

Your holiday trash could be contributing to environmental injustice

November 18 2021, by Radhika Iyengar



Credit: [Jonathan Cutrer](#)

The past few weeks have been hectic. Almost every week we had a party at home. Usually, Diwali celebrations continue for a month. Families invite other families for lavish meals, show off their beautiful saris, and

kids go to sleep very late—I mean VERY late. Thanksgiving is around the corner, and then we have the December holidays with the New Year. Many more parties are in stock, with lots of rushed visits to Whole Foods.

Unfortunately, parties also invite full trash cans and lots of food waste. This includes plastic ware that is widely used. After all, Costco gives an excellent deal on cheap plasticware that almost looks like metal. The silver border on the plates adds a touch of elegance. Plastic wine glasses, plastic "shot" glasses, water in plastic cups, small water bottles ... big trash bags conveniently carry all this garbage from our big houses to someplace we have never visited. There is no cap on the number of trash cans so that any household can have one, two, three, four, or even five. Millburn, where I live, is a very sought after town, and the prestige, good school district, and accessible community to NYC come with hefty taxes. Residents dutifully pay taxes that cover the garbage disposal service.

The convenience of disposing of all this garbage comes with a big environmental justice question mark. An eye-opener for me was the documentary "[The Sacrifice Zone](#)" from the Ironbound community in Newark. All these tons of garbage from my beautiful town next to the most pristine forest reserve go to Newark to get incinerated. There, residents have been fighting a long battle with incineration companies because of the increasing prevalence of cancerous pollutants in the air. Recently they held a protest to gather some momentum on the topic.

It is no coincidence that the garbage from a predominantly white (65%) community like Millburn is dumped in a low-income community predominantly populated by people of color. According to The New School's [research](#), 80% of the incinerators in the U.S. are located in income communities and/or communities of color. The article quotes Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, saying, "New Jersey's

facilities are in the Ironbound area of Newark, not in Short Hills, Union County's incinerator is in the only Black community of Rahway and South Jersey's facility is in Westville, not Haddonfield." There have also been increasing voices in Millburn's local media pointing out that Millburn's garbage is burned just 10 miles away from us, and thus we are not saved from the air pollution from the burning of the garbage.

The protests in the Ironbound community resonate with the [grassroots protests that the U.S. has seen in the past](#). One of the first accounts of grassroots movement was the Black garbage workers in Memphis striking to demand [equal pay](#) and better work conditions in 1968. Another landmark event was in 1979 by African American homeowners in Houston who were fighting to keep a sanitary landfill out of their suburban middle-income neighborhood. The first large-scale environmental justice movement was in 1982 in Warren County, North Carolina, when 500 arrests were made on a PCB landfill issue. This was the first time "environmental racism" was coined. The protests also led the Commission for Racial Justice in 1987, which correlated waste facility sites and demographic characteristics. Race, more than any other factor, determined dumping grounds. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, many grassroots movements [fought against corporate polluters](#) and government inefficiencies. It looks like we haven't learned from these pasts events and instead continue to be perpetrators of injustices.

What are some steps that will help to deliver environmental justice? Here are a few ideas, some of which are already underway in Millburn.

Firstly, the town has started its own composting pilot where residents are asked to bring their organic waste to a township facility. Residents could benefit from this initiative and reduce their trash. [More here](#).

Second, residents could do their own composting by getting a composter unit readily available in the market, or pay a company such as Java

Compost to take it.

Third, schools need to start composting and separating food in the cafeteria. Education is key to learning about composting and its importance.

Fourth, schools should also teach about environmental justice relating to their neighborhoods. Simply composting without knowing the bigger picture is like putting a Band-Aid on a serious wound. [Here](#) is an example of a project led by NJ students regarding the impact of a school on the environment.

Fifth, a "pay as you throw" tax on additional bins will make residents think twice about throwing away more waste. It has been tried in [other counties](#) as well. Maybe Millburn could take the lead from them.

Remember that trash disposal is never free. The cost could be in terms of your health, or someone else's.

These steps may seem a small step in the right direction. But they are significant steps towards solving a bigger problem. Let us look at the bigger picture. Methane is a big problem. Methane comes from landfills, agriculture, and the energy industry, and it is the second-largest contributor to global warming after carbon dioxide. According to [this article](#), "cutting methane is the fastest, most effective way to slow down warming now." The article reports, "When methane goes directly into the atmosphere, instead of being burned, it is 80 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide over the first 20 years. "

One of COP26's most promising steps has been 100 countries joining the U.S. and E.U.-led coalition to cut 30% of methane emissions by 2030 injected. We can also cut down on methane at the local level, while helping to create a more environmentally just society.

In order to build a socially and environmentally just society, we need to level and reduce our emissions across the board. It starts with each community becoming more responsible about the waste it generates.

This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University
<http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu>.

Provided by Earth Institute at Columbia University

Citation: Your holiday trash could be contributing to environmental injustice (2021, November 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-holiday-trash-contributing-environmental-injustice.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--