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The United States Lead Crisis

The [Flint Water Crisis](#)¹ is arguably the most popular example of an environmental injustice in the 21st century. Flint, MI is a city in which [over 50% of its inhabitants are African American and the median household income \(between 2012 and 2016\) is around \\$25,000](#)², and the Flint crisis demonstrates what disadvantaged communities must go through in order to receive any form of retribution. For Flint, victims that ingested the toxic water will have to cope with lifelong effects such as [Legionnaires' disease](#)³. No settlement or government program to fix the ongoing crisis will subtract from the health deficiencies that lead-contaminated water imposes onto the human body. Sadly, Flint is not the only American environmental tragedy in the 21st century that has affected the poorest and most disadvantaged people in this country – many of which are people of color. In this paper, I will illustrate how in East Chicago, Indiana, lead-contaminated soil forced residents of a public housing complex to relocate is a result of negligence, and I will highlight areas with high lead contamination that do not receive the

¹ Kennedy, M. (2016, April 20). Lead-Laced Water In Flint: A Step-By-Step Look At The Makings Of A Crisis. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/04/20/465545378/lead-laced-water-in-flint-a-step-by-step-look-at-the-makings-of-a-crisis>

² U.S. Census. (n.d.). QuickFacts. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/flintcitymichigan/PST045216>

³ Legionnaires' disease. (2018, January 11). Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/legionnaires-disease/symptoms-causes/syc-20351747>

attention that Flint has, as well as identifying some causes as to why these demographically similar areas commonly fall victim to environmental injustice.

East Chicago, Indiana is 38.3% African American and 53.9% Hispanic or Latino, according to the [U.S. Census](#)⁴. Furthermore, the median annual household income is around \$27,000 – putting many of the residents at or below povertys. An [article in The Atlantic](#), explains how the West Calumet Housing Complex was built near a USS Lead refinery in 1972, and the Indiana State Health Department flagged the site as contaminated [in 1985](#)⁵, forcing the facility to close. Further testing of the areas in the 1990s and 2000s showed elevated levels of lead in children and in homes, causing the Indiana Department of Health to recommend that the EPA to resolve this issue. Later, the EPA conducted tests in 2014 and 2016 showing some areas had lead levels of 91,000 ppm in the soil and 32,000 ppm indoors. The levels of lead required to the EPA to perform a clean-up is [400 parts per million in the soil](#)⁶. These findings prompted Mayor Anthony Copeland to issue an evacuation of the West Calumet housing complex. This horrific situation shows some of the key characteristics of environmental injustices. Here, we have an example of unequal enforcement, where the implementation of regulations that are intended for the protection of communities failed to be enacted. In addition to procedural inequity, there is a clear and obvious inequality in protection from environmental harm. It is hard to imagine a situation where housing for affluent, majority white residents would be constructed so close to

⁴ U.S. Census. (n.d.). U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: East Chicago city, Indiana. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/eastchicagocityindiana/PST045216>

⁵ Reese, S. (2016, September 04). TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from http://www.nwitimes.com/timeline-history-of-the-uss-lead-superfund-site-in-e/article_eb369585-9e14-5a88-98c0-74c0fbaba5ea.html

⁶ Environmental Health and Medicine Education. (2017, June 12). Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/csem.asp?csem=34&po=8>

lead refineries and other factories. But like in many other cities across the country, poor residents of color were forced by the limitations of their class and economic situation to live in an area that contained lead levels over 200 times the level sufficient to cause for concern.

Evidence continues to show that lead-poisoning and lead contamination continue to be a reality for people of color in some of the biggest cities in the country. [Reuters completed an examination](#)⁷ of census tracts (about 4,000 people subdivisions) and zip codes in order to observe a more accurate depiction of elevated lead levels in specific areas. What Reuters found is absolutely startling. 2,606 tracts and 278 zip codes had a prevalence of lead of at least twice Flint's rate. For instance, Maryland, as a whole, showed that 2% of children had elevated lead levels. Whereas in some places in the Baltimore-area had localities with as high as 40% of the children tested having elevated lead levels. Many of the areas where lead levels are the highest tend to be near the residences of poor, disadvantaged people of color. Naturally, this demands the question – what is it about these communities that leaves the disadvantaged to such toxic conditions? [An article from Al Jazeera](#) provides some reasoning, citing a Cleveland woman named Ebony Holmes who witnessed her son Joshua's behavior change within a year because of lead exposure. Holmes stated “You have parents who don't have an idea about lead poisoning. They move in these neighborhoods where they can afford their budgets and they're not thinking about their kid's health. They're just trying to get a roof over their heads. And the sad part about is, the kids pay for it.”⁸ Here we see the inextricable link between economic class and this form

⁷ Pell, M., & Schneyer, J. (2016, December 19). Reuters finds lead levels higher than Flint's in thousands of locales. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-lead-testing/?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Social

⁸ Vohra, S. (2016, September 01). Lead poisoning in the US: 'A silent epidemic'. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/08/lead-poisoning-silent-epidemic-160828150706164.html>

of environmental injustice where people with low incomes prioritize having a place to live without any knowledge of the possible dangers of a housing situation. Additionally, Kim Foreman, who is a director of a local non-profit Environmental Health Watch, states that many poor residents fear complaining to landlords out of fear of eviction. Lastly, [a study published in 2016 by IOPscience](#) found that their results supported the theory of “sacrifice zones” – otherwise known as areas with high minority populations where toxic environmental outliers can exist and not receive attention⁹. The study goes on to say, “the ability of such facilities to impose health risk on populations with the least capacity to resist would contribute to the persistence of these patterns”. In other words, facilities are able to exist in areas where there is no pushback to their construction, most of the time being places where poor, disadvantaged, overworked citizens do not have the privilege of being able to protest the construction of factories near their neighborhoods like affluent citizens are.

In conclusion, the environmental injustices we continue to witness within our country are mostly experienced by the poor, who are defenseless in the path of harmful externalities caused/allowed by those with power, and the effects then compounded by the lack of enforcement by the government. In order to prevent more events similar to those listed above, there must be mobilization to represent and defend these vulnerable areas from abuses handed down by powerful entities and those who serve their special interests in government.

⁹ Collins, M. B., Munoz, I., & Jaja, J. (2016, January 26). Linking 'toxic outliers' to environmental justice communities. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/11/1/015004#erlaa0e28s5>