

Unequal Exposures

Toxic Chemicals in Communities of Color



“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” Jeremiah 8:22

God gave us the gifts of clean air, water, and soil. Yet today, many communities of color, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, lack access to clean water, clean air and healthy, fresh food. Toxic chemicals in these divine gifts contribute to chronic disease.

Chronic disease rates, including cancer, are higher among people of color, and African Americans in particular. While diet, exercise, and genetics are factors, another factor leading to differences in chronic disease rates between Whites and other racial and ethnic groups is the unequal exposures to toxic chemicals. Chemicals can interfere with a person’s genetic code and hormones, which may predispose someone to disease. Communities of color and low-income communities are exposed to more chemicals than White middle-class or upper-middle-class communities. This disparity is due in part because communities of color are more likely to have toxic waste facilities and other polluting industries in their neighborhood than White communities even of the same income levels.¹

FOOD

Low-income urban communities lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables, especially local or pesticide-free produce.² These communities may rely on quick marts and gas stations for groceries. Some communities and churches plant their own community gardens to bring fresh produce to communities living in these “food deserts.” Communities with access to fresh fruits and vegetables can reduce risk for type II diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

But its not just about access to fruits and veggies—it is also about the qual-



ity of the produce available. Many agricultural pesticides are linked to cancer, reproductive challenges, developmental disabilities, and Parkinson’s disease.³ Some pesticides, when ingested, are “endocrine disruptors” (EDs) and can interfere with our hormones, affecting reproductive and physical development. Community and urban gardens are important avenues for getting good quality produce into urban homes and communities.

WATER

Access to clean water is vital to sustaining life. Under the Clean Water Act, water quality has improved but research suggests there are socio-economic disparities in water quality.⁴ A University of California-Davis study found that in most cases communities of color drank poorer quality water than White communities.⁵ This inequity is related to outdated piping, often made of lead, and poor sewage infrastructure. These communities often have higher rates of water pollution because of the proximity to industrial and waste sites.



AIR

Research by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that neighborhoods with the most polluted air are those with the highest percentages of African American, Latino, and Asian American residents. While low-income communities may also live in neighborhoods with poor air quality, communities of color, regardless of income, live in communities with poorer air quality than White communities of the same income.^{6,7} This is particularly true in urban areas. In every major city African Americans are more likely than Whites to be exposed to higher concentrations of air

QUICK FACTS

- African American men are more likely to develop and die from prostate cancer than any other ethnic group.⁸ Prostate cancer is linked to pesticides and BPA. BPA is an endocrine disrupting chemical(ED) found in polycarbonate plastic (labelled #7 PC), food cans, thermal receipt paper, and infant formula cans.
- Puberty age is falling across girls of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, but it's falling most dramatically among African American and Latina girls. Chemicals in pesticides, the air, and consumer goods are linked to falling ages of puberty.⁹ Children who grow up in agricultural areas and urban areas with higher levels of pollution or factories are over-exposed to these chemicals.
- Latinos and African Americans are twice as likely and Native Americans nearly three times as likely as Whites to develop type II diabetes.¹⁰ Scientists are finding more evidence that chemicals, such as glucose-altering EDs, such as BPA in canned food or phthalates in fragrances, play a role in the genesis of type II diabetes.¹¹

toxics. More than 70 percent of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air quality standards.¹² These discrepancies also translate to health disparities especially respiratory illness. In 2009, the Office of Minority Health reported that 2,300,000 African Americans have asthma, with African American women 30 percent more likely to have asthma than White women.

CONSUMER PRODUCTS

The products in the places where we work, live, pray, and play contain unregulated chemicals, including chemicals associated with chronic health problems. More than 84,000 chemicals are registered for commerce,¹³ yet the EPA has only fully tested 200 chemicals for safety¹⁴ and grandfathered in 62,000 chemicals with no testing under the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA.) New discoveries in the last twenty years, such as the effect of low-dose exposures to chemicals, is not taken into account under TSCA. These shortcomings mean that toys, cookware, and furniture can contain toxic chemicals.

Low-income communities depend more on discount, second-hand stores, or corner stores for consumer goods, which may sell older products with chemicals that have been phased out or removed from other stores by retailers, manufacturers, or local governments with stronger laws because of mounting scientific evidence of toxicity.

Some products are also marketed specifically towards communities of color. Chemicals in cosmetics (such as hydroquinone and mercury in skin lighteners, coal tar in hair dyes, and placenta and formaldehyde in hair relaxers) are one example.

WORKER JUSTICE

The prevalence of toxic chemicals also impedes our ability to ensure worker justice. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, African American men and Latinos are less likely than Whites or Asian Americans to work in management and professional fields. They instead concentrate in service, manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and transportation sectors. Asian Americans are overrepresented in the personal appearance industry such as nail salons. These jobs expose workers to more chemicals than jobs in the management or professional fields.¹⁵ According to the Blue-Green Alliance, more than 50,000 people die a year from occupationally caused illnesses such as liver cancer from manufacturing vinyl chloride, lung disease from asbestos in construction projects, and leukemia from benzene production. Other occupational exposures to chemicals increase risk of chronic or reproductive health issues such as Parkinson's disease from pesticides, reproductive challenges from phthalates,¹⁶ and asthma from cleaning chemicals.¹⁷

BEARING WITNESS IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE

"Do not fear, O Soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God." Joel 2:21-23

There is much work to do, but through our local and national efforts we can ensure justice for vulnerable populations in our human community. Find materials for education and advocacy for a just chemical policy at www.nccecojustice.org.

*Note: See www.nccecojustice.org/ejchemicalref.php for a list citations referenced in this fact sheet.