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Which Came First, People or Pollution? How Race and Socioeconomic Status Affect Environmental Justice

Abstract

“Toxic Waste and Race in the United States” prompted much research and debate in the past several decades about the existence of racial and socioeconomic disparities around environmentally hazardous sites of a wide variety. Through recent advancements, many of the uncertainties about the existence and magnitude of such disparities are being resolved. At the same time, uncertainties have also existed about the causes of the disparities. Indeed, the most fundamental question - Which came first, the people or the pollution? - has yet to be satisfactorily answered. Are present-day disparities the result of a historical pattern of siting polluting facilities in minority and poor communities, or are they the result of demographic changes after siting? GIS and other recent methodological advancements are applied in a national-level analysis to attempt to answer these questions and to identify the racial, market-based, and socio-political factors that account for present-day environmental disparities.

Professor Paul Mohai was an early and major contributor to the growing body of quantitative research examining the disproportionate environmental burdens in low income and people of color communities in the U.S. A significant outcome of this early research was the organization of the historic 1990 “Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards” with colleague Dr. Bunyan Bryant. Professor Mohai also served on the National Advisory Committee to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, and was a member in the early 1990s of the “Michigan Coalition” that advised the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on environmental justice policy. He also served as a member of the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council between 2007 and 2013. His current research involves national level studies examining the causes of environmental disparities by race and income and the role environmental factors play in accounting for racial and socioeconomic disparities in health. He is also examining pollution burdens around schools and the links between such burdens and students’ academic performance and health.