

# Environmental Justice in Louisville

## A Community Research and Action Guide

### About University of Louisville's Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research

The Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research is dedicated to understanding the processes and conditions that create and sustain social justice globally, nationally, regionally, and locally—with a special focus on the Louisville community and the U.S. South. The institute seeks to advance understanding of the U.S. civil rights movement and to honor the humanitarian vision of longtime racial justice organizer, educator and journalist Anne Braden, whose outlook was global, but whose activism was concentrated at the grassroots level.

Our mission is to bridge the gap between academic research and community activism for social justice. To do so, we stimulate and support interdisciplinary scholarship on social movements, citizen participation, public policy reforms, and social, racial, gender and economic justice.

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## What is Environmental Justice?

There are many definitions of Environmental Justice (EJ), coming from grassroots groups, governments, and others. Most share some common ideas and are situated in a framework that values a healthy environment for all and acknowledges that disparities have occurred on the basis of income, race, and ethnicity. EJ exists when no particular group experiences more environmental hazards than others, and when environmental laws are applied and enforced with equal rigor in all communities. Environmental benefits and resources should be fairly distributed, and access to information and decision-making power should be free from discrimination.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines EJ in part as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

The 2002 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, in a meeting of grassroots groups, held that “peoples and communities are entitled to equal protection of our environmental, health, employment, housing, transportation, and civil rights laws.”

Sociologist Robert Bullard, a leading scholar-activist in this field and author of *Dumping in Dixie*, has identified some core principles for EJ:

- the right of all people to be protected from environmental degradation
- a “precautionary principle” model of public health, in which prevention of harm is a priority
- a finding of discrimination not only on the basis of intentional acts but on disparate impacts and statistical weight
- targeting action and resources toward redressing disproportionate risk burdens borne by certain communities

## Are YOU being affected?

- unequal enforcement of environmental laws
- unfair exposure to harmful chemicals, or toxins in the home, school, neighborhood, or work place
- discriminatory zoning and land-use practices
- biased or faulty assumptions in calculation, assessment and citizen decision-making input about environmental risks
- unequal access to information and services after environmental disasters

## Organizations, cont.

<b>Federation of Southern Cooperatives Land Assistance Fund</b>	<a href="http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com">www.federationsoutherncoop.com</a>	(601) 354-2750
<b>Society of Environmental Journalists</b>	<a href="http://www.sej.org">www.sej.org</a>	(215) 884-8174

## Academic Resources

<b>University of Louisville Ctr. for Environmental Policy &amp; Management</b>	<a href="http://cepm.louisville.edu/">cepm.louisville.edu/</a>	(502) 852-8042
<b>University of Louisville Ctr. for Land Use &amp; Environmental Responsibility</b>	<a href="http://louisville.edu/landuse">louisville.edu/landuse</a>	(502) 852-6388
<b>Deep South Center for Environmental Justice</b>	<a href="http://www.dscej.org">www.dscej.org</a>	(504) 816-4005
<b>Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University</b>	<a href="http://www.ejrc.cau.edu">www.ejrc.cau.edu</a>	(404) 880-6911
<b>International Directory of Environmental Justice Researchers (University of Michigan)</b>	<a href="http://meldi.snre.umich.edu/directories/ejrd">meldi.snre.umich.edu/directories/ejrd</a>	

## Governmental Resources

<b>US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)</b>	<a href="http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/policies/ej/">www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/policies/ej/</a>	
<b>EPA Office of Environmental Justice</b>	<a href="http://www.epa.gov/compliance/environmentaljustice/index.html">www.epa.gov/compliance/environmentaljustice/index.html</a>	(800) 962-6215
<b>Kentucky Department for Environmental Protection</b>	<a href="http://www.dep.ky.gov">www.dep.ky.gov</a>	(502) 564-2150
<b>Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District</b>	<a href="http://www.louisvilleky.gov/APCD/">www.louisvilleky.gov/APCD/</a>	(502) 574-6000
<b>Metro Sewer District, Louisville</b>	<a href="http://www.msdlouky.org/">http://www.msdlouky.org/</a>	(502)587-0603
<b>Indiana Department of Environmental Management</b>	<a href="http://www.in.gov/idem/">www.in.gov/idem/</a>	(317) 232-8603

# Local and Regional Resources

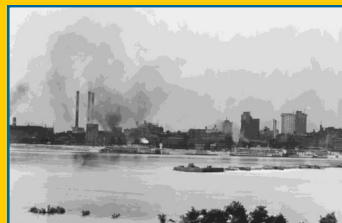
## Legal Resources

<b>Kentucky Resources Council</b>	
<a href="http://www.kyrc.org">www.kyrc.org</a>	(502) 875-2428
<b>Southern Environmental Law Center</b>	
<a href="http://www.southernenvironment.org/index.htm">www.southernenvironment.org/index.htm</a>	(434) 977-4090
<b>National Environmental Law Center</b>	
<a href="http://www.nelconline.org/index.html">www.nelconline.org/index.html</a>	(617) 422-0880
<b>Indian Law Resource Center</b>	
<a href="http://www.indianlaw.org">www.indianlaw.org</a>	(405) 449-2006

## Action Resources

<b>Kentuckians for the Commonwealth</b>	
<a href="http://www.kftc.org">www.kftc.org</a>	(502) 589-3188
<b>West Jefferson County Community Task Force</b>	
<a href="http://wjctcf.org/index.php">wjctcf.org/index.php</a>	(502) 852-4609
<b>Rubbertown Emergency Action</b>	
<a href="mailto:rvoice1@aol.com">rvoice1@aol.com</a>	(502) 551-4734
<b>Advocates for Environmental Human Rights</b>	
<a href="http://www.ehumanrights.org/index.html">www.ehumanrights.org/index.html</a>	(504) 799-3060
<b>The National Tribal Environmental Council</b>	
<a href="http://www.ntec.org">www.ntec.org</a>	(505) 242-2175
<b>Alternatives for Community and Environment</b>	
<a href="http://www.ace-ej.org">www.ace-ej.org</a>	(617) 442-3343
<b>Southwest Research and Information Center</b>	
<a href="http://www.sric.org">www.sric.org</a>	(505) 262-1862
<b>Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice</b>	
<a href="http://www.sneej.org">www.sneej.org</a>	(505) 242-0416

## Environmental Injustice in Louisville History



C&S Special Collections University of Louisville

From its earliest days as a community, Louisville has grappled with environmental injustices. For example, African Americans were often relegated to the least desirable areas to live. Even as living patterns have changed over the years, both natural and human-made environmental problems continue to disproportionately affect poor people and people of color.

With the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s, disputes arose over the negative health effects of smoke from Louisville's booming coal processing industry. Doctors associated it with lung and heart diseases and citizens nearby complained of health and fire hazards; shopkeepers saw their products ruined; and women's groups complained of blackened laundry. Industrialists and the courts saw those effects as simply the price of progress.

Another issue of the early 1900s was household "privies" that overflowed with stinking sewage, noxious and potentially dangerous methane gas, and household waste. The job of cleaning them was often relegated to African American "tubmen."

When more advanced sewage systems began to be put into place in the 1930s, the motivation was to keep basements dry and roads from flooding. People who lived downstream suffered negative impacts that others did not. Sewage from upstream communities—with waste from homes, industry, and even butchering operations—was released right above where people downstream drew their household water. Later, residents near the industrial "Rubbertown" area endured higher levels of pollution than would have been permitted in other parts of the community.

Today, residents living in parts of town with a heavy concentration of industrial sites experience polluted air and water, as well as chronic illness. Others see their neighborhoods still littered with debris long after a major storm because local clean-up policy prioritized more well-to-do homeowners. Throughout the city's history, citizens have organized and fought hard legal battles to change policies or seek redress, with varying degrees of success.

## Citizen Success: Working Together

Poor people and people of color have organized and taken action against environmental injustices in their neighborhoods. Citizen success often depends on a mix of research, legal/policy advocacy, grassroots mobilization and direct action.

One example is in west Louisville's "Rubbertown," named for heavy concentrations of oil, plastics and rubber industries from the manufacturing booms of two world wars. Rubbertown is still home to a huge complex of chemical plants that release pollutants into the air, onto the land, and into wastewaters discharged into the Ohio River or the metro sewer system. Residents suffer high levels of chronic heart or lung illnesses that they believe result from or are worsened by emissions from the plants. Foul odors often sweep the community too.

Longtime civil rights leader Rev. Louis Coleman and his Justice Resource Center (JRC) worked for years to call attention to air toxics problems in the area resulting from the highest industrial emissions in the county. Researchers from the county health department and the University of Louisville documented greater health risks there from toxic emissions—some cancer-causing—than in any other part of the county. Formed with a grant from the local health department, an advocacy group—the West Jefferson County Community Task Force (or WJCCTF)—held meetings and forums about reducing air toxics. Dissatisfied with the pace of action, JRC organized residents to form Rubbertown Emergency Action (REACT). REACT has demanded an end to the toxic pollution and empowered local residents to inform themselves and act on their own behalf through protests, public testimony, and learning to take their own air samples.

The work of WJCCTF, JRC, and REACT has resulted in several important outcomes. One is the Strategic Toxic Air Reduction (STAR) regulatory program of the Metro Air Pollution Control District. STAR—now a nationally-recognized example of how to deal with harmful, cancer-causing air pollution—requires major producers of air toxics to estimate the risks of certain emissions and to present plans for using the best available technology to reduce them. The STAR program has brought meaningful toxic reductions and survived an attempt by Rubbertown industries to repeal it. REACT leader Eboni Neal Cochran also won a

major legal victory over the companies' attempts to silence residents' demands for change.

Perhaps even more important, Louisville has become a national model for how communities use laws, research, and each other to address environmental injustice. Impacts on land and people cannot be erased, and the struggles over Rubbertown persist. Yet communities working together can stop harmful policies and unequal impacts from continuing unbridled.

### ***Taking Action and Finding Help***

**Community Organizations** — Those who work for environmental justice in their communities may or may not have formal membership in an established environmental organization. They might be parents who get active spontaneously when they realize their children's health and well-being are being disproportionately affected by issues such as pollution.

**Universities and Libraries** — Public and private schools and libraries contain books and other documents on environmental justice. You can access electronic files from databases around the world. Many universities issue cards for community borrowers to access resources. You might also find maps, almanacs, census information, and other helpful tools.

**Public agencies** — Local, state and federal governments have departments dealing specifically with environmental issues. Other departments also deal with environmental aspects of their own work. A city's planning office will inform you of local zoning regulations, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has information on entities that have broken federal environmental laws. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) grants everyone the right to access public information through open records requests.

**Researchers and Journalists** — Scholars research environmental justice locally and globally. They have documented disproportionate environmental impacts on poor communities, perceptions of diverse populations to "environmental" issues, and other relevant findings. They might work independently, or on behalf of a university institute or nonprofit organization. Some media outlets have a dedicated environmental reporter. Journalists have the added benefit of communicating with large audiences.