Vulnerable communities continue to bear greater pollution burden

Environmental justice work requires listening to and centering the people suffering the consequences of the ways policy and pollution intersect

Taking a deep breath of fresh air, enjoying the shade of plentiful trees while walking to a nearby park on maintained sidewalks, drinking clean water, or living close to a reliable and convenient source of public transportation are some of the basic comforts that aren’t as common as they should be in neighborhoods where there are more people of color who don’t have much money.

In an effort to address this inequality, the City of San Diego released its Climate Equity Index late last year, using indicators — like pesticide use, asthma rates, tree coverage, access to healthy foods and to public transportation — to score hundreds of census tracts in the city on access to these kinds of opportunities.

“Climate equity,” the city says, is “addressing historical inequities suffered by people of color, allowing everyone to fairly share the same benefits and burdens from climate solutions and attain full and equal access to opportunities regardless of one’s background and identity.”

This lack of access happens all over the country and race continues to be a significant factor in determining which communities suffer the greatest consequences that result when policy and pollution intersect. Carolina Martinez, director of the Environmental Health Coalition’s climate justice campaign, spoke with me about the environmental justice movement and what their organization is currently working on to address some of these inequities. (This email interview has been edited for length and clarity.)
Q: I've seen the terms “climate equity” and “environmental justice.” Is there a difference between the two?

A: Environmental justice is a movement. Climate equity and/or climate justice are used interchangeably to refer to the work and/or goals that mostly focus on greenhouse emission reduction, energy and other “climate”-specific issues to address within environmental justice communities.

“Environmental Justice Communities” is the term preferred to refer to communities at the front lines of the environmental/climate crisis. Our communities are home to the largest sources of toxic pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about the history of the environmental justice movement?

A: It is extremely important to understand that the environmental justice movement was born out of the Civil Rights Movement. Since the 1960s, civil rights leaders knew that our communities of color were also fronting the consequences of toxic pollution.

The 1988 “Toxic Waste in the United States” study by the United Church of Christ marked a critical point in formalizing the environmental justice movement. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, it was the first study of its kind to address issues of race, class and the environment on a national level. “The study found that over 15 million African Americans, 8 million Hispanics, and half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans resided in communities with at least one abandoned or uncontrolled toxic waste site,” the EPA said in a timeline graphic detailing the agency’s involvement in the environmental justice movement. "...The study noted that although the socioeconomic status of the residents appeared to play an important role in the location of hazardous waste sites, the residents' race was the most significant factor among the variables analyzed.”

Grounded in racial justice, the environmental justice movement works to address the environmental impacts placed on low-income communities of color. It affirms the rights of indigenous people and communities most affected by climate change and toxic pollution to lead with the solutions; environmental justice communities represent and speak for themselves.
Q: What are some examples of the ways that poor communities and communities of color are being affected by this kind of environmental inequality?

A: According to the CalEnviroScreen tool, developed by the state to identify communities most burdened by pollution from multiple sources and vulnerable to its effects, National City, City Heights and the Logan area are ranked in the top 25 percent of census tracts for pollution impact. These communities are predominately Latino and have significant refugee populations from East Africa, Vietnam and Cambodia. They’re neighborhoods that are also at the top in the county for traffic proximity and diesel particulate pollution, with especially high risks for asthma. In 2017, Barrio Logan's rate of asthma-related hospital visits is higher than 92.9 percent of census tracts in the state. City Heights follows Barrio Logan in asthma emergency room visits for children, with 220 visits per 10,000 children. Other major health concerns that are prevalent in these neighborhoods include cancer, obesity, and diabetes.

Q: What issues does your organization have its eyes on this year, in terms of the work you're focused on locally in the area of environmental justice?

A: On March 19, the Metropolitan Transit System board [is expected to] announce priority projects for a ballot measure that will raise $24 billion for the next 50 years. These projects must serve environmental justice communities by reducing pollution and connecting all San Diego residents to jobs and schools.

Seventy percent of jobs are unreachable within 90 minutes by public transit, and our local economy, health, and environment are at risk. We are asking that the following be included in the ballot measure: guaranteeing that the UC San Diego Blue Line express trolley service, with some of the highest ridership in the region, meets its demands for the next 40 years; deploying zero-emission buses in environmental justice communities over the first two years; offer youth opportunity passes up to the age of 24; set aside funding for the city to implement anti-displacement and affordable housing strategies; ensure that the San Diego Association of Governments will champion the trolley’s Purple Line; and more.