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Pollution, people of color and the poor

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Eco Catholic

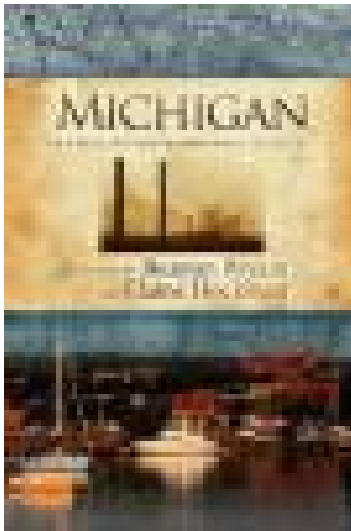
There are many arguments for why it is imperative we transition toward a sustainable future: energy efficiency, a relocalization of the economy and renewables. Often overlooked in the discussion are the deleterious impacts of pollution -- climate change, habitat destruction and resource depletion -- and the impacts here and now on the health and quality of life upon people of color and upon the poor.

The field of environmental justice questions the status quo. It makes explicit those impacts and seeks remedies on behalf of communities who may not have the resources to have their voice heard. Environmental justice is a pervasive theme of the church's social teaching. When I entered the keyword "environmental justice" on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website, I found 1,430 references.

Environmental justice is at the core of Catholic social teaching because every major environmental challenge we face, from climate change to where to put oil pipelines, impacts folk of color and the poor much more profoundly than more affluent communities. The upshot is that environmental justice addresses the pathway from environmental and the accompanying social/economic distress toward healthy environments where one can experience full economic and social participation.

New book links race, class, pollution and health

A prophetic voice in the cause of justice has been Professor Bunyan Bryant of the University of Michigan. Bunyan Bryant has been one of the national pioneers in addressing the issue of environmental racism from both an academic and public policy perspective.



Bryant has, with Professor Elaine Hockman, published a new book,

Michigan: A State of Environmental Justice? (Morgan James, publisher). In a series of essays that incorporate the power of multivariate statistical analysis, the book challenges some of the prevailing stereotype of folk who are in distressed communities:

- It isn't only African-Americans who are victimized. Latinos are more heavily exposed to pollution from industrial discharge and hazardous waste sites than their white neighbors regardless of whether they live in big cities or in small towns.
- Public health effects [i.e. low birth weight, middle-age cancers and childhood asthma] of exposure to pollution are discounted or treated as externalities in distressed communities. However, the cost to the communities is enormous. Children in these communities face so many challenges, including poorer quality schools and fewer educational resources, broken family structure, drugs and violence. But perhaps the greatest challenges they face are the health and mental development impacts of heavy exposure to environmental toxins.
- In the Detroit Area Study survey cited in the book, blacks are just as interested in and committed to healthy environments and connection to nature as their more affluent suburban neighbors, and are more concerned about the health of their local community.
- When one factors in health care costs, it is less expensive for our nation to remediate pollution sources, whether through clean-up or controls on stacks, than to do nothing.
- There is no real conflict between economic development and environmental protection. In fact, where there is clean water and clean air, real economic growth, controlling for race and class, will be much more rapid.

My involvement in the project

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I was a student of Bryant's and a collaborator with Hockman. I co-author a couple of chapters of their book.

In the chapter "The Multifaceted Nature of Pollution, Environmental Cleanup and Issues of Disparate Impact and Health," Hockman and I use a statistical modeling system known as path analysis to examine

the effects of race and class as well as different sources of pollution on the rates of middle-age cancers, asthma and low birth weight across the state of Michigan. [For purposes of confidentiality, we could only get public health data at the zip code level.] We used data of point source pollution from the state of Michigan data files and federal government. We found that race and income had both direct and indirect impacts on the likelihood of poor health impacts.

In particular:

- Some forms of pollution have a stronger relation to race and income than others. People of color and the poor are much more likely to live near incinerators than landfills.
- Of all the major pollution sources -- from toxic release to hazardous waste sites -- airborne contaminants from incinerators are associated with the highest rates of health stressors.
- There is both a direct relationship between most minority groups -- African-American, Latino and Native American -- and areas of higher density of pollution sources [particularly strong with blacks].
- All three predictive factors -- minority status, residing in polluted areas and low income -- are associated in one way or another with low birth weight, childhood asthma or middle-age cancers.
- When one breaks the minority groups into sub-groups of black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American, a direct relationship remains with at least one of the public health stressors, with the exception of Native Americans. Even with the Native American population, there is a strong indirect effect with Native Americans, showing the strongest correlation between area of residence and concentration of pollution sources.



Currently, Bryant and Hockman are looking at the correlation between the location of sources of lead in Detroit and its concentration in Head Start children who live nearby, and the health impacts on children with higher lead in their blood.

Moral implications

Beneath the myriad statistics in this and some of the other articles in *Michigan: A State of Environmental Justice?*, one reality stands out. If each child, regardless of race or class, is made in the image and likeness of God, then to turn a blind eye and accept the status quo represents a robbery from these children who, through no fault of their own, suffer the most, both now and as they go forward toward the future.

To enter life with high concentrations of lead and mercury in your system means that your life chances -- from health and life expectancy to your capacity for learning -- is greatly impaired. Poor children and children of color who can least afford further roadblocks in their life's journey toward the promise of abundant life continue to have their future stolen. The great moral challenge for the church is that this story is repeated in state after state. It is, I believe, the call of the church to advocate on behalf of those who have yet to have their voices heard at the table.

After reading *Michigan: A State of Environmental Justice?*, one no longer can drive by an incinerator or hazardous waste treatment facility without asking the question: Who is living in that neighborhood and

what are the costs to that community does that facility carry?

*"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me" --
Matthew 25:45*

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