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Prolonged Injustice in Urban America

Jametta Magwood, Edith Marie Williams, and Sandra Hasben Glover

ABSTRACT

Environmental inequality is the suggestion that the working class, the poor, persons of color, and ultimately the economically disadvantaged are subjected to living conditions that may prove to be hazardous both personally, professionally, and also to the infrastructure of the urban communities that these people inhabit. These injustices affect not only housing but education, quality healthcare access, and access to employment. This article investigates the distinct relationship of environmental inequalities imposed in urban communities that are promoted by a prominent institution: the government. It has been suggested that the government is primarily controlled by individuals who are incapable of identifying with individuals who are residents of these urban communities susceptible to the threat of environmental inequality. This introduces multiple questions: Are political leaders less concerned with such individuals and is this why the needed attention in these communities is positioned at the bottom of the agenda if it appears at all? This, in addition to the lack of funding distributed among these regions for improvements, demonstrates the neglect of the government and how this maintains environmental injustice in urban areas.

INTRODUCTION

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IS DEFINED 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.”¹ The goal of environmental justice is to create and improve access to opportunities for individuals living in urban communities that are comparable to the opportunities available to those inhabiting non-metropolitan areas, as well as overcome implications of environmental racism “caused by racial and economic advantages built into policy-making, enforcement, and the location of waste disposal and polluting industries.”²

In the past, the inequality that plagued urban municipalities was intensely associated with poverty yet cur-

rently, inequality is more strongly connected to the existence and authority of the affluent. Disparities in skills can account for about one third of the discrepancy in income inequity, and that skill inequity is itself rationalized by past colonization and immigration relationships. In addition, there are also significant variations in the local concentrations in different industries. This accounts for the economic and education makeup of the workforce of those industries.³

Also a social justice issue, environmental justice largely concerns the African American population. African Americans are inexplicably affected by power plant emissions because they are assembled in great urban metropolitan areas. As a result African Americans experience increased percentages of asthma and are also party to the established interrelationship of the developing world where a transforming climate endangers already frail and overly exhausted financial systems.⁴ Such conditions are not fit for living. An additional injustice is that only minimally adequate funds are appropriated to aid individuals living in these circumstances. The government along with the companies do not take or enforce the necessary precautions to limit or eliminate the hazardous conditions that they produce. Neither party is oblivious to the living conditions that this may create and both play a role in the endorsement of the environmental inequality

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patterns that exist in urban areas. The absence of real interaction, physical representation, and financial support exacerbates an already dire situation. An example of government exacerbation is Executive Order 12898, to United States federal outfits, which endorses an implementation of environmental justice that allows for the sustained production of poisonous waste, "as long as its negative effects do not fall disproportionately on disadvantaged communities."⁵ The key word in this instance is disproportionately. Secondly, there are a lack of advocates and lobbyists at the national level involved in the environmental movement sustaining a potential relationship between the powerlessness of urban communities, the empowerment of environmental injustice, and the location of the toxic facilities.⁶ This in no way demonstrates a sincere effort to eliminate such inequitable practices.

DELVING INTO THE URBAN COMMUNITY

The United States Census Bureau defines urban as "a cluster of one or more block groups or census blocks, each of which has a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile at the time."⁷ Urban communities are inundated with traffic, people, and buildings. Existing in such an environment forces compromise to occur, especially when no other option is available. The compromise is between the environment and the area's inhabitants. Ultimately, both will suffer. This is not a new phenomenon. Documented since 1983, predominantly African American communities have regularly been the direct target for the location of toxic waste facilities, locally undesirable land utilization, and environmental hazards. A possible cause for this is the cheap land that may attract the economically disadvantaged also attracts industry neighbors emitting toxic waste.⁸ Residents of urban areas have suffered at the hands of neglect of the government for as long as urban areas have existed.⁹

The Current Population Survey (CPS) obtained 2002 data showing that 51.5% of the African American population lived in the metropolitan area but inside the central city and 36% lived in the metropolitan area but outside the city area. On the contrary, 57% of non-Hispanic whites lived outside the central city but within the metropolitan area, in comparison to the 36% of African Americans, and only 13% of African Americans and 22% of non-Hispanic whites lived in nonmetropolitan areas.¹⁰ Over half of blacks live within a metropolitan area. This data exhibits extreme disproportion and distribution differences amongst different ethnicities' residential locations in the United States. Several epidemiologic examinations investigating health effects across large-scale urban areas have related many disparate health issues to the presence of air pollution from the conglomeration of industrial sources in urban areas.¹¹ Executive Order 12898 that permits the production of poisonous waste as long as its negative effects on disadvantaged communities are not excessive is a mandate that supports the results, disparate health issues, of these epidemiologic studies.

IMPLICATIONS OF AN OVERLOOKED SOCIETY

There is a lack of representation, communication, and funding between the government and communities existing under these conditions. In 1990, 53 percent of the United States' black population was located in the South. In turn, only 62 percent of the black elected officers were found in the region. Despite advancements made since the civil rights movement, blacks remain underrepresented as political officials. The presence of African Americans is also absent from policymaking committees and administration boards, including industrial and environmental regulatory agencies. The interests of all-white industrial boards, zoning commissions, and governmental regulatory bodies may take priority to those of the black community.¹²

The government has not mandated or encouraged any form of community participation in "the development of regional centers or regional meetings, such that problems and issues can be approached from a long-term perspective as opposed to multiple ad hoc solutions."¹³ There have been no aggressive campaigns to engage community involvement in the development and use of databases, and the language utilized in associated reports is not prepared in a manner for the layman to understand. The majority of economically disadvantaged areas are commonly served by neighborhood community and church-based organizations. These organizations are essential assets for community access to information and guidance on appropriate local reaction to the information. In such instances, it is essential to reiterate the applicable portion of the goal of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): "... meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development...."¹⁴ This provides elemental support on how the EPA in its effort to execute environmental justice has not achieved its objective.

One such example is Charitable Choice, a provision proposed by former Senator John Ashcroft into President Clinton's Welfare Reform Act. The primary objective of Charitable Choice was to give faith-based organizations (FBOs) the opportunity to compete alongside the broad selection of private, secular outfits "for contracts from state (and county) governments to provide social services under the block-grant funding of the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (which replaced the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program) and Supplemental Security Income program."¹⁵ This proposal had potential to improve the community since faith-based organizations were many communities' source of information and principal aid; nonetheless, this idea sparked immediate controversy and was unsuccessful.

Concerned community residents are forced to depend on the neighborhood and community-based organizations to provide the services that keep them informed on policies that affect their living environment. In addition to nonexistent community development and encouragement to participate in policy development pertaining to environmental industrial, legislative, and mercantile operations, there is little evidence of a formal voice from urban

communities in both administrative and personnel positions within environmental and natural resource agencies and authoritarian bodies at all levels of government.¹⁶ This voice needs to speak to the inequalities that the residents of the urban environment are subjected to and the inconsiderate policies implemented by local and national government.¹⁷

Communication and representation both play parts in advocating for these urban communities when large industrial corporations enter and take over communities and forget about the residents. It has been shown that corporations are strategically established in urban environments. Mounting evidence exists that the geography of commercial production has a significant impact on the urban system. Corporations using usual production technologies have a tendency to distribute their plants throughout a multiple number of places to acquire better control over their unskilled labor force.¹⁸

PURPOSELY SEGREGATING SUBURBIA FROM URBAN: THE BEGINNING OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

The United States Federal Housing Authority (FHA) was conceived to help lift the country out of the Depression, but played a central role in creating the African American urban economic depression that persists today.¹⁹ The FHA materialized from the 1934 National Housing Act as a collaborative involving the federal government and private financial and housing industry authorities as an effort to strengthen the financial system following the 1929 collapse of the stock market.²⁰ However during the first three decades of its existence the organization utilized its supremacy for the advantage of white homeowners at the detriment of the African American population.²¹ The FHA structured their program so that African Americans would not be able to purchase homes in white communities in order to maintain the homogeneity in those neighborhoods. Through the formation of relationships with lenders, land evaluators, authorities within the financial industry, and laws that mandated the exclusion of African Americans, their efforts were successful. Because African Americans were associated with risks the FHA fashioned a funding deficiency in vicinities of diverse racial composition and intentionally focused the barrage of resources to fall entirely over and into the uniform, white suburbs.²²

Zoning was one of the most important measures introduced to prevent integration and maintain control of the land. The FHA maintained that this form of control would reduce the likelihood of undesirable intrusion that could accelerate modifications in neighborhood structure.²³ The FHA was adamant that such actions were necessary because sound mortgage investments were necessary to continue to support the economy, but African Americans had been classified into a financial category where minority housing opportunities were practically abolished.²⁴ For this exact reason, there was no way to amend the original laws to rectify the minority housing situation.

FUNDING THE URBAN COMMUNITY

The principal manner in which the government has demonstrated its lack of support for improvement in urban communities is through the absence of funding. The government has neglected to realize the importance of maintaining the infrastructure of the urban communities in the United States. The Bush Administration propositioned for the deterioration of principal environmental security standards in addition to reallocating national environmental enforcement accountability from the federal government to the state government, diminished financial support in vital programs, and withdrew from executing new standards.²⁵ Funding equity is an issue that weighs greater in the realm of community development. More resources are needed to help communities in this struggle. Increasing the proportion of institutions that can aid in funding partnerships and provide a progressive legal approach and public policy advocacy is vital in this cause. Maintaining the infrastructure of the urban community is needed to uphold personal values, living standards, and to establish sustainable circumstances for continuous development.²⁶

Not only are urban communities subjected to limited funding; that which was once received has been diminished.²⁷ Additionally, programs that have provided assistance to urban residents and their communities have been drastically reduced. A prime example is New Orleans, Louisiana. Even before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the port city, its residents were aware of the class system contradictions based on race and socio-economic status. Two-thirds of New Orleans' African American population was described as either in poverty or the working poor. Historically, the city's local government made attempts to alleviate the race and class differences of its black citizens and "play levee roulette with the hurricane protection system based on the availability of federal funding."²⁸ However, there were deficits plaguing the black community before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina.²⁹ In 2005, a total of \$71 million had been eliminated from the budget of the Army Corps of Engineers of the New Orleans district and the funding for improvements and maintenance of the levees had only been slightly increased in recent years. The city had the ability to survive the storm but not the flood. In the days following the flood, millions of television viewers witnessed almost 70,000 people, majority black, trapped and suffering in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center; a real demonstration of the lingering disparities of the regions ethnic, gender, and social system disparities.³⁰

CONCLUSION

Injustice and the African American community have gone hand-in-hand for so long that some may think that this is the way things are supposed to be, and it is the accepted expectation of many families. In his article, *Insuring Inequality: The Role of the Federal Housing Administration in the Urban Ghettoization of African Americans*, John Kimble notes the following:

As African American neighborhoods in urban center expanded, the FHA redlined increasing proportions of the cities' real estate and colored most of the remaining territory yellow—signifying definite decline. At the same time, the federal mortgage insurance program enabled many of the cities' more affluent white residents to move into the new suburban developments, precipitating further decline in the value of urban real estate and exacerbating the hemorrhaging of human and financial capital out of cities. The FHA accepted the ghettoization of African Americans as the cost of insuring the American dream for white citizens.

However true this may seem, communities seem to come together to prevail against the intentional entrapment and anticipated failure introduced by governmental policies or the lack thereof.

Environmental injustice has apparently been present since the inception of neighborhoods and communities and remains today with the support of government institutions.³¹ Since the government is the self-proclaimed prevailing body, a greater force is required to overcome this momentous issue. This entails great involvement of the community and grassroots efforts. Individuals directly affected by these circumstances need to be the voices to come forward and speak out against the injustices that afflict their communities. Not only is there strength in numbers but also in power. Becoming members of local governing bodies and decision-making boards is also essential in instituting policies that affect urban residents and communities. Achieving the common goal of environmental justice does not equate to the advantaged members of society never being provided resources that supply their needs and interests, nor should the affluent and influential be obligated to swallow all of the expenses. However, any imbalanced allocation of benefits and inconveniences should support the more disadvantaged.

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