



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

## A JUST SOCIETY SUPPORTING HEALTH OF ALL RESOURCE SERIES



### ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND HEALTH

*Overtly or inadvertently, powerful entities make decisions that can, over time, allow injustice to creep into our lives and communities. These decisions can impact every strand of our existence, from our natural environment and living conditions to our very health and safety. Environmental devastation arises from structural forces that systematically disenfranchise, disempower and racially discriminate against people, leaving some of us marginalized or trapped in vulnerable situations. Often we are placed in these situations by the very systems we trust to protect us — including duly elected officials charged with carrying out duties that are mandated by societal laws. The concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice can help us understand this and make the changes needed to move toward a more just society.*

*Environmental racism is the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color. The term was coined in 1987 by the Rev. Ben Chavis Jr. to better explain the results of a study he was releasing as executive director of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. "[Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States](#)" explored the frequency and impact of hazardous waste sites being placed near or in communities of color. For the people in the study and for people today, living near a toxic waste site, breathing polluted air and/or being exposed to unclean water cumulatively affects the body's health. Pursuing environmental justice is a response to environmental racism and produces better health for all.*

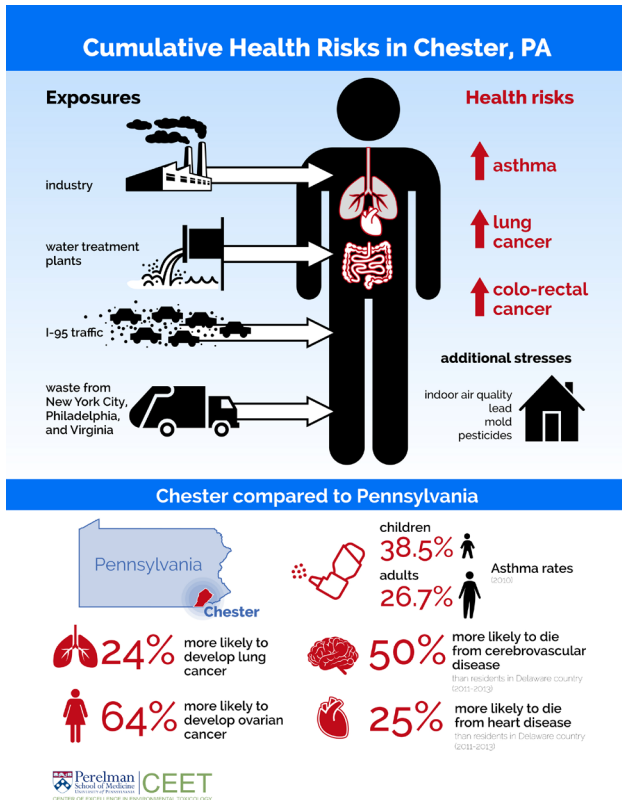
#### ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

In Chester, Penn., a [1995 study](#) conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources revealed that over 60% of children's blood samples contained lead above the action level recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Chester is a small city in the southeastern part of the state, with a population that is over 70% black. The study also examined cancer and noncancer risks from pollution sources at locations in the city, showing that these exceeded levels deemed acceptable by the EPA.

Even into the 21st century, our society continues to perpetuate systemic racial biases that result in greater health risks for people of color. [Analysis](#) of conditions in the American Northeast and mid-Atlantic indicates that people of color live with 66% more vehicular air pollution than do white residents. The study found that the chance of inhaling pollution particles from burning gasoline was 61% greater for African Americans, 73% greater for Asian Americans and 75% greater for Latinos.

The American Lung Association (ALA) reports that poor people and some racial and ethnic groups often face higher exposure to pollutants and may experience greater responses to such pollution. Air pollution, for instance, has significant [impact on the body](#). A [scenario described](#) by the ALA illustrates the devastating interplay of factors

As Lutherans, we foster "faith that is active in love, a love that seeks justice, and an insight that strives to discern what is right, good and fitting." We "join with others to remove obstacles of discrimination and indifference that prevent people from living out their callings." (Both quotes are from the ELCA's 1991 social statement *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*.) But social, economic and political inequality is acute, and indications of it abound. This series places before us the intersection of racial equity with environment, global, health, housing, hunger and migration realities. It invites us to look at obstacles and equip ourselves to advocate for a just society supporting the health of all.



Infographic visualizing 2012 data, shared with permission of CEET. [ceet.upenn.edu/target-communities/chester/](http://ceet.upenn.edu/target-communities/chester/)

poorer job opportunities; dirtier workplaces; and higher traffic exposure are among the factors that could handicap groups and increase the risk of harm. Finally, existing health conditions, behaviors or traits may predispose some groups to greater risk. For example, people of color are among the groups most at risk from air pollutants, and the elderly, African Americans, Mexican Americans and people living near a central city have higher incidence of diabetes.”

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice is a response to environmental racism, providing us a lens through which to focus on policies and practices that impact our shared world. In the ELCA social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, we, as a church that pursues justice, are called to face and address difficult social, political and economic problems, including how race and ethnicity figure in political decisions about environmental pollution (pg. 6). The task is difficult but worthy.

“Racism, both blatant and subtle, continues to deny the reconciling work of the cross,” the social statement explains. “God’s forgiveness frees us from the enslavement of racism. For some, this may mean giving up power or privilege; for others, it may mean giving up anger or prejudice. Let us know this reconciliation in our lives!” (pg. 5).

ranging from racism to class bias to housing market dynamics and land costs. First, “pollution sources tend to be located near disadvantaged communities, increasing exposure to harmful pollutants. Second, low social position may make some groups more susceptible to health threats because of factors related to their disadvantage. Lack of access to health care, grocery stores and good jobs;

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Enter your location in the Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool (link [www.epa.gov/ejscreen](http://www.epa.gov/ejscreen)). What does the data indicate about health indicators related to local environmental exposures and community demographics?
2. Where are energy generation, transportation, sanitation and wastewater facilities located in your community? Do these areas have any income level or racial/ethnic makeup distinct from the general composition of your community? What do you know about the concerns of local communities in these areas?
3. Take a moment to imagine a place you would gravitate toward for healthy rest and recharging. What is it like? What about the environment makes it appealing? Is it possible to bring elements of that space to where you and your neighbors are now?
4. Is there a health risk factor in your environment that could be addressed with better and more just policy management?

ORIGINAL POSTING: August 2020