

# The Guardian



**Interview**

## Robert Bullard: 'Environmental justice isn't just slang, it's real'

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The 'father of environmental justice' spoke to the Guardian about how the civil rights movement has spilled into environmentalism

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**R**obert Bullard is known as the “father of environmental justice” in the United States for his work in the 1970s, which highlights the burden of pollution suffered by minority communities, and his leading role as a voice against environmental racism in the 1980s.

Bullard, who has written several seminal books on environmental justice, spoke to the Guardian about how the civil rights movement has spilled into environmentalism.

## **What is environmental justice?**

It's the principle that all people are entitled to equal environmental protection regardless of race, color or national origin. It's the right to live and work and play in a clean environment.

The current situation is not equal; it's never been equal. Some people are more equal than others in the US - if you are poor, working class or a community of color, you get less protection, you get less enforcement of pollution laws.

Environmental justice isn't just a slang term for these people, it's real. If a community is located on the wrong side of the tracks, it's going to get a larger amount of pollution.

## **What are the roots of this injustice?**

It's rooted in racial discrimination in housing, land use planning and zoning. Lines of demarcation on race and class were used to confine and segregate individuals and communities. This historical pattern stands to this day.

Some communities that were considered compatible with pollution could do without amenities like paved streets, water lines and sewers. Racism and classism were major drivers with who gets what, when and how much.

In the southern US this was codified in law through Jim Crow segregation. It was legal to separate African Americans through housing and transit and allow certain industries to be permitted in certain communities. White communities could resist having pollution near them, so industries chose the path of least resistance.

The laws that codify racial segregation have been eradicated but the practices continue today, which is why you get refineries, chemical plants and landfills disproportionately in communities of color. There have been four decades of studies documenting that it's not land values or property values - the most potent variable is race. It's the driver of who gets pollution and who doesn't.

America is still segregated and so is pollution. The first major study of this in 1987 showed race is the strongest variable in where facilities are located and in 2000 we found the same thing. People of color make up 57% of residents in a two-mile radius of hazardous facilities, and make up 60% of those people who live near two polluting facilities.

The most vulnerable are the least politically connected. If you keep people of color off boards deciding the permits and if you have voter suppression, the outcomes are very predictable. You get this pattern that continues for decades. The only way to reverse that is to change the idea that communities of color are dumping grounds for pollution. Just because they are poor or a community of color, they shouldn't suffer this injustice.

## **The disparity in neighborhoods isn't just about industrial pollution, is it?**

No, it's not just pollution. Communities of color don't get a fair share of the good stuff - parks, green spaces, nature trails, good schools, farmers markets, good stores. They get less of all the things that make communities healthy and get more of their fair share of the bad stuff.

Environmental justice advocates for healthy, sustainable, livable communities that ensure tax dollars are spent on those in need rather than where the power lies. Money follows money and power. Environmental justice challenges that dominant paradigm.

## **What are the impacts of this disparity?**

The outcomes are pretty dramatic. You have elevated asthma, instances of cancer, learning disabilities. It's not difficult to see the health disparities associated with the pollution released into the air, water and ground.

Studies show that when these power plants close, the health effects show up in terms of fewer hospital visits, fewer respiratory illnesses.

In 1996, during the Atlantic Olympics, you couldn't drive for two weeks in the city, and in that time the air became cleaner, there were fewer emergency room visits for asthma attacks for children. There were immediate results.

### **The most famous example of environmental injustice would probably be Flint, Michigan, wouldn't it?**

The Flint water crisis is an obvious example of environmental justice. People were drinking contaminated water and those health effects will be forever, they will not be reversible.

The Flint crisis hit the media with a bang and got lots of attention, and deservedly so, but there are hundreds of Flints across the US - places like Newark and Detroit, because of old systems and crumbling infrastructure. Other cities looked around and saw the problems weren't isolated to Flint.

There are "sacrifice zones" - in Louisiana, with the chemical industry; south-west Detroit, with the refineries there; Philadelphia; Richmond, California; Wilmington, Delaware - all communities of color surrounded by industry.

I live in Houston, the capital of the petrochemical industry in the US. If you look at the refineries and chemical plants and look at the communities next to them, they are largely Latino and African American. The pollution suffered by these people is often ignored unless there is a disaster and people are evacuated.

### **How did you first get involved in environmental justice?**

I came to Houston in 1976 to work as a sociologist. My wife filed a lawsuit in 1978 suing this company that was planning to put a landfill in a black middle-class community in Houston and she asked me to collect information for the case. It was the first lawsuit using civil rights law to challenge environmental discrimination.

I had 10 students study this and we found five out of five landfills in Houston were located in black neighborhoods, and six out of eight incinerators were in black neighborhoods. We calculated that 82% of all solid waste dumped in Houston from the 1930s to 1978 was dumped on black communities, when black people were only 25% of the city's population.

The case went to trial in 1985 and the judge found we couldn't prove intent of discrimination but the data showed it wasn't random, it was a decision made by city council members who were all white. It got me started and I expanded this study to Dallas and found all the city-owned smelters were located in black and brown neighborhoods. I looked at Alabama and found the nation's largest hazardous waste facility was in a town that was 95% black. It was an apartheid-type system; not one county official was black.

I then expanded to look at the whole US. The issue started getting adopted by universities across the country.

I wanted to link the issue to civil rights, which is why I work with communities now to help people get informed about environmental inequality and racism's impact. Environmental

racism steals people's wealth and health. Everyone deserves to eat safe food, drink safe water, have their kids play outside safely.

### What should be done?

Communities should realize they have collective power when they vote. Our elected officials need to understand our laws and need to apply them equally across the board. No community should be seen as compatible with pollution and poison.

If we strive to eliminate racism and classism, as well as pollution and environmental degradation, then we are doing what we can to make sure communities are sustainable and livable. It takes a lot of work; it's not a sprint. But it's achievable if we view it as important.

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