Environmental Racism in Chicago

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In the United States, there is a systematic disparity of exposure to environmental pollution in which low-income minority groups are forced to bear the burden of associated health problems and risks. This essay will highlight the systematic ways in which marginalized groups are targeted and exploited to work and live in unsafe conditions, which ultimately impacts their overall quality of life and health. The environmental justice movement and community organized groups' goals are to target the systematic structures that allows for the continuation of inequality. Throughout Chicago's history, there have been many cases of environmental injustice and inequality in the South and West neighborhoods consisting of predominately Black and Latinx members. The treadmill of production theory and history of exclusionary zoning practices provide a framework for the two case studies of environmental justice that will be presented in Little Village and the surrounding area. Ultimately, the work done by environmental justice organizations benefit the community by reducing exposure and risk, but even the process of "greening" the neighborhood can put its members at risk for environmental gentrification and displacement.
Environmental racism is a term used to describe the disproportionate exposure to toxic and hazardous waste in low-income minority communities due to the inequality of environmental policymaking and laws (Pellow 2000 and Brulle and Pellow 2006). Environmental racism is an extension of the systematic racism that minority groups have faced in the United States throughout history. Specifically, Latinx and African Americans are at a systematic disadvantage, unable to access appropriate resources, and are put at a higher risk for health and economic disparity. In Chicago, factories and industrial manufacturing production plants are placed in predominately Hispanic and Black communities. Air, water, and ground pollution from these production facilities impede on the health of the overall community both directly or indirectly. The collective exposure to these pollutions is at much higher rate than the surrounding white-affluent neighborhoods. Improper storage of hazardous waste, illegal dumping, and lack of education and protection for the workers all contribute to unjust and unequal environmental protection. This is a human health crisis causing higher rates of asthma, cancer, respiratory illness, lead poisoning, and cardiovascular disease seen at exponentially higher rates in these communities (Brulle and Pellow 2006). The accessibility to healthcare is limited in low-income minority and immigrant communities. This, in combination with unsafe living conditions, leads to suffering of specific populations. Chicago's segregated neighborhoods allow for specific minority communities to be targeted and ultimately exploited.
Chicago is currently one of the most segregated cities in America. Discriminatory housing practices in the 1920s segregated immigrant and minority communities into sectors of Chicago that lacked job opportunities, access to education, healthcare, and inadequate housing. This put these populations at a significant disadvantage, while offering high risk jobs working with hazardous materials without proper protocol and protection in place. Exclusionary zoning practices throughout the districts persist today even after the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Figure 1 depicts the racial distribution throughout Chicago's neighborhoods (Demographics Research Group 2010). We can see that Hispanic and Black communities are located in the South and West side of Chicago, while white populations are in affluent areas of the city and the Northern suburbs. This is consistent with historical redlining of racial and housing discrimination that began in 1934 with the National Housing Act. Figure 2 is a map identifying the most at-risk populations for exposure to pollution (Lam 2018). An overlay of Figure 1 and Figure 2 depicts a clear correlation between Black and Hispanic populations and high rates of environmental pollution. The foundational history of Chicago contributes to the overall inequality seen in these communities of marginalized groups today.
The environmental movement beginning in the 1960s consisted of predominately white voices, excluding those who are most directly impacted from the negative effects (Brulle and Pellow 2006). In the 1970s, middle and upper-middle class community members used the phrase "Not in My Backyard" in opposition of industrial and manufacturing sites to be placed in their predominately white neighborhoods. Ultimately, the privilege in these affluent communities further pushed locally unwanted land use into low-income minority communities, externalizing the cost to already disadvantaged areas. The environmental justice movement emergence in the 1980s focused on the right that "all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations" (Brulle and Pellow 2006). The fight for environmental justice is just as prevalent today in 2021, especially in the city of Chicago.
The main driver of environmental injustice is capitalism and the demand for capital accumulation, ultimately at the expense of poor and minority groups. Treadmill of production theory provides insight of why this occurs and how it benefits those who hold a position of power. The treadmill of production is sociological theory that highlights how economic growth and the drive for capital accumulation force businesses to seek out innovative ways to increase capital while decreasing the cost of production. This demand is reliant on the extraction of natural resources and production of pollution harming the environment. David Pellow, Director of the Global Environmental Justice Project, has done extensive research on the sociological drivers of environmental injustice in Chicago. He developed an intersectional approach to environmental justice while highlighting the role of stakeholders' position of power (Pellow 2000). Pellow explains the power dynamic between multiple stakeholders and uneven distribution of resources which keep poor and minority groups at a disadvantage. Those in power of the industry or state drive the demand for goods while finding ways to cut cost for production or targeting specific groups that they know they can take advantage of and exploit. This forces marginalized groups to be stuck on the treadmill that allows the capital accumulation for those in power. Meanwhile, laborers are underpaid and working in unsafe hazardous conditions. This theory will provide a framework throughout my essay in the ways in which the cost of hazardous production is externalized onto minority communities. Like I mentioned previously, the systematic structure of exclusionary zoning practices segregated Black and Hispanic communities into the South and West areas of the city. This is where the preponderance of factories, coal plants, steel production plants, and other industrialized facilities are located. These systematic structures will be applied to two case studies presented over the last 40 years.
In 1995, after push from the state to increase the recycling rate in Chicago, Waste Management Inc. created a recycling program known as the "Blue Bag" (Pellow 2000). Chicago Recycling Coalition and Citizens for a Better Environment were two environmental organizations that pushed for improvement in recycling in the city of Chicago, which ultimately led to the state law that required an increase of recycling to 15% in 1994, and 25% in 1996 (Pellow 2000). Additionally, during this time the U.S. Supreme Court was investigating to see if Chicago's incinerator ash was compliant with the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, in which they found Chicago was violating this law and was not properly disposing the hazardous waste (Pellow 2000). The ash from the incinerator in Northwest Chicago was being buried in the surrounding landfills which directly violated these laws since toxic compounds could leach into the soil and water (Pellow 2000). Eventually, the incinerator closed and WMI, the company known for putting hazardous waste sites, landfills, and incinerators into predominantly minority communities, took the opportunity to start a large-scale recycling program (Pellow 2000). The "Blue Bag" program allowed households to put their recyclable material in a blue bag along with their trash that would be picked up and brought to material recycling and recovery facilities (MRRFs) (Pellow 2000). The recyclable material was then hand sorted alongside household waste. The labor force consisted of predominately African American workers that were underpaid, overworked up to 20 hours a day, and deprived of proper protection for handling hazardous materials (Pellow 2000). Frequently, workers were exposed to hypodermic needles and syringes, unregulated medical waste, and toxic and hazardous substances (Pellow 2000). This is not only a human health concern but also a concern for racial injustice in the community. The initial implementation of the Blue Bag program was backed by state officials, environmentalist groups, and neighborhood communities because WMI claimed it would benefit the environment all while providing jobs in low-income communities in Chicago (Pellow 2000). This case study of environmental racism in Chicago in the 1990s exemplifies the treadmill of production in society. WMI took the opportunity to expand in the market after the closing of their incinerator. By constructing a recycling facility, they

were allowed to continue to gain capital, despite the harms to the individuals running the production. Strategically placing the recycling plant in a predominately low-income African American community permitted WMI to underpay and overwork the employees without much initial backlash. This was a tactic frequently used by this company. The introduction of the recycling facility coincided with a period in which unemployment was at an all-time high due to job decline from large scale "deindustrialization" (Pellow 2000). Therefore, community organizations backed up the introduction of the recycling plant because it would offer jobs to a community that was suffering immensely. Additionally, the environmental organization stakeholders supported the project because of the positive contribution to overall waste reduction and increase in recycling (Pellow 2000). The innovative initiative that WMI took used methods of "greenwashing" to present a project that seemed like a win-win to the other stakeholders. Ultimately, the "Blue Bag" project was unsustainable and put already disadvantaged groups at risk, leading to the work force to riot and halt production (Pellow 2000). The workers and community presented their resistance to the unequal and unjust exploitation of workers and exposures to toxins within the neighborhood. The protests, riots, and letters written to the press expressed their concern for these unsafe conditions reached the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which fined WMI for several labor violations (Pellow 2000). This case study provides one example of the environmental racism that marginalized groups in Chicago face. Unfortunately, this incident is not isolated but does provide a basis for understanding the mechanisms which continue the perpetuation of environmental inequality. Many of the tactics used by the industry as it pertains to the presentation of large-scale industrial operations are still used today. Crawford Generating Station, built in 1924, was a coal-fired power plant in the neighborhood South Lawndale in the Southwest side of Chicago. Eventually, South Lawndale became Little Village, a predominately Latinx community. Before the formation of Little Village, South Lawndale consisted of predominately Czech and Eastern European immigrants. In the 1970s white immigrants moved from the city into the surrounding wealthier neighborhoods leaving non-white minority groups to concentrate in areas of high demand for toxic industrial development (Isaacs 2020). Mexican immigrants moved into the South Lawndale area because of reclassification zoning from the University of Illinois campus, which ultimately displaced this population into Pilsen (Issacs 2020). The coal plants located in predominately Lantinx communities were known for extensive environmental pollution affecting the overall health of the surrounding community. The Crawford Coal plant in Little Village and Fisk coal plant in Pilsen were known for their excessive smokestacks which billowed smoke clouds into the air, covering the community in soot and ash. In 2001, the NAACP scored Crawford coal plant as the worst offender of environmental justice (Isaacs 2020). The surrounding communities' concerns of exposure from the coal plant were justifiable since emissions from this site included, "3 million tons of carbon dioxide, 9,000 tons of sulfur dioxide, 2,500 tons of nitrogen oxides, and 145 pounds of mercury [a year]" (Isaacs 2020). As a result of toxic exposure to the surrounding community, a study in 2001 from Harvard School of Public Health states that Crawford was responsible for "41 deaths, 550 emergency room visits, and 2,800 asthma attacks per year" (Isaacs 2020). In 2012, the Crawford coal plant, owned by Midwest Generation, closed because they did not want to upgrade their equipment to the up-to-date standards proposed by the Clean Air Act. Prior to their closure they were using outdated equipment from pre-industrial regulations (Isaacs 2020). After the coal plant closed, a vacant lot was available for purchase, so one environmentally hazardous site was replaced for another thus exacerbating the already high air pollution. In 2017, NRG hired Hilco Redevelopment Partners to purchase the land that the Crawford plant was on in order to start a development known as Exchange 55. Exchange 55 is an e-commerce shipping warehouse for Target, home to 176 diesel trucks (Isaacs 2020). Hilco's Exchange 55 website claims to be "eco-friendly" by planting trees on site, adding solar panels on the rooftops, all while benefitting the community by providing 1,000+ local jobs to support economic growth in Little Village (Exchange 55 2020). Again, companies are "greenwashing" their mission and goals by focusing on ecological benefits to a community without addressing underlying air pollution concerns from their facility. Placing emphasis on job creation and eco-friendly missions allows industries to manipulate stakeholders, investors, and the state to back projects that are ultimately not environmentally conscious. By emphasizing social and ecological contributions, companies can bypass the disproportionate risk they are exposing the community to when presenting their projects. On April 11, 2020, Hilco began the demolition of the Crawford Coal plant, and gave last minute notice to the surrounding community. Improper protocol was used during the demolition project resulting in a large plume of dust covering Little Village. The dust was likely to contain hazardous waste from the plant including lead and asbestos. This toxic dust plume coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a virus that targets the respiratory and immune system. Chicago's Department of Public Health report of City of Chicago's Air Quality and Health Report already listed the Southwest area of Chicago as highly vulnerable to the effects of air pollution, listing them as one of the most polluted areas of the city (CDPH 2020). Health associated risk for these areas include but are not limited to asthma, COPD, lead poisoning, coronary heart disease, low birth weight, and cancer risk (CDPH 2020). Within hours after the demolition project, Fernando Cantú, a 78-year-old man who lived in Little Village blocks away from the implosion site, died. Cantú had asthma and COPD, putting him at higher risk of the negative health implications because of the toxic dust that covered his neighborhood (Camarillo 2021). Environmental justice advocates fear that the policies, laws, and regulation in place to protect minority groups from pollution are not enough (Cherone 2021). Mayor Lori Lightfoot's response to the botched demolition requires more extensive permits and regulation for future demolition projects using implosion, including a city environmental inspector coming to certify that hazardous residue is not present prior to the demolition (Cherone 2020). Hilco was fined $68,000 for 16 citations and is paying $370,000 to settle a lawsuit for their failure to protect the community members in Little Village (Cherone 2020). The e-commerce facility is not currently operating, and concern for environmental justice is at the forefront of the Little Village community as production will shortly begin. The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) is working with the community to address the environmental issues that their neighborhood faces, while advocating for legislative policies that protect their community. The closure of high polluter coal plants throughout Black and Hispanic communities improves and minimizes the exposure to toxic and hazardous wastes and pollution. With the loss of industrialized manufacturing sites, vacant land is often bought by other industries to produce facilities like the Crawford and Fisk sites. Deciding vacant land use also has the potential to put the community at risk for gentrification and displacement. Low-income communities are less likely to have private developer's purchase of land and use for the community due to lack of public or governmental investment (Maantay and Maroko 2018). Rather, larger companies come in and will buy the vacant land and convert it into to higher-end commercial or residential property. Gentrification through improving housing, bringing in new business, and renovating in low-income communities can displace minority communities as affluent white individuals begin to move into the previously vacant areas (Maantay and Maroko 2018). Additionally, a new problem emerges as environmental organizations push for increase in urban green spaces in low-income communities and begin cleaning up the communities. Urban green spaces have significant positive impact on the community's health and overall well-being (Kern and Kovesi 2018). A possible risk hindering the development of these neighborhoods is environmental gentrification. Environmental gentrification refers to the process of improving the environment of a community and "greening" of a neighborhood, resulting in the increase of local property values and displacing of the local community (Maantay and Maroko 2018). The process of improvement of the environment could include urban green spaces, community gardens, incorporating innovative green infrastructure, and cleaning up local pollution, all of which tend to attract affluent residents to neighborhoods that were previously undesired. It is necessary to provide the community with resources that many surrounding neighborhoods have already has access to, but this also can contribute to risk of displacement.

Low-income communities face challenges with food insecurity, pollution from transportation, inability to access nature, and lack of communal spaces (Kern and Kovesi 2018). Equality in the community means that accessibility issues must be addressed. Yet, there is a fine line between addressing the environmental hazardous risk to the community and risking displacement into overcrowded neighborhoods with worsened environmental conditions (Maantay et al. 2018). Often environmental groups, predominately wealthy and white, will come into low-income minority communities and contribute to the "greening" of communities. Community engagement is essential to avoid environmental gentrification while also addressing environmental equality. Improving access to jobs and the conditions of the workplace in the manufacturing facilities located in the

community can help mitigate these issues. Additionally, city investment in green transportation reduces air pollution for those in the community using public transportation to and from their employment. There is sufficient evidence of environmental injustice targeting low-income and minority communities that should be addressed in legislative policy to protect these vulnerable populations and diminish the effects of zoning and gentrification. Environmental racism is still pervasive in low-income and minority communities throughout Chicago. As local environmental justice groups fight for change in legislative policy, the continuation of industrial manufacturers fill the gaps in the economic sector in South and West neighborhoods of Chicago. Black and Latinx communities disproportionately bear the burden of environment risk and hazards associated with air, water, and land pollution. Health concerns associated with environmental pollution in an area with limitations in access to appropriate resource provides an exemplary struggle for environmental justice. The mechanisms for this cycle have been presented by the historical roots of segregated neighborhoods and exclusionary zoning while large industrial companies drive the treadmill of production. Workers are exploited because of their immigrant status and relatively low position of power and are subsequently forced to work in unsafe conditions with hazardous materials. Stakeholders that support the manufacturing and industrial facilities are being coerced through methods to create an idealized vision of what the company's goal and missions are by using eco-friendly language and persuading others with the potential to provide jobs to support the community. Meanwhile, the efforts of environmental protection within the community and improvement of pollution and quality of life can put the communities at risk for displacement due to environmental gentrification. Environmental racism is multifaceted and complex in the systematic mechanisms that contribute to inequality and the difficulties of implementing improvements to end the cycle.

Figures

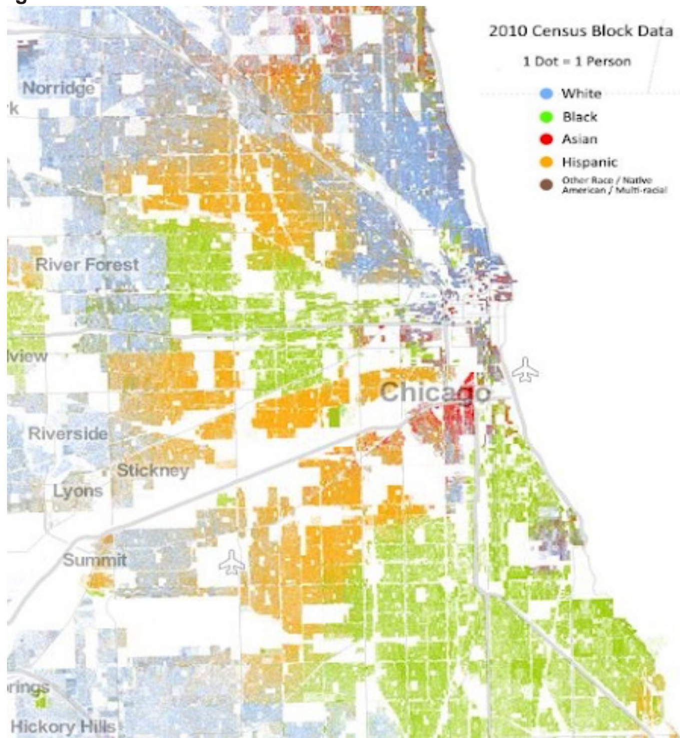

Figure 1. Map Of Racial Distribution in Chicago from 2010 Census Block Data (Demographics Research Group 2010)

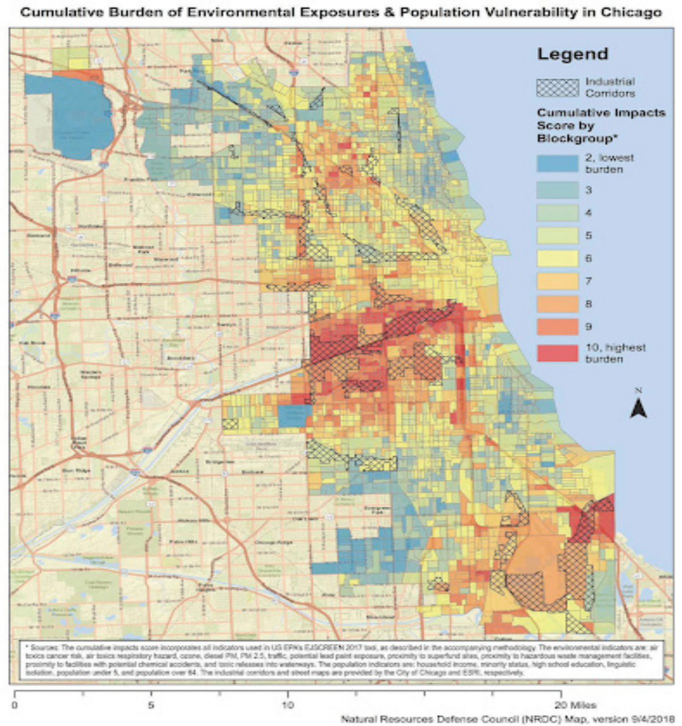

Figure 2. Map of Exposure to Environmental Risks and Hazards in Chicago by Neighborhood. (Lam 2018)