

The Challenge of Environmental Justice for Children: The Impact of Cumulative Disadvantageous Risks

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Introduction

DO YOU REMEMBER THE TIMES WHEN YOUR MOTHER WOULD YELL, “GO OUTSIDE AND PLAY?” Or when you, your family, or friends would get to play outside until the street lamps came on? Or how about the time you watched the lizard as it climbed past your bedroom window? Well, in the past decade many young people in the United States have lost the childhood opportunity to experience nature. Consequently, children today are living in a completely different world in comparison with the world in which their parents and grandparents grew up. This is especially true for poor children of color living in urban settings.

The Children’s Defense Fund states that over 21% of children in America live in poverty. Poor families and families of color are more likely to live in communities that are situated close to high-polluting industries, hazard waste facilities, and incinerators. In addition, these families are more likely to live in substandard housing, experience poor indoor and outdoor air quality, and be exposed to deteriorating lead paint and contaminated soil within individual homes and communities. Currently, 16% of white non-Hispanic children live in poverty, compared with 41.5% of blacks and 41% of Hispanic children, and as a result these children live in communities that bear a disproportionate share of the environmental problems that occur in the United States.

The disparity in environmental contamination between majority and minority U.S. citizens is further observed in inner-city children’s use of space. Space has become a major factor in children’s daily lives. Pollution, crime, social ills such as

drug deals and gang activity, and lack of play and green spaces are just a few of the problems experienced in inner-city environments.

All of these issues combined have led many scholars to question: Are today’s urban conditions detrimental to the development of inner-city children? Have inner-city children lost access to natural areas and, subsequently, outdoor play?

Recognizing that childhood is a social construction, the purposes of this article are several: (1) to summarize the environmental justice movement, (2) to analyze the developmental contexts that many children living in inner-city communities confront, and (3) to review the consequences of environmental injustices and their relationship to the future of park management.

Environmental justice movement

The environmental justice movement in the United States began during the summer of 1978 (Bullard 1990). The predomi-

nantly African American community in Warren County, North Carolina, protested the selection of a local landfill as the site to dump soil contaminated with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). Many Warren County residents believed that the site was chosen due to perceived lack of opposition by the poor, minority residents living near the site. Warren County took the state to court twice but the federal courts rejected the suits, and hauling of the tainted soil to the landfill began in September 1982.

This gave rise to a joining of civil rights and environmental rights communities as protestors attempted to physically block the path of over 6,000 truckloads of PCB-laced soil. By the end of the six weeks of protesting, over 500 protestors were arrested, making it the first time anyone was jailed in the United States for participating in a landfill siting protest. Consequently, the issue of environmental justice was raised to the national level for the first time in the U.S.

Since this event there have been significant strides in the environmental justice movement, which was given impetus by two early empirical studies:

- In 1983, the U.S. General Accounting Office (1983) issued the report *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities*. The report examined racial and economic characteristics of communities located near four hazardous landfills in the southeastern United States. The report concluded that blacks were disproportionately represented in three of the four communities with hazardous waste landfills, and all four communities had at least 25% of the residents living below the poverty line.

- In response to the siting of the Warren County PCB dump, the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice issued a 1987 report entitled *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities Surrounding Hazardous Waste Sites*. The report found that the most significant factor for the siting of hazardous waste facilities was race, and a subsequent speech by Benjamin Chavis gave rise to the term "environmental racism."

These studies led not only to an increased production of empirical studies investigating environmental justice claims, but also led to the rise of a grassroots movement and the interaction of local, state and federal policy.

In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was held in Washington, D.C. The summit brought together local grassroots organizers and leaders from around the country dedicated to protecting people of color from unwanted land uses. With the adoption of 17 principles for environmental justice, the grassroots leaders rejected mainstream environmentalism and set forth an ideological framework that represents culture-specific political action.

In 1992, the Environmental Protection Agency issued an environmental equity document, emphasizing that impartiality should guide the application of laws. The document advocated strengthening the relationship with minority academic institutions, hiring more minorities for policy-making positions, addressing the distribution of risk in environmental risk of management, and creating a better database for tracking environmental equity issues.

However, the document also stated that the data did not support the contention that race was systematically correlated with more risk, except in the case of blood lead levels.

In 1994, the Clinton Administration issued Executive Order 12898, the "Executive Order on Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations." It directs each federal agency to develop an environmental justice strategy.

Over the past twenty years a vast array of issues—including but not limited to lead poisoning, hazard waste siting, landfill siting, national superfund sites, brownfields, contaminated fish consumption, and water and air pollution—have been the primary focus of many grassroots organization in communities of color. The understanding that poor and minority communities were disproportionately burdened with environmental contaminations in comparison with more affluent and non-minority communities has been documented extensively (Bullard 1994). The initial movement illustrated the needs of disenfranchised populations and placed environmental health in a central role in effectively fighting unjust private and public policies and management.

The framework incorporates a strategy modeled after previous social movements. The civil rights movement in particular provides a master frame that validates the struggle for rights by marginalized individuals. Environmental justice movement advocates perceive themselves as second-class citizens to whom governmental and corporate groups do not feel accountable, and claim full rights, from fair community treatment to legal protection (Capek 1993). The framework includes five principles of environ-

mental justice: (1) guaranteeing the right to environmental protection; (2) preventing harm before it occurs; (3) shifting the burden of proof to the polluters; (4) obviating proof of intent to discriminate; and (5) redressing existing inequities (Capek 1993; Bullard 1994).

Finally, a call to abolish environmental racism is also viewed as a significant element within the environmental justice frame, though it is not listed as one of the five principles. Since the environmental justice frame is built around a concept of rights, these elements are applicable to public environmental concern and to the environmental decision-making process. These elements include social issues such as the distribution of resources, the role of values in decision-making, conflict management and resolution, and the inclusion of marginalized groups and perspectives (Opatow and Clayton 1994). The elements of the environmental justice frame are unified by strong emphases on individual and community rights, the democratic process, and respect for individuals and communities. The framework also attempts to answer what contributes to and produces unequal protection. These elements are firmly grounded in fairness and in an understanding of the concept of justice in the United States.

So, what is justice? Bullard (1994) contends that "[e]nvironmental decision makers have failed to address the 'justice' question of who gets help and who does not; who can afford help and who cannot; why some contaminated communities get studied while others get left off the research agenda; why industry poisons some communities and not others; why some contaminated communities get cleaned up while others do not; and why some communities

are protected and others are not protected.” The concept of justice is viewed as a value judgment based on beliefs about the moral rightness of a person’s fate (Cvetkovich and Earle 1994; Cook 1995). Treatment by other people and applications of rules and regulations are judged to be just if appropriate standards are met. These standards are defined by supporting values and morals. In turn, these values are used to evaluate if people’s actions and other events can be justified. To understand justice is to understand something that impacts everyone’s lives.

Today, the phrase “environmental justice,” as it is currently used by grassroots environmentalists, refers to the need to distribute environmental hazards fairly across different demographic groups and to connect environmental issues with social justice concerns (Opatow and Clayton 1994). Though the environmental justice movement focuses on the disproportionate siting of hazards in low-income, minority commu-

nities, it has a deeper, more salient concern in the fair and just allocation of natural resources. The environmental justice movement emphasizes that the natural world is urban as well as wilderness. The movement also asserts that a safe and healthy environment—clean air, water, and land—is a basic right of all individuals and communities. The environmental justice movement goes beyond focusing on specific environmental hazards and represents a community-driven social movement that attempts to address all environmental issues that negatively affect people of color, tribal members, and poor community members. The movement believes that the social, cultural, environmental, and physical health of individuals and communities is at the core of ensuring that each person has the right to live in a clean, safe, high-quality environment. It has drawn attention to our nation’s most vulnerable populations—children, the elderly, the poor and other groups—who may serve as victims, and has expanded the environ-



mental justice definition to take account of places where people live, work, and play by including four interrelated environments: natural, built, social, and cultural. This new vision has dramatically expanded the discourse concerning environmental justice to include disparities in housing, transportation, food, and parks and green spaces.

Environmental injustices and child development

Research has established that the neighborhood environment exerts significant influence on child development. Children's use of neighborhood space, such as streets, parks and playgrounds, contributes significantly to their social, psychological, and physical development. Outdoor play provides opportunities for socializing with and learning from peers, physical activity (Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz 2002), and exploration and way-finding skill acquisition (Moore and Young 1978). Previous studies indicate that inner-city residents are more dependent on public parks and open space than residents of suburban and exurban communities (Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz 2002). At the same time, access to neighborhood parks and playgrounds in low-income, inner-city areas has been compromised by concentration of social and environmental risks such as crime, public use and sale of illegal drugs, and declining environmental quality.

With specific regard to constraints on park use, Taylor (1993) found that among residents of New Haven, Connecticut, parks were perceived as dangerous, drug infested, and not well maintained. In particular, women did not perceive parks as appropriate places for family recreation. Talbot and Kaplan (1992) also found that fear of danger was a deterrent to park use

among Detroit-area residents. Moore (1989) observed that fears associated with crime and road traffic among children and parents affect children's travel to playgrounds. West (1993) suggested that use of urban parks outside of one's neighborhood is complicated by having to traverse gang territory.

Barriers to greater use of neighborhood outdoor spaces hold important implications for children and adolescents' sense of personal and community identity (Morrow 2000, 2001). Therefore there is a need to increase understanding of how children perceive environmental quality and how their perceptions affect their use of neighborhood outdoor spaces.

Environmental quality of the neighborhood is also important since the leisure activities of children are more likely to occur in outdoor neighborhood spaces (Taylor et al. 1998; Moore 1989) and because there is greater dependence on public parks and open space in inner-city communities. Access to neighborhood outdoor spaces is threatened by a number of environmental risk factors such as crime, drugs, gang activity (Farver et al. 2000; Shakoor and Chambers 2001; Rasmussen et al. 2004), systemic poverty (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Bradley and Corwyn 2002), traffic dangers (Moore 1989), and pollution (Bullard 1996; Di Chiro 1996). Empirical studies have linked such factors to a range of negative developmental outcomes in inner-city neighborhoods, particularly those of minority status. For example, in a survey of 1,035 elementary and high school students on Chicago's South Side, Shakoor and Chambers (2001) reported that 70% of the students have witnessed a violent crime (robbery, stabbing, or shooting) and 46% had been a victim of one of

eight violent crimes. Farver et al. (2000) demonstrated that children's perceptions of neighborhood conditions correlate with socio-emotional functioning. In their study, children's drawings were used to assess neighborhood conditions. The amount of violent content in the drawings correlated negatively with measures of scholastic competence, peer acceptance, and behavioral content. Violent content correlated positively with external locus of control. Amount of gang activity in the drawings correlated negatively with scholastic competence and peer acceptance and positively with external locus of control. Drug use content correlated negatively with scholastic competence and behavioral conduct. Neighborhoods having high socioeconomic status associate positively with a range of academic achievement outcomes (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2002).

Conclusions

There are real consequences for the children living in inner-city areas. The cumulative disadvantageous risks faced by inner-city children allows for the introduction of a new framework that goes beyond the short-term focus on environmental justice for children by illustrating the importance of structural effects in producing social-psychological factors that may influence children's current and future behaviors. I attest that race and class status interacts with place in a unique way and creates many challenges that lead to residents experiencing cumulative disadvantages.

Consequently, the social and cultural ideology present and the built environmental setting will continue to be shaped by both a history of racial segregation and separation and a deterrent from mainstream ideals. Numerous outcomes result from the

simultaneous mediation of race, class, and place. For example, urban children are disproportionately dependent on local environmental experiences. These everyday experiences are an important aspect of the children's lives, yet the majority of the U.S. has no experience with the kinds of neighborhood contexts in which urban children reside. Add to this the fact that many maintain ties through their social network with other poor family members, friends, and neighbors, and the complication for providing safe natural resource experiences increases.

These differences mean that urban children are disproportionately introduced to negative environmental experiences according to their structural background. As neighborhoods continue to become more segregated and poverty more concentrated in urban neighborhoods, the environmental experiences may be laced with a heightened level of fear of the outdoors due to the emergence of cultural practices to restrict children's freedom through parental/guardian control, curfew, and surveillances (Outley and Floyd 2002). In addition, environmental injustices lead many parents to seek alternative play provisions within private markets for their children. Unfortunately, issues of affordability and accessibility will keep many children within the community due to lack of cultural and economic collateral.

As illustrated, children living in inner-city areas are affected disproportionately. The exposure of children to these environmental issues has the potential to affect future generations. Access to children's perspectives is significant since children are the "primary consumers" of neighborhood environments and thus are more likely to have more frequent exposure to neighbor-

hood conditions. Moreover, children and adolescents (along with older adults) are the most vulnerable to risk factors in the neighborhoods, yet historically are often neglected in urban planning and policy decisions. Children and young people are an integral

part of just and ecologically sustainable communities. Providing access to children's voices addresses the issue of incongruence and divergence between those who plan or study urban community spaces and those who actually use them.

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