

# Violence and racism shape views of environmental issues

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People living in marginalized communities in St. Louis, particularly African Americans, have been enduring, as one study participant said, "real problems" such as violence and racism that are perceived as more

immediate than issues of climate change, finds a study from the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

"We suggest that threats like violence and racism play a significant role in shaping people's awareness of, and engagement with, environmental issues," said Joonmo Kang, a doctoral student at the Brown School and first author of the study, "'Let's Talk About the Real Issue': Localized Perceptions of Environment and Implications for Ecosocial Work Practice." The study was recently published in the *Journal of Community Practice*.

"These imminent threats must be addressed alongside efforts to draw attention to environmental issues," Kang said. "Despite this prioritization of violence and racism on the part of community residents, many of our participants applied an environmental justice lens to their experiences."

While this finding echoes the history of violence and racism in St. Louis, Kang said, the study suggests that "this degree of alertness could serve as an opportunity in mobilizing in the face of these types of threats."

Kang and co-authors Vanessa Fabbre and Christine Ekenga, both assistant professors at the Brown School, argue that ecological social work practice should incorporate localized perceptions of an environmental justice perspective in any education or community mobilization for environmental decision-making.

Stemming from calls to attend to localized perceptions of environmental issues, the study investigated how residents living in socio-economically challenged communities in St. Louis perceive and make meaning of their local environmental conditions, such as air, water and climate, and risks, especially with respect to their health and well-being.

The authors conducted interviews with residents on the north sides of

both the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County.

"Participants' perspectives reverberated the long history of racial inequality in St. Louis and demonstrated an awareness of environmental injustice and disproportionate health risks for African Americans," Kang said. "Although they did not immediately see environmental issues like air pollution or climate change as having a direct impacts on their lives, they were sensitive to race-based environmental injustices."

Particularly in places like St. Louis, where, Kang said, "racism informs the realities of people's daily lives and the meanings people generate with respect to environmental issues," social workers who are "knowledgeable about [racism](#) and environmental justice are well-positioned to carry out ecosocial work practice," he said.

**More information:** Joonmo Kang et al. "Let's talk about the real issue": localized perceptions of environment and implications for ecosocial work practice, *Journal of Community Practice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/10705422.2019.1657218](#)

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