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environmental racism in new york

by marnee meyer

Over the last two decades, asthma incidence has reached epidemic proportions in the united states. While asthma incidence has increased overall across the country, some communities have drastically higher rates of asthma than the u.s. average. Urban communities, in particular, have much higher rates of asthma than rural or suburban communities. Even within some urban communities, the rates vary by neighborhood. This is the case in New York City. Although the other neighborhoods and boroughs of NYC have high rates of asthma, they are not nearly as high as the rates in the South Bronx and Central Harlem. Children living in East Harlem are three times more likely to have asthma than children living on the Upper West Side, and 25% of children from the South Bronx have asthma. Why are residents of these neighborhoods so disproportionately affected by asthma? The answers -- environmental racism and environmental injustice.

Environmental racism/injustice is the unequal distribution of environmental risk among ethnic/racial minorities or low-income populations. Environmental racism/injustice also refers to the unequal receipt of benefits of environmental policies or the differential enforcement of environmental rules or regulations in minority communities. The issue of environmental racism was first brought to the attention of the public in 1982 when a group of protestors from Warren County North Carolina organized to defeat the construction of a toxic waste landfill. The landfill was proposed to be located in Warren County, which at the time was 84% African-American and one of the poorest counties in the state. This action ignited the environmental justice movement.

The high rates of asthma in predominantly minority and low-income communities of New York City raise suspicion of environmental racism/injustice. The community which has to date uncovered the most environmental hazards is the South Bronx. The South Bronx is predominantly African-American and Latino. Almost one half of all households have incomes below the poverty-line in the South Bronx, compared to 17% for New York City. Although the South Bronx is one of New York City's greenest and most open boroughs, it is also the site where much of New York City's waste is deposited and incinerated. Due to the less stringent zoning laws which favor heavy manufacturing use, most of the city's waste stations are located in the South Bronx. The New York Organic Fertilization Complex and the Bronx Lenox Hospital/Browning Ferris Industries Medical Waste Incinerator are both stationed in the South Bronx. More than 50% of the city's commercial waste and 30% of its overall garbage is concentrated in waste transfer stations in the South Bronx. Over 70% of New York City's sludge (from sanitation waste) is processed into fertilization at the New York Organic Fertilization Complex. Furthermore, pollution from the diesel trucks traveling on the Bruckner Expressway contributes to poor air quality in the Bronx. Many of these trucks are transporting fruits and vegetables to the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Cooperative -- an important source of employment for the area.

Environmental advocacy groups like the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition and West Harlem Environmental Action have met some success in their efforts in drawing attention

to these injustices and eliminating them from their neighborhood. Although the state and local Department of Environmental Protection did not respond to the community's concerns, the federal government did take notice. In March 1999, the U.S. Department of Justice and Environmental Protection Agency opened an inquiry into the health effects of 35 waste transfer stations in the South Bronx. Bradley Campbell of the White House Council on Environmental Quality stated, "These city and state facilities are being sited in a way that imposes on low-income and minority communities disproportionate environmental health threats." Moreover, due in part to the efforts of the environmental advocacy groups, the Bronx Lebanon Hospital closed operations in 1997, and two years later it finally dismantled the stacks of the incinerator. Although it is not being held accountable for the epidemic of asthma and other respiratory illnesses in the Bronx, the corporation is required to pay a token \$50,000 fine for the excessive emission of carbon monoxide.

While the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition has met some success, there are other environmental injustices that remain in these communities. Poor housing conditions create more allergen -- dust mites, cockroaches -- which also contribute to the high rates of asthma. And the exhaust from the Bruckner-Expressway continues to play a role in the asthma epidemic.

It is important that environmental risk factors for asthma are not ignored. If you've ridden on the subway in the last couple of months, you may have noticed a series of posters from the NYC Department of Health from their "Strike Out Asthma" campaign. The posters picture kids in very active roles -- playing baseball, jumping rope -- with text in both English and Spanish about how to "strike out asthma." The text reads, "See your doctor regularly," "Use a Spacer," "Get an asthma plan," "Learn about asthma plans." From the appearance of these posters, the "Strike Out Asthma" campaign is only about treatment and not about the environmental hazards which plague poor communities or the city ordinances which protect rich communities at the expense of poor people's health. Furthermore, this type of campaign places the responsibility on the parents and children with asthma and not on the polluters or the governmental agencies which overlook environmental racism. Asthma will not be stricken from these communities until the environmental injustices are uncovered and eliminated!

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