

Few Americans see race as key factor in environmental inequality

April 13 2022, by Sara Zaske



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Only 33% of U.S. households believe that Black people are more likely to experience environmental pollution and that this well-documented inequality is unfair, a Washington State University study has found.

A nationally [representative survey](#) of 1,000 U.S. households showed that many more Americans, 59%, believe that poverty is a root cause of environmental inequality. Only 37% believe that Black people are more likely than white people experience pollution, even though this is a statistical fact. Even among those who believe this environmental inequality is true, some still feel that it is "fair"—in other words, that it is up to the people living near polluting industries to work harder so they can move.

"A very small number of people in the U.S. believe that environmental inequality along racial lines exists, said Dylan Bugden, a WSU sociologist and author of the study published in the journal *Social Problems*. "This is a clear challenge for the environmental justice movement to try to convince the public that this is real."

Environmental inequalities encompass a range of things from proximity to polluting industries to limited access to clean water and green spaces. It also includes the ability to mediate the effects of climate change, such as having air conditioning during heatwaves or being able to recover from wildfire or flood damage. Research has shown that Black communities statistically suffer [environmental problems](#) more than white communities of similar income levels.

For this study, Bugden analyzed data from an AmeriSpeak omnibus survey administered in May 2020. Operated by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak scientifically selects panels of adults to be representative of U.S. households.

Bugden compared the survey participants' views on environmental inequality to their responses to questions related to American economic mobility and "meritocracy"—essentially, how easy they felt it was for low-income Americans to improve their circumstances through their own hard work and talent.

The study also examined responses to what's known as the "racial resentment scale." Since few people in the U.S. will claim they are racist, researchers have developed a set of questions to assess more subtle beliefs, such as whether slavery and discrimination created conditions that make it difficult for Black people to advance, or whether Black people can improve their lives if they just "tried harder."

When looking at the interplay among answers to questions in these three areas and environmental inequality, Bugden found a strong connection. People who scored high in racial resentment as well as beliefs that America is an economically mobile, meritocratic society also did not believe race played a role in environmental inequality, or that those inequalities were unfair.

"I've never had a finding quite like this where the effect was that big," said Bugden. "It became very clear that there was a relationship between the idea that we live in a fair, 'post-racial' society and believing that environmental inequality exists and whether they supported doing anything about it."

The researcher termed this connection "color-blind environmental racism." A large portion of respondents did believe class, but not race, played a role in environmental [inequality](#). Bugden called this classic color-blind ideology, a belief that denies racism exists in a situation that ultimately serves to perpetuate it.

The extent of color-blind environmental racism may be a significant obstacle for [policy proposals](#) like the Green New Deal, Bugden noted, which bring together social, economic and environmental policy.

"There's a paradox: if you publicly identify racial inequalities in a policy, you may trigger a racial backlash from an American electorate that doesn't believe they're true and is unwilling to use resources to address

their effects," he said. "This is an old story, but it's something the environmental justice movement will have to strategize around."

More information: Dylan Bugden, Environmental Inequality in the American Mind: The Problem of Color-Blind Environmental Racism, *Social Problems* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/socpro/spac005](https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac005)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: Few Americans see race as key factor in environmental inequality (2022, April 13)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2022-04-americans-key-factor-environmental-inequality.html>

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