

Apr. 10, 2007

Toxic waste and race: Report confirms no progress made in 20 years

ANN ARBOR, Mich.—Environmental injustice in people-of-color communities is as much or more prevalent today than 20 years ago, say researchers commissioned to conduct a follow-up to the 1987 landmark study, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States."

The new report, "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987-2007: Grassroots Struggles to Dismantle Environmental Racism in the United States," shows that 20 years later, disproportionately large numbers of people of color still live in hazardous waste host communities, and that they are not equally protected by environmental laws.

"People of color across the United States have learned the hard way that waiting for government to respond to toxic contamination can be hazardous to their health and health of their communities," said Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. Bullard was the principal investigator for the study.

The 160-page report, which was commissioned by the United Church of Christ and produced by scholars at Clark Atlanta University, the University of Michigan, the University of Montana and Dillard University, points to the dismal post-Katrina response in New Orleans as one poignant example of unequal treatment of minorities in hazardous waste emergencies. The findings also show that environmental laws don't protect communities of color any more than they did 20 years ago when the original report was commissioned.

Paul Mohai, professor of environmental justice at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment and a co-author of the report, described the results as dismaying. "You can see there has been a lot more attention to the issue of environmental justice but the progress has been very, very slow," Mohai said. "Why? As important as all those efforts are they haven't been well executed and I don't know if the political will is there."

Bullard, Mohai and colleagues Robin Saha, assistant professor of environmental studies at University of Montana, and Beverly Wright, founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University and a Hurricane Katrina survivor, are jointly releasing the full report. An executive summary of the report was released in February at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"The cleanup and reconstruction efforts in New Orleans have been shamefully sluggish and patchy, and the environmental injustice may be compounded by rebuilding on poisoned ground," Wright said.

The report is the first known national study to use a new method of data analysis that better locates people in relation to hazardous waste sites, and uses 2000 census data to show that the racial disparities are much greater than previously reported.

"We think this study and the findings in it, as well as the case studies that show the human side to the national statistics, make a really strong case for environmental injustice to be on the policy agenda of Congress," Saha said. "It's clear the policies we are trying aren't working and that something else needs to be done."

More than nine million people are estimated to live in host neighborhoods within three kilometers of one of 413 hazardous waste facilities nationwide. The study found that the proportion of people of color in host neighborhoods is almost twice that of the proportion of those living in non-host neighborhoods. Where facilities are clustered, people of color make up over a two-thirds majority (69 percent).

Ninety percent of states with facilities have disproportionately high percentages of people of color living in host neighborhoods. States with the 10 largest differences in people-of-color percentages between host neighborhoods and non-host areas include.

- Michigan (66 vs. 19 percent)
- Nevada (79 vs. 33 percent)
- Kentucky (51 vs. 10 percent)
- Illinois (68 vs. 31 percent)
- Alabama (66 vs. 31 percent)
- Tennessee (54 vs. 20 percent)
- Washington (53 vs. 20 percent)
- Kansas (47 vs. 16 percent)
- Arkansas (52 vs. 21 percent)
- California (81 vs. 51 percent)

Differences in these percentages range from 30 percent (California) to 47 percent (Michigan). Host neighborhoods are typically economically depressed, with poverty rates 1.5 times that of non-host communities.

The report analyzed the percentages of all people of color in host communities by EPA region and every region with commercial hazardous waste facilities had a disproportionate number of minorities in host neighborhoods. The study also looked at 80 selected metropolitan areas.

In addition to analyzing the total percentage of people of color in host communities, the report analyzes the percentages of Hispanic/Latino, African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander separately. For example in Michigan, which had the largest disparity in the proportion of people of color living in host neighborhoods, the majority of those minorities affected were African American.

The report also gives more than three dozen recommendations for action at the Congressional, state and local levels to help remedy the disparities. It also makes recommendations for nongovernmental agencies and industry.

The report includes testimonials on the progress of the environmental justice movement by some of its founders and key leaders. There are also two detailed case studies, one on post-Katrina New Orleans, and the other on toxic contamination of an African American community in Dickson, Tenn. Finally, the report includes a timeline of milestones in the environmental justice movement that Bullard solicited from environmental justice leaders around the country.

For more information:

- Robert Bullard, Clark Atlanta University; (404) 880-6920, rbullard4ej@worldnet.att.net
- Paul Mohai, University of Michigan; (734) 763-4598, pmohai@umich.edu
- Robin Saha, University of Montana; (406) 243-6285, robin.saha@umontana.edu
- Beverly Wright, Dillard University; (504) 782-8989, bhwright@aol.com

Reference sites:

- Clark Atlanta University: www.ejrc.cau.edu
- University of Michigan: www.snre.umich.edu
- University of Montana: www.umt.edu
- Dillard University: www.dillard.edu
- United Church of Christ: www.ucc.org

Contact: [Laura Lessnau](mailto:Laura.Lessnau) **Phone:** (734) 647-1851

Contact: [Paul Mohai](mailto:Paul.Mohai) **Phone:** (734) 763-4598