is dedicated with deep love and admiration to the memory of Allen D. Willard. We are forever grateful for the unwavering support you gave us, the pride you expressed in us, the ways you challenged us to think more deeply, your gift for filling our gatherings with humor, your quiet appreciation, and most particularly, for providing us with the most remarkable example of true, joyful, thankful, enduring love.

Sail on!

Kathleen Odell Korgen
William Paterson University

Jonathan M. White
Bridgewater State University

Shelley K. White
Boston College
As an activist-scholar, my life is devoted to advancing a sociological analysis of the world's most pressing environmental issues. I believe that such an approach is necessary because environmental activism can be effective only when guided by sociological prescriptions that take into account the interconnections between social and ecological issues. As stated by Pablo Eisenberg (1997) of Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, "Although we know that our socioeconomic, ecological, and political problems are interrelated, a growing portion of our nonprofit world nevertheless continues to operate in a way that fails to reflect this complexity and connectedness" (p. 331). As a result, the linkages among environmental abuses, poverty and economic inequality, racism, human health problems, and political-economic power are typically ignored. For this reason, I seek to develop and integrate an environmental justice (EJ) perspective into my sociological work. The notion that "not all people are polluted equal" is a central concern in my ongoing research. My quest is to uncover the root causes of environmental inequities in the United States and around the globe. Furthermore, my work aims to provide policy makers, environmental advocates, scholars and scientists, social justice activists, foundation officials, and ordinary citizens with real solutions to the ecological crisis.

**Sociological Research on Environmental Justice**

Not all people enjoy the same protection from ecological hazards. Rather, industries and government agencies regularly adopt pollution strategies that offer the path of least resistance: displacing ecological harm onto the public in ways that are politically "expedient." As a result, the less political-economic power a community possesses to defend itself, the more likely it is to suffer arduous environmental and human health problems. Throughout the United States, it is communities of color, industrial laborers, rural farm workers, immigrant laborers, and working-class neighborhoods that are being harmed to the greatest extent. A report by Cerrell Associates (1984) for the California Waste Management Board, for instance, recommends that "middle and higher-socioeconomic status neighborhoods should not fall at least within the one-mile radius of any proposed incinerator site" (p. 42). Instead, the report recommends that the state target "lower socioeconomic neighborhoods"—which they defined as primarily low-income, rural, or Catholic—because those communities had a much lower likelihood of offering opposition. In Greater Los Angeles, 91% of the 1.2 million people living in

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**References**


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**THE SOCIOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: MERGING RESEARCH AND ACTION**

Daniel Faber
Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts

In 2006, Daniel Faber was recognized as a Champion of the Earth by Salem State College and HealthLink, as well as Outstanding Environmental Advocate of the Year by the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow, a statewide environmental coalition of over 160 organizations in Massachusetts. Dr. Faber has also been awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at Northeastern University, for advancing environmental justice in Massachusetts and beyond. His book, *Capitalizing on Environmental Injustice: The Polluter-Industrial Complex in the Age of Globalization* (2008), was a finalist for the 2009 C. W. Mills Award.
close proximity (less than 2 miles) to the city’s 17 hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities (TSDFs) are people of color.¹

My own research is concerned with the disparate exposures to environmental health hazards experienced by people of color and working-class whites. This first takes the form of higher rates of “on the job” exposure to toxins used in the production process, and second as greater neighborhood exposure to pollutants emitted from nearby factories, toxic dumps, agricultural fields, transportation systems, and hazardous waste facilities. Third, unequal exposure to ecological hazards manifests as unequal enforcement or faulty cleanup efforts implemented by the government or the waste treatment industry, such as through the increased use of permanent or mobile incinerators that burn this waste in the community. For instance, government penalties for violations of Superfund hazardous waste laws in communities of color average only one-sixth ($55,318) of what they do in predominantly white communities ($335,566).² The final piece to the quadruple exposure effect comes in the form of greater exposure to toxic chemicals in the household (such as lead paint), commercial foods, and a variety of consumer products. For example, lead poisoning continues to be a leading health threat to children, particularly poor children and children of color living in older, dilapidated housing. Black children are now 5 times more likely than white children to have lead poisoning. Taken together, it is clear that people of color and working-class families experience a disparate exposure to environmental hazards where they “work, live, and play” (Bullard, 2005). This is true internationally as well (Pellow, 2007).

In 2001, Dr. Eric Krieg and I released a report on ecological stratification in Massachusetts (we updated and expanded the report in 2005). Entitled Unequal Exposure to Ecological Hazards: Environmental Injustices in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the study is unique in a number of ways. Most other EJ studies focus on limited geographical areas (such as a city), or if national in scope, analyze only one type of hazardous facility or waste site. In such circumstances, it is difficult to claim disparate exposure based upon studies of only one type of facility, or in a very limited range of communities of different sizes and populations. Most of these studies also fail to develop a method for measuring the relative severity of the ecological hazards faced by different communities vis-à-vis each other. As a result, we are left with a limited picture of the total environmental burden faced by people of color and working-class families. Our study is the first to bridge these shortcomings, and is, to date, the most comprehensive environmental justice study of any state in the country.

Our report analyzes both income-based and racially based biases in the geographic distribution of some 17 different types of environmentally hazardous sites and industrial facilities in every single community in Massachusetts. We also measure the density of ecological hazards within and between communities (i.e., frequency and severity of hazards per square mile), which allows us to consider the different sizes and populations of these communities. For instance, our study reveals that communities of color in the state average an eye-popping 48.3 hazardous waste sites per square mile. In contrast, white communities average only 2.1 hazardous waste sites per square mile. As a result, communities of color average 23 times more hazardous waste sites per square mile than white communities. We similarly analyze the total industrial emissions of carcinogens, persistent bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs), and reproductive toxins in every community in Massachusetts between 1990 and 2002. In so doing, we uncover that communities of color receive well over 33% of all the carcinogens, PBTs, and reproductive toxins released by industry (but comprise only 9.4% of all communities).

Moreover, we developed a system for ranking the cumulative environmental burden in each community. Our findings indicate that ecologically hazardous sites and facilities, ranging from highly polluting power plants to incinerators to toxic waste dumps, are disproportionately located in communities of color and working-class communities. In fact, the numbers are very disturbing: Low-income communities face a cumulative exposure to environmentally hazardous facilities and sites that is 4 times greater than high-income communities. Far worse, communities of color experience a cumulative exposure rate to environmentally hazardous facilities and sites that is over 20 times greater than white communities. We conclude that striking inequities in the distribution of these sites and facilities place lower-income families and people of color at a substantially greater health risk. In fact, a person living in a community of color is 39 times more likely to live in one of the 30 most environmentally hazardous towns in Massachusetts.


Action Based Upon Our Sociological Research on Environmental Justice

Prior to our 2001 study, the assumption among many policy makers was that environmental injustice was insignificant in Massachusetts and a problem confined to the Sunbelt and other parts of the country. Our report exploded
that myth and generated enormous statewide and national media attention, including interviews with National Public Radio, CBS News, Scientific American, the Boston Globe and Herald newspapers, local television and radio stations, and countless other media outlets. More importantly, our report fueled organizing efforts by activists and served to jump-start a lagging legislative process to adopt a draft EJ policy for Massachusetts. As stated by Veronica Eady (2003) of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), and a board member of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) at the Environmental Protection Agency,

The Faber-Krieg report . . . sent shockwaves through neighborhoods across Massachusetts where residents sensed an unfair pollution burden but did not know what to call it. All of a sudden, “environmental justice” was a widespread battle cry, not just across the state’s communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, but all across the landscape. The Faber-Krieg reported created a media splash that produced two key results. First, residents began to look closely at the draft environmental policy. . . . The Faber-Krieg report drew careful scrutiny to the draft policy not only by residents, not only by the media, but also by other states and by industry. The second key development induced by the Faber-Krieg report was that the activists demanded legislation that would in effect make an environmental justice policy adopted by the EOA applicable to state agencies across the board, not just environmental agencies. (p. 171)

Media furor surrounding our report led to intense pressure on the EOA to adopt an EJ policy, and led me to testify before the Joint Committee on Natural Resources and Agriculture in the State House on May 17, 2001. A few months later, the legislature and governor supported implementation of an EJ policy. The new EJ policy included many of the recommendations made in our report, and is now among the most comprehensive in the nation. In fact, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, who extensively cited our report in his own environmental platform during his 2005–2006 campaign for governor, is currently considering an executive order on environmental justice that would strengthen the gains already made. The executive order is being pushed for by the Massachusetts Environmental Justice Alliance, of which I am a co-founding member.

A final word: My sociological investigations tell me that organizing efforts against the procedures that result in the unequal distribution of environmental problems have limited success. Attempts to rectify distributional inequities without attacking the fundamental processes that produce the problems in the first place are largely focused on symptoms rather than causes and are only a partial, temporary, and necessarily incomplete solution to environmental injustice. We need additional policies that emphasize greater public participation in the capital investment decisions through which environmental burdens are produced and then distributed. This includes state programs and policies that mandate the phase-out of dangerous chemicals and the phase-in of safer substitutes, cleaner technologies and production processes, and a more precautionary approach to environmental problem solving.

In Massachusetts, I helped to co-found the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow (AHT), a coalition of environmentalists, public health advocates, labor unions, faith-based organizations, scientists, EJ activists, nurses and doctors, and ordinary citizens working for this more production-focused approach. The AHT has successfully won a phase-out of mercury in Massachusetts, and is advocating for a number of pieces of legislation. Among these is an Act for a Healthy Massachusetts, which would mandate the phase-out of dangerous chemicals for use by industry. Instead, businesses would be required to adopt safer substitutes for these dangerous chemicals. If adopted, we would be the first state in the country to have this type of legislation. I have also utilized my sociological training to serve as one of the architects of the Safer Alternatives bill, which I am hopeful will come up for a vote within the next year before the full legislature. But more needs to be done. As director of the Northeastern Environmental Justice Research Collaborative, I am working on new sociological research and action initiatives around climate change, globalization, philanthropy, and other environmental justice issues. The urgency of the global ecological crisis demands it of me, as it does of all sociologists.

References


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you make it a point to conserve energy? Why or why not? Has Lou Jacobson's Sociologist in Action piece influenced your thinking? If so, how might you use sociological tools to convince someone to actively fight environmental pollution and global warming? If not, why not, and what might it take for you to consider changing your energy use habits?

2. Jacobson says that his drive to combat global warming and environmental degradation stems from growing up in the heart of coal country in the Appalachian Mountains. How is this an example of his use of the sociological imagination? Can you think of a personal trouble of your own that might spur you to work for energy conservation? How do you think (a) where you live, (b) your age, and (c) your social class impacted your answer?

3. David Pellow maintains that "environmental injustices are socially created." What does he mean by this statement? What are some examples that help to prove his point?

4. Pellow describes how he works for environmental justice with colleagues all over the world. Why do you think it is essential for us to look at environmental justice as a global issue? How does the fact that we now have a global workforce (with corporations moving across national lines in search of cheap labor) play a role in the struggle for environmental justice?

5. Why did Daniel Faber's work result in "shockwaves" across Massachusetts? Were you surprised to find that environmental injustice exists in a state like Massachusetts? Why or why not? If you were a citizen from Massachusetts (or if you are), how might you use Faber's findings to work toward reducing environmental injustices?

6. What does Faber mean when he says we need a "more precautionary approach to environmental problem solving"? How might we go about achieving such an approach? How might you and fellow students take this type of approach on your campus or in your community?

7. Is there a student organization on your campus that works for environmental justice? If not, why do you think one doesn't exist? What might lead to one being created? If there is one, do you think it is having a positive impact on society? Why or why not? If yes, what makes it effective? If no, what recommendations might you make to help it become more effective? How might you, personally, contribute to such an effort?

8. Thirty years ago, few, if any, sociology textbooks contained chapters on environmental justice. Today, almost every sociologist recognizes the importance of addressing (and teaching about) the connection between social and ecological issues. What do you think brought about this change?

RESOURCES

The following websites will help you to further explore the topics discussed in this chapter:

ASA Section on Environment & Technology
http://www.envirosoc.org/

Environmental Justice/Environmental Racism
http://www.ejnet.org/eq/

EPA Climate Change
http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/

EPA Environmental Justice
http://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/

Global Warming: Early Warning Signs
http://www.climatehotmap.org/

New York Times Global Warming Page
http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/science/topics/globalwarming/index.html#

Sociosite Environment—Ecology
http://sociosite.net/topics/environment.php

Story of Stuff
http://www.storyofstuff.com/

To find more resources on the topics covered in this chapter, please go to the Sociologists in Action website at www.pineforge.com/korgensia.