quality standards. Many Americans live in these communities: 57 percent of all whites, 65 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of Hispanics.



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Pesticides. Ninety percent of the approximately two million hired farm workers in United States are people of color, including Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Caribbean blacks, and African Americans. Through direct exposure to pesticides, farm workers and their families may face serious health risks; it has been estimated that as many as 313,000 farm workers in the United States may suffer from pesticide-related illnesses each year.

Wastewater. Modern sewage systems were developed to carry sewage and storm water separately to prevent overflow problems that are common in older, urban areas. Many inner cities still have sewer systems that are not designed to handle storm overflow; as a result raw sewage may be carried into local rivers and streams during storms, creating a health hazard.

EPA's Role

In 1992, EPA created the Office of Environmental Justice to address environmental impacts affecting minority and low income communities. The Office's functions include:

- coordinating with other federal agencies on environmental justice issues;
- providing communication, outreach, education, and training for the public;
- providing technical and financial assistance to outside groups; and
- serving as a central repository of environmental justice information.

Your Role

■ **LEARN about the community in which you are working.** How familiar are you with its population? For example, are there people who don't speak English well, people who can't read, or people who are shut in? Will work schedules keep people from attending community meetings?

32 million (14 percent) of the people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home. For example in California, 5.5 million people speak Spanish and 0.6 million speak Chinese at home. Over 17 million (8 percent) of people living in the U.S. speak Spanish at home.

Are important announcements and information such as fish advisories and Superfund site fact sheets available to non-English speakers? What is the educational level of people in the communities? How diverse is the community?

■ **CONSIDER children.** Children are especially vulnerable to harm from toxic substances and may be exposed through normal play.

Intergenerational equity means that younger or older generations, or future generations, should not bear a greater environmental burden. Is there a relatively high population of children in the neighborhood? Do children play outdoors

where they may come in contact with contaminated soil and water? Do cleanup remedies suggest unrealistic goals such as prohibiting children from playing outdoors?

■ **UNDERSTAND cultural diversity.** Many cultural groups, e.g. African Americans, American Indian and Alaskan Native, and Asian Pacific Americans, depend upon fishing to augment their diets either because of poverty or tradition.

Of the 250 million Americans; 49 million (20 percent) are African Americans, Indian Americans, and Asian Americans. 22 million (9 percent) are Hispanic Americans.

Do people garden and rely upon food they grow in soil that is or may become contaminated? How do they water their garden?

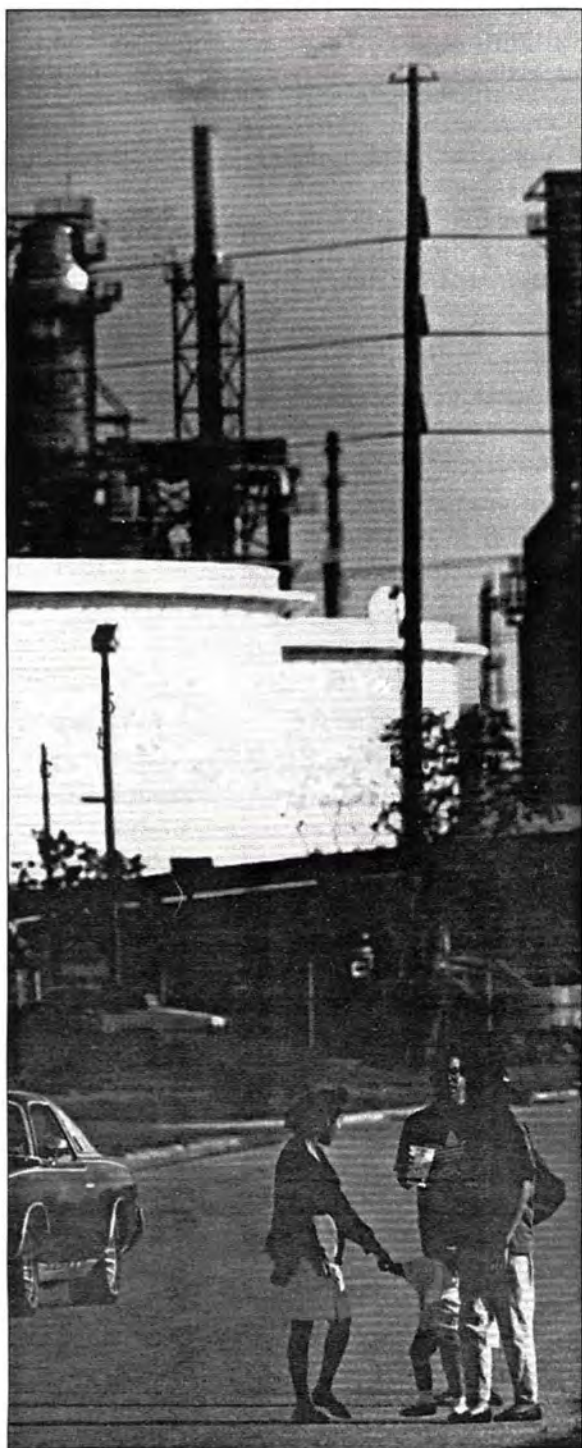
People may be exposed to toxics through multiple sources. Do some people receive additional exposure to toxics at work or because they live in older housing?

■ **REALIZE that poverty severely limits options and opportunities.** Low income groups cannot always move away from undesirable places, do not have adequate health care to identify environmental disease, and may suffer more exposure.

Many low income persons do not own vehicles and do not have access to county, state, or federal parks for recreation. Not only do they miss out on quality outdoor experiences, they fish, swim and play in areas that are contaminated.

Are they more exposed to auto emissions even though they don't own vehicles because they live in inner cities, close to heavily traveled streets and freeways?

This pamphlet is for EPA employees who would like to know more about environmental justice. If you work in communities, support those that do, write regulations which affect people or communities, or answer an EPA hotline, you have a role in justice.



Working With Communities

EPA's Community Involvement Coordinators have suggested a number of communication techniques for working with low income and minority communities.

- Take the community seriously
- Listen to what they have to say
- Make more use of facilitators
- Identify and work with informal communication networks
- Get out early and talk with communities
- Work with minority media
- Recognize that minorities are not usually members of national environmental groups and may need to be reached through other means
- Hold regional workshops with community leaders
- Build bridges for long term planning
- Be sensitive to working with cultural diversity
- Involve local Minority Academic Institutions



To Learn More:

Call the Office to be placed on the mailing list for the Environmental Justice Update Memo or to find out who your Regional justice contact is.

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