



Justin Roberson (left), age 6, and Mychal Adams, age 1, wait on a stack of bottled water at a rally where the Rev. Jesse Jackson was speaking about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, Jan. 17, 2016. (photo: Bill Pugliano/Getty Images)

Beyond Flint: Poor Blacks, Latinos Endure Oversized Burden of America's Industrial Waste and Hazards

By Aaron Morrison, International Business Times, 25 January 16

Elizer Lee Cruz will occasionally look out at English Station — the shuttered and corroding coal power plant sitting on an eight-acre island in the middle of Mill River — and marvel at its architecture. From Fair Haven, a neighborhood just east of the river comprising largely minority and working-poor people, Cruz and his neighbors can see the tops of four of the facility's smokestacks that stopped billowing in 1992.

“The way the bricks are laid — little blocks of cement with a circle and a lightning bolt — it was a power plant that was built to the glory of God,” he says, describing what he can see from the riverbanks. But that awe is fleeting for Cruz, an environmental activist who last year fought a plan that would have reopened the plant .

English Station, though dormant for more than two decades, still casts a large shadow. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has [condemned](#) it as a brownfield site whose grounds are tainted with polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a contaminant that causes cancer. The energy company that once owned the facility sold it to another company, and a disagreement over who is responsible for the site's neglect has delayed cleanup.

Meanwhile, Fair Haven's Latino, black and immigrant residents cast fishing lines along the river adjacent to and downstream from the power plant, where some of the marine life is already contaminated with PCBs. City and state officials [have discouraged](#) consuming certain kinds of fish that come from the Mill River, but Cruz worries that stalled cleanup of English Station is endangering some immigrant families who sustain families with their catches.

“If there is anything known or unknown that is escaping into the water, they're eating it,” says Cruz.

Because of New Haven's own history of environmental problems, Cruz is watching the ongoing scandal over Flint, Michigan's poisoned water supply with great interest. He and other community advocates are all too familiar with one of the hidden truths of American ecological injustice: People of color are disproportionately harmed by neglected environmental issues.

The Flint water crisis continues to generate headlines, but the negligence and mismanagement of public resources in largely minority communities reaches far beyond the borders of that central Michigan city. Across the country,

blacks and Latinos are more likely than whites to live dangerously close to environmental hazards.

Connecticut is among the states with the worst disparities, with a higher proportion of poor minorities living near facilities that use, store, process or emit harmful chemicals, according to the [Center for Effective Government report](#) released this month. The study suggests that, nationwide, proximity to such sites increases the risk of death, disease and other poor health outcomes in children and adults.

Activists in Connecticut say they are frustrated that the most affected populations are often not included in environmental justice conversations until the impact rises to the level of Flint.

“A rich, suburban community is not going to allow a power plant to come in their community, even though they still need power,” says Lynne Bonnett, a New Haven-based environmentalist. Bonnett, who is white, once ran the local Environmental Justice Network, a group that fought state and local officials over air quality issues in the area. While majority white, middle-income and wealthy communities enjoy relative insulation from the risks of living near hazardous facilities, a lack of political representation on environmental issues makes it more difficult for racial minorities in poorer neighborhoods to combat injustices, adds Bonnett.

With a recent focus on police violence against communities of color, national social movements have little bandwidth to address environmental injustice, says Kerry Ellington, a black New Haven activist and teacher.

“I think Black Lives Matter has a special role right now and a heavy burden to broaden the narrative of the injustices happening in black communities across America,” Ellington says, noting however that “we have to broaden the idea of what violence looks like in communities of color.”

Decades of environmental justice work inspired the Center for Effective Government’s latest review of the more than 12,500 U.S. industrial facilities that are required to report their risk management measures to the EPA. Using census and other government data, the Washington, D.C.-based group determined that people of color make up almost half of the 11.4 million people nationwide who live near dangerous facilities and are twice as likely to live in those areas as whites. Nearly 1 in 10 U.S. schoolchildren attend one of the 12,000 schools located within 1 mile of an industrial facility, or the so-called “fenceline zone.” But the disparities among poor children of color are more pronounced. Low-income Latino children, for instance, are twice as likely to live near dangerous facilities as poor white children.

That’s true for residents of Fair Haven. The towering smokestacks at English Station loom over a soccer field and basketball court located across from John S. Martinez School, a Fair Haven public magnet school of over 500 students, which is 84 percent Latino. The median household income for the Fair Haven zip code is \$35,397, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Latinos and blacks make up nearly 70 percent of the residents here and earn one-third less income compared to whites. The rate of poverty in Fair Haven is estimated at 24 percent, slightly less than the rate of poverty among New Haven’s 130,000 residents.

Connecticut has more than two dozen industrial facilities and 171,905 people living within risk zones— and nearly a quarter of them are in poverty, according to the Center for Effective Government. “Where state and local governments have limited resources or no political will to provide ... protections due to industry influence or ideological views, it is essential that the EPA step up to defend these communities’ right to a safe environment and a healthy community,” wrote the authors of the center’s report.

Flint’s water problems are more complex than simple proximity to an industrial facility. In a bid to save the financially ailing city money on its water supply infrastructure in 2014, Flint officials stopped sourcing water from a Detroit supplier that took proper anti-contamination measures. Instead, it drew from the contaminated Flint River through pipes without proper chemicals, resulting in dangerous levels of lead, E. coli and other contaminants in darkly colored and odiferous water for the city’s 100,000 residents.

For months, residents complained to state and local officials in Michigan about the contaminated water. But instead of a swift response to clean it up, officials scrambled to minimize liability and convince residents that they were safe to shower, drink and cook with the water. The true human toll of the water scandal may not be known for years, experts say. That the people most effected are black and poor is not lost on civil rights groups.

“We do know that in African-American communities the pollution levels, soil [contamination] levels and other things don’t get the attention they deserve,” says Dori Dumas, president of the [Greater New Haven NAACP](#). “Hearing this about Flint reminds us of our own community — maybe not at that level — but the same types of things are happening.”

Advocates in New Haven say educating minority populations about the environmental dangers is how they hope to spur civic and political engagement at the grassroots level. To their delight, a high school in New

Haven teaches students that air and water pollution in communities of color is as important an issue of environmental justice as access to fresh foods and green spaces.

Common Ground High School, located northwest of the city's residential neighborhoods, encourages its mostly black and Latino students to develop [solutions for environmental injustice](#) in their community, according to Joel Tolman, a spokesman for the school.

Marcel Aguirre, an 18-year-old recent graduate of Common Ground, says he wants the larger community to feel as though it has a stake in the well-being of poor blacks and Latinos. Aguirre says remedies for environmental injustice eventually cost everyone, even the rich. "One person's problem is everyone's problem."