Cost of Darkness: Environment Sector

By Crystani Freeman

One aspect of the environment is [environmental racism](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/alamo-sociology/chapter/reading-environmental-racism/), which refers to the burdens people of color and low-income folks face, due to the forced waste and pollution into their communities. While more affluent neighborhoods can afford to raise awareness so that they remain virtually untouched by big companies, minority groups do not have that same opportunity.

In fact, 1.5 million people of color reside in areas susceptible to contamination, [the Environmental Protection Agency estimates](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/08/climate-changed-racism-environment-south). According to Robin Saha, an Environmental Studies professor at the University of Montana: “[communities of color targeted](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/k7ev93/coronavirus-death-rates-environmental-racism) for polluting facilities, waste sites, and the like also have higher rates of cancer, asthma, miscarriages, low birth weight babies–just to name a few adverse health conditions linked to pollution.”

But the impact of environmental racism started long ago. An early environmental justice protest happened in 1982 when a [hazardous waste landfill](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/08/climate-changed-racism-environment-south) was assigned to a mainly African-American community in Warren County, North Carolina. Almena Myles, one of the protestors, conveys, “We felt we had stepped back in time like, it was the 1960s all over again and we had to fight for our rights as if it was the civil rights movement.”

Southern states are especially vulnerable to environmental degradation. In St. James Parish, Louisiana, poverty-stricken communities living along the Mississippi River have been renamed “Cancer Alley.” Here, the risk of getting cancer is [700 times](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/k7ev93/coronavirus-death-rates-environmental-racism) the average in the U.S.

Environmental racism exists in multiple aspects of a person of color’s life. *Environmental International* conducted a study in 2016, finding an association between [racial segregation and particulate matter exposure](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/the-trump-administration-finds-that-environmental-racism-is-real/554315/) for the long-term. Furthermore, the more racial segregation that persists in an area, the higher the risks minorities may suffer from contact with the pollutants.

New evidence finds a [causal link](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/k7ev93/coronavirus-death-rates-environmental-racism) between environmental racism and COVID-19. In simple terms, a community is at a higher risk of contracting the disease if their government allows big companies to release toxins and hazardous wastes into the area. The first black mayor of Greenville, Mississippi, [Heather McTeer Toney](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/08/climate-changed-racism-environment-south), suggests, “Citizens need to step into roles to protect themselves from what’s coming. The government isn’t agile enough.”

When monopolistic companies pollute, it causes harm to the environment, people, and animals. We must also remember the detrimental effect on vulnerable populations. The *Cost of Darkness* documentary further explores how environmental racism impacts communities of color.