Environmental Justice Educational Series

Part 4: Environmental & Natural Resources Policy (ENRP)
Antiracist Policy to Create Systemic Change

"Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggles of people."

- Ibram X. Kendi

We have completed 3 EJ posts to date, and in each there is a common thread: Policy.

This is not a coincidence, as racist policies have favored the health and well-being of white communities over those of non-white, low-income communities for generations. Due to this historical environmental racism, the present-day environmental justice movement arose.

This post breaks down the term 'antiracism', provides historical examples of racist policy, and illuminates a path forward.

Picture Link

An invaluable resource, Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 book *How to Be an Antiracist,* provides the clearest language that allows us to be on the same page. With this, he starts with definitions.

Racism: A marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.

Racial inequities: When two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing, such as the difference in homeownership between white and non-white families.

Policy: Written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people.

Racist policy: Any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups.

Antiracist policy: Any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups.

Racist idea: Any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. They argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.

With this terminology in mind, let's analyze the history of redlining, discussed in our last post, and follow the thread from [policy inception to present-day](#).

The 1933 New Deal created the Federal Housing Administration to bolster homeownership during the wake of the great depression. The FHA added parameters for appraising/vetting properties and homeowners. Only select individuals and families qualified.

This led to color-coded maps which ranked loan worthiness of neighborhoods from least to most risky, or from "A" through "D." The most "risky" neighborhoods were marked in red on the map.

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A [2022 study found](#) that folks in previously D-graded areas live near nearly twice the density of oil and gas wells as A-graded, exposing residents to pollutants that cause heart disease, anxiety, depression, preterm birth, impair lung function, and more.

Over 60% of previously D-graded communities remain nonwhite

[In education](#), one study analyzed racial disparities in college attendance outcomes from the 1980s through the 2010s. Although college entrance rates increased for all racial groups, Black and Hispanic youth became increasingly less likely than their White peers to attend four-year selective colleges. In the 2010s cohort, Black and Hispanic youth were 8 and 7 percentage points, respectively, less likely than their White counterparts to secure admission to four-year selective colleges, **even after controlling for parents' income, education, and other family background variables.**

This has roots in residential segregation, where much more resource investment went into A-graded communities vs. D-graded.

Housing and schooling are intrinsically enmeshed in the United States, both in terms of education and property values. An A+ graded school has a 4-fold higher median home price than that of the lowest quality (D or less), and school attendance zone boundaries are drawn along residential assignment, a direct result of policy.

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Black and Hispanic individuals are overrepresented in the essential workforce, a direct result of inequity in educational opportunities, and face disparities in health insurance with lower access to healthcare.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the amalgamation of systemic injustices directly related to redlining were brought to a head: [During July 2020](#), Hispanic folks were 5x more likely to die of COVID than white, while Black and Indigenous folks were 3-4x more likely.

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Colorado has taken steps to implement antiracist policies.

For example, the legislature passed a bill in 2021 (HB 21-1266) to create a single definition of disproportionately impacted communities that could be used across state agencies. The bill created an Environmental Justice Action Task Force that met for a year and created a series of recommendations for lawmakers that included:

- ○ Consider the impact of future policy across agencies
  - ○ Set goals to eliminate existing health disparities
  - ○ Improve community involvement and 'participatory science'
  - ○ Emphasize the voice of tribal nations in Colorado
  - ○ Increase funding

With bill HB 23-1233, the term Disproportionately Impacted Communities (DIC) was enacted.

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The bottom line is that dismantling racist policies requires taking a look at their history and implementing *antiracist* policies. Each MENV student must look at how current policies impact their future careers and create change through education, voting, and utilize privilege to amplify voices of those impacted by racist policies.

More reads:

1. *The Color of Law* by Richard Rothstein
2. *Is Science Enough?: Forty Critical Questions About Climate Justice,* by Aviva Chomsky

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