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US environmental injustice goes well beyond Flint

UN watchdog denounces structural racism and calls for reparations, systemic reforms

February 6, 2016 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The lead-contaminated water crisis in Flint, Michigan, has sparked public outrage [overdepraved indifference](#) to the lives and health of the city's majority African-American residents. The catastrophe, emblematic of environmental racism that exists within a broader context of structural discrimination, has not escaped international attention.

On Jan. 29, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on people of African Descent [issued its preliminary findings](#) after an 11-day visit to the U.S., expressing grave concern for the human rights of African-Americans. While it acknowledged some positive strides toward achieving racial justice, including criminal justice reforms on the federal and state level and passage of the Affordable Care Act, the group decried the systemic impediments to equality, noting, "the persistent gap in almost all the human development indicators, such as life expectancy, income and wealth, level of education and even food security ... reflects the level of structural discrimination that creates de facto barriers for people of African descent to fully exercise their human rights."

Environmental injustices affect poor white communities, too. But the U.N. experts [observed](#) that African-Americans are "disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards impacting their health and standard of living."

Where one lives has a significant effect on public health. Geographic location is not a matter of happenstance and [ZIP codes matter](#). According to a new report

from [the Center for Effective Government](#), people of color make up nearly half the 11.4 million people living in zones adjacent to dangerous facilities, and have nearly double the risk whites face of living near those sites. A recent [NAACP report](#) also found that 78 percent of all African-Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant, which is associated with serious health complications, such as [heart and respiratory disease and lung cancer](#).

The crisis in Flint is far from isolated. “The highest polluting industrial facilities, across a range of sectors from farming, mining to manufacturing, are more likely to be situated in poor and minority neighborhoods,” according to the U.N. experts. Louisiana’s [Cancer Alley](#), an area with significant concentration of industrial pollutants near low income and minority neighborhoods so named because of its high rates of cancer, is another high profile example. And Detroit’s predominantly black Boynton neighborhood has been described as a “[sacrifice zone](#),” where authorities continue to ignore complains by the area’s predominantly black [residents](#) about air pollution from a local oil refinery.

People of color are exposed to [nearly 40 percent more harmful airborne toxins](#) than their white counterparts. Approximately two-thirds of the 5.7 million children living within a mile of a high-risk chemical facility are from communities of color. This is further compounded by the prevalence of [food deserts](#), in which minority communities lack options for healthy and affordable food, [racial disparities](#) in access to and quality of medical care, and fewer economic opportunities.

Renters, especially those in blighted urban communities, are more vulnerable to exposure to lead or other harms disregarded by landlords more concerned with profit than livability. Marginalized communities lack the political capital necessary to demand enforcement of health and environmental codes. They are also less able to mobilize against toxic facilities in their neighborhoods and often lack the resources to move.

The ongoing disaster in Flint reinforces the need for a long overdue reckoning with the legacy of slavery and institutional discrimination and a meaningful effort to remedy it.

Unfortunately, instead of easing, racial economic inequality is getting worse in the United States. In 2013, wealth disparity between whites and blacks [reached its highest point since 1989](#). “The wealth of white households was 13 times the median wealth of black households in 2013, compared with eight times the wealth in 2010,” according to a [Pew Research Center analysis](#).

[Home ownership constitutes a significant part](#) of the wealth gap. African-Americans who have largely not enjoyed the benefit of accumulated generational transfers of wealth, along with other socioeconomic impediments, wait longer to purchase houses, and are slower to build equity. “When it comes to housing and race, there is really no such thing as chance or accident,” [Sherrilyn Ifill](#), director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said in 2014. “It’s very important to remember that if you pull the thread long enough — when we’re talking about housing and race in particular — you get to a point where actions were compelled or imposed in ways that have generational consequences that we continue to live with today.”

Disparate rates of home ownership are partly attributable to de facto and de jure government policies, including [slavery, Jim Crow, redlining and predatory lending](#). Without concrete efforts to recognize and remedy these systemic racial disparities, including through reparations, environmental injustice will continue to exact a toll on communities of color.

Existing environmental, civil rights and public health laws are not equally enforced. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency was aware of serious water quality concerns in Flint but [dragged its feet](#) in responding to local complaints. The agency’s failures reach far deeper. A 2015 study by the [Center for Public Integrity](#) found that the agency dismissed [95 percent](#) of community discrimination complaints. In fact, the EPA has not made a single finding of discrimination in 20 years.

The cumulative toll of environmental injustice is staggering. “Exposure to multiple social and environmental stressors is likely to have serious psychological, physical, educational, and labor market consequences,” according to a [2009 study](#) at the University of Colorado. These include compromised physical and mental health, failing schools and reduced job prospects, all of which undermine family stability.

Given the deeply historical and structural roots of racial inequality, the U.N. experts urged Congress to pass the [Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act](#), which seeks to create a body to “examine slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies.”

Reparatory justice is a complicated and deeply contested concept. Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates’ 2014 Atlantic essay, “[The Case for Reparations](#),” details the harrowing and irrefutable facts about the costs exacted on African-Americans by centuries of racism. His criticism of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who is vying to be the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee by touting a revolutionary agenda on income inequality, for rejecting reparations has sparked vigorous debate about the intersection of racial and class inequalities and how to surmount them. Confronting the unique experience of African-Americans does not minimize the increasing misery caused by the current economic system, which transcends racial lines, or ignore past harms to other communities, including Native Americans, who also deserve justice and equality.

Yet many Americans reflexively reject reparations because the issue often evokes the unpopular image of individual compensation. But there are other ways to repair past harms, including acknowledgement, collective remedies and reforms to limit their continuity and future consequences.

Flint is emblematic of a grave environmental injustice that is neither isolated nor ahistorical. The ongoing disaster reinforces the need for a long overdue reckoning with the legacy of slavery and institutional discrimination and a

meaningful effort to remedy it. We should start with an unflinching, inclusive and exhaustive examination of the topic.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.