Commentary: ZIP codes predict health and National City, Barrio Logan, San Ysidro and City Heights residents are at risk

Barrio Logan is on the Equity Index as being one of the worst areas in the city with a mix of industrial and housing mixed together, photographed on Wednesday, February 12, 2020. (John Gibbins/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Environmental justice is the right of all people to live, work and play in a clean and healthy environment. It sounds so simple, but environmental racism is systemically embedded in our culture and government.

Four decades ago, communities of color began to stand up against locating polluters in their communities. From Warren County, North Carolina, to Barrio Logan in San Diego, communities were protesting. In 1982, North Carolina officials proposed to bury 60,000 tons of soil contaminated by polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs in a small-town landfill. In 1978, Barrio Logan residents fought to have the neighborhood rezoned to remove the 48 junkyards that existed near homes and schools.

In 1987, the United Church of Christ published the seminal report “Toxic Wastes and Race in the U.S.” which found that “three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.” Since then, more than 200 studies have made similar findings confirming the disproportionate impact on communities of color.

Today, ZIP code is still the most potent predictor of health. People of color are exposed to more environmental health threats and suffer more illnesses. In San Diego County, National City and the communities of Barrio Logan, San Ysidro and City Heights rank in the top 25% for overall hazards in the state. What does that mean for their health?

More asthma — children in these neighborhoods have 3-5 times more asthma hospitalizations than La Jolla children. Shorter lives — residents in impacted communities live up to 16 years less than those in the healthiest census tracts. Now, COVID-19 incidence is another deadly statistic.

Across the country, COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting Black and Brown communities. In Louisiana, Black people account for a third of the population but more than half of the COVID-19 deaths. In Chicago, Black people are 30% of the population but 44% of COVID-19 deaths. In San Diego, Latinx people account for about 34% of the population but more than 60% of COVID-19 cases and nearly 45% of deaths where the race or ethnicity of the patient is known.

This isn’t news — we’ve known about these risks for decades. In 2003, scientists studying SARS found that patients from regions with higher air pollution were 84% more likely to die than those in less-polluted areas. Exposure to air pollution, specifically particulate matter, makes people more vulnerable to respiratory distress, like that caused by the novel coronavirus. Fossil fuel combustion is a major source of particulate pollution and this data underscores the need to reduce it.

Warren County, North Carolina, sparked the environmental justice movement, as the killing of George Floyd sparked the resurgence of the racial justice movement and calls for police reform. These events were not unique — hundreds of toxic industries were permitted in communities of color just like hundreds of Black and Brown people have been assaulted by the police. Action must be taken now to address these long-standing injustices.

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U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres articulated the vision: “As we spend trillions to recover from COVID-19, we must deliver new jobs through a clean, green transition. Investments must accelerate the decarbonization of all aspects of our economy. Fossil fuel subsidies must end and polluters must pay for their pollution.”
The environmental justice path forward includes local and global action:

Transition to zero emission. Four thousand truck trips per month originate from the Port of San Diego’s freight terminals and travel through Barrio Logan and National City. The Port is considering new tenants that would add up to 7,000 more trips. It must be required to maximize its zero emission trucks with a goal of 100% zero-emission vehicles by 2030. The state will likely require 100% heavy duty zero-emission vehicles by 2035-2040 but these communities deserve healthier air sooner.

Protect community health. The Barrio Logan Community Plan must be adopted in 2020! Its 1978 plan is the oldest in the city and was derailed in 2014 by political chaos. The 2010 National City Old Town Plan corrects the zoning, provides new green space and affordable housing and must be implemented.

End “pay to pollute” rules. These lock in decades of carbon pollution, leading us into another health crisis from worsened air and climate pollution.

Nonaction is explicitly racist. In the face of data that clearly show Black and Brown people are infected at a higher rate, die at a higher rate and live in much more pollution, when we don't act, we say we don't care. Taking out ads expressing our support for Black Lives Matter is easy — reducing our addiction to fossil fuel is not, but it must be done.

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