

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Environmental Injustices in Communities of Color

God gave us the gifts of clean air, water, and soil. Yet today, many communities of color, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, lack access to clean water, air and healthy, fresh food. Additionally, some products either marketed towards or sold in low-income and communities of color contain toxic chemicals, including toys, cleaning supplies, cookware, and body-care products. These factors can contribute to chronic diseases later in life.

Not only are people of color disproportionately exposed to toxic chemicals, but low-income communities often times lack the financial resources to diagnose and treat disease. This fact sheet discusses how people of color are disproportionately impacted and provides ideas to combat injustice.



Food

Low-income urban communities lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables, especially local or pesticide-free produce (CDC, Beaulac et al 2009.)

These communities may rely on quick marts and gas stations for groceries. Some communities and churches plant their own community gardens to bring fresh produce to communities living in “food

deserts.” Communities with access to fresh fruits and vegetables can reduce risk for type II diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease.

What you can do for food justice

→Eat a diet filled with fresh produce and whole grains.

→Wash and peel any produce to avoid pesticides.

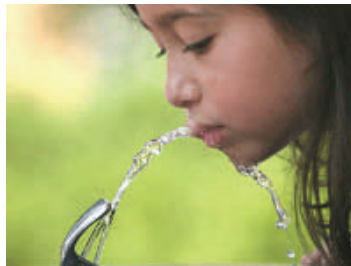
Visit www.whatsonmyfood.org to learn about pesticide exposures from fruits and veggies.

→Start a community garden at your church.

Pesticides are linked to cancer, reproductive challenges, and Parkinson’s disease. Some are “endocrine disruptors” and can interfere with our hormones,

affecting reproductive and physical development. Pesticides can also effect cognitive development. Farmworkers and communities living in agricultural areas are highly vulnerable. Roughly 85 percent of farmworkers are Latinos and four percent of farmworkers are African American.

Water



Access to clean water is vital to sustaining life. Under the Clean Water Act, water quality has improved. Yet communities with lead or cadmium piping, a limited sewage system, pesticides or run-off from chemicals leaching from industrial plants, waste facilities, or landfills may have poorer water quality. A small field of research suggest socio-economic disparities in water quality, (Venderslice 2011.) A University of California-Davis study found that in most cases communities of color drank poorer quality of water than white communities (Farzin and Grogan 2011.)

Bottled water is not necessarily safer. Some bottled water is just bottled municipal water. A 2011 study by the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine found some bottled water companies are marketing towards communities of color so that they will buy it over their practically free, and as clean or cleaner, municipal tap water.

Air

Research by the Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA) finds that neighborhoods with the most polluted air are those with the highest percentages of African American, Latino, and Asian American residents. While low-income communities may also live in neighborhoods with poor air quality, the two are not mutually exclusive. Communities of color, regardless of income, live in communities with poorer air quality than white communities of the same income (Bouwes et al. 2003.)



Quick Facts

- African American men are more likely to develop and die from prostate cancer than any other ethnic group.
- African American and white women are equally as likely to develop breast cancer. African American women are more likely to die from it.
- Puberty age is falling across girls of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, but it’s falling most dramatically among African American and Latina girls. This can predispose them to obesity and breast cancer later in life.
- Compared with whites, African Americans had 51% and Latinos had 21% higher obesity rates. Disparities are greater among women (CDC.)
- Latinos and African Americans are twice as likely as white people to develop type II diabetes.

What you can do for water justice

→Obtain a copy of your local water quality report put out by your utility company or municipality. Read this Food and Water Watch guide on how to interpret it. If you learn of poor water quality, invest in a water filter or organize a group at your church to press local officials to clean it up.

<http://documents.foodandwaterwatch.org/TapWaterGuide.pdf>.

→Be a good steward of your water. Use it wisely and consider making your own cleaning products or cosmetics products to keep toxic chemicals from getting into the water system. Recipes can be found at www.nccecojustice.org/resources.



This is particularly true in urban areas where in every major city African Americans are more likely than whites to be exposed to higher concentrations of air toxics. More than 70 percent of African Americans live in counties in violation of federal air quality standards.

These discrepancies also translate to health disparities. In 2009, the Office of Minority Health reported about 2,300,000 African Americans have asthma. From 2001-2003 African American women were 30 percent more likely to have asthma than white women. In 2007, African Americans were three times as likely to die from asthma-related disease than the white population.

What you can do for air justice

- Avoid spending too much time outside on days with poor air quality alerts.
- Contact local officials if you see or smell toxic chemicals in the air.
- Consider organizing a group in your community to monitor the air quality: <http://gcmonitor.org/section.php?id=138>

Consumer Products



The products in the places where we work, live, pray, and play contain untested, unregulated chemicals of concern. More than 84,000 chemicals are in commerce, yet only 200 have been tested for safety under the Toxic Substances Control Act. That means chemicals in toys, cookware, furniture, and even cosmetics we put on our bodies can contain toxic chemicals.

Low-income communities depend more on discount or second-hand stores for consumer goods, which may sell older products with chemicals that have been phased out of newer ones. One example is bisphenol-a (BPA) found in sport and baby bottles. BPA is linked to early puberty in girls, cancer, heart disease, and type II diabetes. While many manufacturers switched to safer alternatives in 2008, there is not a national ban. Only 20 percent of states have banned the sale of BPA bottles. BPA bottles have still been found in dollar stores.

What you can do for justice in consumer products

- Avoid indoor pesticides. Clean countertops and floors. Spray clove oil and water to avoid ants. Patch holes with steel wool to reduce mice.
- Visit the Environmental Working Group to learn about the safety of your personal care products: www.ewg.org/skindeep. Make your own at <http://nccecojustice.org/health/healthyspa.php>
- Buy toys and other children's products free of BPA, phthalates, and PVC.
- Avoid cleaning products and other products that contain chemicals banned under California's Proposition 65, triclosan, or quaternium compounds. Best to use vinegar and baking soda.

Some products are also marketed specifically towards communities of color and contain some of the most toxic ingredients in cosmetics such as hydroquinone and mercury in skin lighteners, coal tar in hair dyes, and placenta and formaldehyde in hair relaxers.

Worker Justice



Toxic chemicals are also an issue of worker justice. In general people of color and low-income people are overrepresented in manufacturing and manual labor jobs. These workers are also overexposed to chemicals. Janitorial workers come in contact with cleaning products in the air and on their skin that may increase risk of cancer and reproductive challenges.

Nail salon workers, who are mostly Asian, complain of cancer, respiratory problems, seizures, miscarriages, and birth defects from overexposure to chemicals (California Occupational Mortality Study).

What you can do for worker justice

- If you work with products that contain chemicals, ask for a copy of your MSDS sheet. See if they are available in the language you speak. If you belong to a union, see if they can help you interpret the data and help ensure safety measures are in place.
- Use protective equipment like gloves, masks, and safety goggles.
- If you suspect your workplace is not in compliance with chemical safety, seek support from your union, churches, or legal counsel.

Farmworkers, who are predominantly Latino, have higher incidences of cancer, miscarriages, rashes, and other health issues from pesticide exposures. According to the Blue-Green Alliance, more than 50,000 people die a year from occupationally caused illnesses such as liver cancer from vinyl chloride, lung disease from asbestos, and leukemia from benzene.

“Do not fear, O Soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God.” - Joel 2:21-23

There is much work to do, but through our local community and national efforts we can bring justice for all God's people and the whole of Creation. Join our movement to find educational materials and to contact your members of Congress to demand chemical policy reform to ensure chemicals are safe for the whole body of Christ. Contact us at the information below.



National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program

110 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 108, Washington, DC, 20002

www.nccecojustice.org • info@nccecojustice.org • 202-544-2350