

# Environmental Justice

## HOW & WHY PLASTIC THREATENS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

### WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.” Unfortunately, this has rarely been the reality for people of color and those living in poverty.

Why? Because the patterns of racism and inequality that have existed in the United States since its founding continue to influence every aspect of our society. Communities with fewer people of color and higher income levels are less attractive to polluting industries not only because real estate is more expensive but also because the residents are far more likely to succeed in pressuring officials and government agencies to enforce existing environmental regulations. If you look around your own county or state, you'll likely find that polluting landfills, incinerators, and manufacturing facilities are located in low-income and/or communities of color rather than in more affluent or majority white communities.

Environmental justice is a commitment that prioritizes the protection of all people — regardless of their race, color, nationality, or income — from environmental and health hazards, and seeks to ensure equitable access to participation in decision-making processes. The impetus for the movement was a 1982 protest led by the NAACP against the siting of a hazardous waste landfill to store soil contaminated with PCBs in Warren County, North Carolina, a predominantly Black community. Although the residents were ultimately unable to block the landfill, this event helped raise awareness of the need for environmental policies that protect low-income communities and communities of color.

### HOW DOES ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE CONNECT TO PLASTICS?

Plastic production and petrochemical pollution disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color in the Ohio River Valley, Texas, and Louisiana — where the bulk of production is concentrated—and where fossil fuel, plastics, and chemical companies intend to build even more facilities. People of color and those living below the poverty line are more likely to live within two miles of multiple facilities, and are sickened by cancer and other diseases that are linked to pollution at disproportionately high rates.

All across the country, landfills and incinerators also tend to be sited in low-income communities and communities of color, saddling residents with the noise, smell, and pollution created by discarded plastics.



*Daniel Winston and son, David, were impacted by the mass burning of vinyl chloride following the Feb 2023 train derailment in East Palestine, OH.*



*The Saratoga Sites housing project located next to the Norlite incinerator in Cohoes, NY. Photo courtesy of Dr. David Bond.*



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### WHERE IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOST THREATENED?

Although environmental injustices occur everywhere, they are particularly rampant along the Gulf Coast in Texas and Louisiana where the petrochemical industry's facilities are concentrated due to the area's abundant oil and gas deposits, easy access to shipping lanes, and comparatively lax enforcement of environmental regulations. Not surprisingly, the petrochemical development in this region has come at significant cost to the health of residents. For decades, the industry has built its plants and refineries along an 85-mile stretch of the Mississippi River that became known as "Cancer Alley" after studies found unusually high rates of cancer among residents in these communities.

The Ohio River Valley in Appalachia is the newest frontier in the petrochemical industry's plans for growth and represents yet another "sacrifice zone." Residents are struggling to prevent the industry's planned buildout of a host of new ethane crackers and other facilities to turn a glut of cheap fracked gas into single-use plastics, rather than leave it in the ground.

Although communities in the Gulf Coast and Appalachia face continuous harms from the facilities operating in their midst, every community with railroad tracks on which petrochemicals are transported is also at risk of health and environmental damage. A highly publicized example of these potential hazards is the February 2023 train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, where tanker cars full of vinyl chloride, a known human carcinogen used to make polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, were open burned, and residents were left to deal with the toxic health consequences.

### KEY ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LEADERS IN THE US

**Dr. Robert Bullard** is often referred to as "the father of environmental justice." A sociologist, he first introduced the concept of environmental justice in his 1990 book "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality." Since then, Dr. Bullard has written 18 books addressing environmental racism. He is the founding director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, the co-founder of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities' Community-Based Organizations' Gulf Coast Equity Consortium Project and Climate Change Consortium, and serves as the co-chair of the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

**Sharon Lavigne** is another pivotal figure in the U.S. environmental justice movement. In 2018, Lavigne, a former special education teacher, founded RISE St. James, a faith-based grassroots environmental organization that mobilized community opposition to a proposed \$1.25 billion Formosa Plastics manufacturing plant in her hometown in St. James Parish, Louisiana. Lavigne was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2021 in recognition of her ongoing efforts to defend her community and resist the continued expansion of polluting facilities in Cancer Alley.



*Dr. Robert Bullard. Photo courtesy of Dr. Robert Bullard.*



*Sharon Lavigne, founder of RISE St. James. Photo courtesy of The Goldman Environmental Prize.*