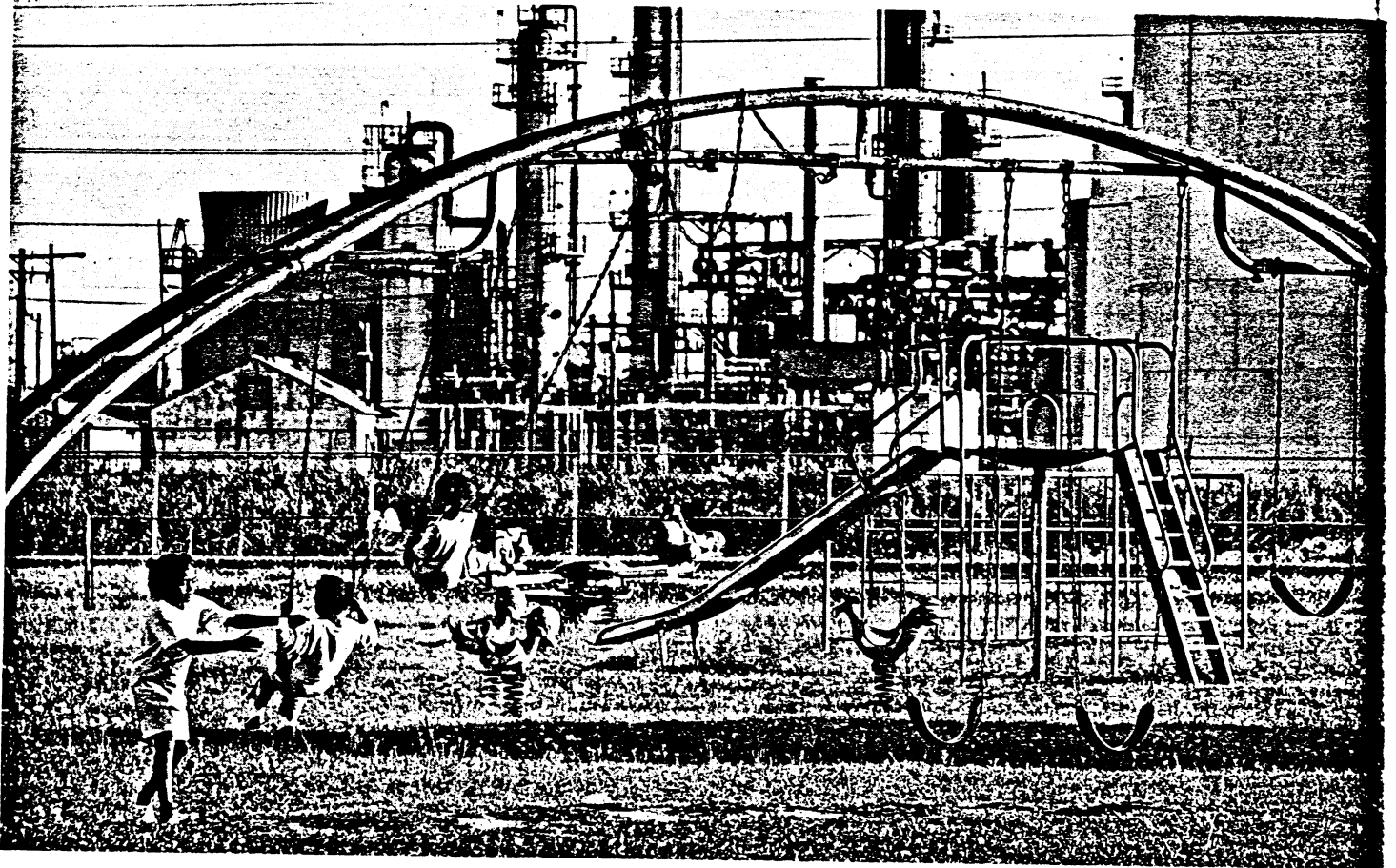


# The Issue



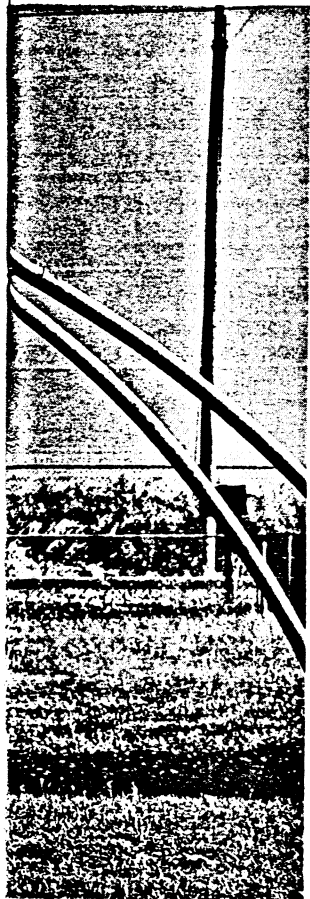
## RACE, POVERTY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

### The Disadvantaged Face Greater Risks

by Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant

Americans have tended to assume that pollution is a problem faced equally by everyone in our society. But awareness and concern about inequities in the distribution of environmental hazards have been steadily increasing. The first event to focus national attention on environmental injustice occurred in 1982 when officials decided to locate a PCB landfill in predominantly black Warren County, North Carolina. Protests very similar to those of the civil rights movement of the 1960s erupted. They led to an investigation the following year by the General Accounting Office (GAO) of the socioeconomic and racial composition of communities surrounding the four major hazardous waste landfills in the South. The GAO report found that three of the four were located in communities that were predominantly black.

The Warren County incident and the GAO report led the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice,



Housing project is cheek by jowl with oil refinery.

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disproportionate distribution to occur by chance, and that underlying factors related to race, therefore, in all likelihood play a role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. At the time the report was released, Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Executive Director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, termed the racial biases in the location of these facilities "environmental racism." Because of its national scope and its strong findings, the Commission's report became a major turning point in raising public awareness about the disproportionate burden of environmental hazards on minorities.

The striking findings of the United Church of Christ study led us to investigate whether other studies existed and to determine whether the evidence from these studies, taken together, demonstrated a consistent pattern of environmental inequity based on socioeconomic and racial factors. We also conducted a study of our own to examine the distribution of commercial hazardous waste facilities in the Detroit metropolitan area. Further, to uncover more information and focus greater attention on this issue, in January 1990 we convened the Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources. (See accompanying article.)

A question often raised is whether the bias in the distribution of environmental hazards is simply a function of poverty. That is, rather than race per se, is it not poverty that

affects the distribution of environmental hazards? And are not minorities disproportionately impacted simply because they are disproportionately poor (although one has to ask why minorities are disproportionately poor in the first place)?

Classic economic theory would predict that poverty plays a role. Because of limited income and wealth, poor people do not have the means to buy their way out of polluted neighborhoods. Also, land values tend to be lower in poor neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods attract polluting industries seeking to reduce the costs of doing business. However, the mobility of minorities is additionally restricted by housing discrimination, amply demonstrated by researchers to be no insignificant factor. Then, because noxious sites are unwanted (the "NIMBY," or not-in-my-backyard syndrome) and because industries tend to take the path of least resistance, communities with little political clout are often targeted for such facilities: The residents tend to be unaware of policy decisions affecting them; they are not organized; and they lack the resources (time, money, contacts, knowledge of the political system) for taking political action. Minority communities are at a disadvantage not only in terms of resources, but also because of underrepresentation on governing bodies. When location decisions are made, this underrepresentation translates into limited access to policy makers and lack of advocates for minority interests.

Taken together, these factors suggest that race has an impact on the distribution of environmental hazards that is independent of income. Thus, as part of our investigation, we attempted to assess the relative influence of income and race on the distribution of pollution. We did so by examining the results of those empirical studies which analyzed the distribution of environmental hazards by both income and race. We also assessed the relative importance of the relationship of income and race in the distribution of commercial hazardous waste facilities in our Detroit area study.

From our investigation, we found 15 studies that, like the United Church of

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a participant in the Warren County protests, to sponsor a nationwide study in 1987. The study used systematic and statistically analyzable data to determine whether the distribution of commercial hazardous waste facilities in minority communities fit the pattern found in the South. It found that it did. Specifically, it found that the proportion of minorities in communities which have a commercial hazardous waste facility is about double that in communities without such facilities. Where two or more such facilities are located, the proportion of minorities is more than triple.

In addition, using sophisticated statistical techniques, this study found that race is the single best predictor of where commercial hazardous waste facilities are located—even when other socioeconomic characteristics, such as average household income and average value of homes, are taken into account. The report concluded that it is "virtually impossible" for this

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Christ study, provide objective and systematic information about the social distribution of environmental hazards. A number of interesting and important facts emerged.

First, an inspection of the publication dates revealed that information about environmental inequities has been available for some time. Rather than being a recent discovery, documentation of environmental injustices stretched back two decades. In fact, information about inequities in the distribution of environmental hazards was first published in 1971 in the annual report of the Council on Environmental Quality. This was only one year after EPA was created, one year after the National Environmental Policy Act was passed, and only one year after the first Earth Day—an event viewed by many as a major turning point in public awareness about environmental issues. There were nine other such studies published in the 1970s. Clearly, it has taken some time for public awareness to catch up to the issues of environmental injustice.

It is worth noting that most of the studies conducted in the past two decades focused on the distribution of air pollution and hazardous waste. Clearly, systematic studies of the social distribution of other types of environmental hazards, such as water pollution, pesticide exposure, asbestos exposure, and other hazards are needed. Also worth noting is that these studies vary considerably in terms of scope. Some focused on single urban areas, such as Washington, DC, New York City, or Houston; others focused on a collection of urban areas; while still others were national in scope. This is important in that it reveals that the pattern of findings is not an artifact of the samples selected: Regardless of the scope or of the methodologies employed, the findings point to a consistent pattern.

In nearly every case, the distribution of pollution has been found to be inequitable by income. And, with only one exception, it has been found to be inequitable by race. Where the distribution of pollution has been analyzed by both income and race, and where it is possible to weigh the relative importance of each, in five out of eight cases race has been found to be more strongly related than has



Abandoned industry site abuts on residential neighborhood in southeast Chicago.

Jeremy Kemp photo.

income. Also noteworthy is the fact that all three national studies which looked at both income and race found race to be more importantly related to the distribution of environmental hazards than income.

In our own Detroit area study, we found that minority residents in the metropolitan area are four times more likely than white residents to live within one mile of a commercial hazardous waste facility. We also found that race was a better predictor of residents' proximity to such facilities than income.

Taken together, the findings from these studies indicate clear and unequivocal class and racial biases in the distribution of environmental hazards. Further, they appear to support the argument that race has an additional effect on the distribution of environmental hazards that is independent of class. Indeed, the racial biases found in these studies have tended to be greater than class biases.

Ultimately, knowing whether race or class has a more important effect on the distribution of environmental hazards may be less relevant than understanding how the conditions that lead to it can be addressed and

remedied. Currently, there are no public policies in place which require monitoring equity in the distribution of environmental quality. Hence, policy makers have little knowledge about the equity consequences of programs designed to control pollution in this country.

Are some groups receiving fewer environmental and health benefits than others from existing programs? Have the risks to some actually increased? If the social, economic, and political disadvantages faced by the poor and minorities are unlikely to be compensated any time soon, then proactive government policies will be needed to address the issue of environmental inequity. The distribution of environmental hazards will need to be monitored, existing policies and programs adjusted, and new programs designed to ensure that all groups share equitably in the efforts to control pollution.

A quarter of a century ago, the Kerner Commission warned, "To continue present policies is to make permanent the division of our country into two societies: one largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities, the other predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs and in outlying areas." When that warning was made, EPA had not yet been created and the nation's major environmental laws had not yet been passed. The terms "environmental racism" and "environmental justice" were unheard of. Our study and those of others indicate that current environmental policies have contributed to the division. To know that environmental inequities exist and to continue to do nothing about them will perpetuate separate societies and will deprive the poor, blacks, and other minorities of equitable environmental protection. □

Note: This article is adapted from a longer paper entitled "Environmental Racism: Reviewing the Evidence," forthcoming in B. Bryant and P. Mohai, eds., *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992).