

Chicago's cumulative report on pollution sparks debate

December 14 2023, by Karina Atkins, Chicago Tribune



Chicago. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Straight out of the starting blocks, Chicago is learning how hard it will be to write an ordinance to reduce a broad array of pollutants built up over many years across a big, diverse city.

Chicago's first-ever "Cumulative Impact Assessment," released in September, is already sparking debate.

In its current form, the assessment contains an index that assigns a 35.3 percentile environmental justice ranking to an East Side neighborhood census tract adjacent to where steel mills once roared, and a nearly identical 35.5 percentile to a glitzy Gold Coast tract.

Census tracts in the 75th percentile or greater, or whose scores are in the 70th percentile but are contiguous with a tract in the 75th percentile, are designated "Environmental Justice Neighborhoods," or communities most burdened by pollution and most vulnerable to its effects.

In another counter-intuitive finding, the index assigns a percentile ranking of 98.6 to a census tract in the South Deering neighborhood that includes lots of heavy industry, plus the site of a controversial metal shredder proposed by Reserve Management Group, and a 40.5 percentile to an East Side census tract that's just across the street.

The proposed metal shredder site is in an industrial corridor. The [city](#) said it is not considering proximity to these corridors in its environmental justice index since they often reflect historic zoning decisions more than the presence of actual pollution.

But Michael Cailas, a University of Illinois at Chicago public health professor who was part of a team that published an updated map of Chicago's [environmental hazards](#) in 2021, described this as "an important omission" and called for future versions of the index to include buffer zones around industrial corridors.

Angela Tovar, the city's chief sustainability officer, defended the environmental justice index as one of many tools the city will use to track its progress over time.

She said the index validates the need for the city to take action and will inform future policies and department operations, but it will not be used to make individual zoning or permitting decisions.

Even though parts of the Gold Coast and East Side wound up with a nearly identical percentile ranking, they face radically different threats, said Tovar.

The index uses census tracts to show the location of pollution risks and the underlying health and socioeconomic vulnerabilities of affected residents, but "individual census tract scores do not reflect a community in its entirety," she said.

Tovar encourages people to zoom out when analyzing the map. On the whole, the census tracts in the Southeast Side have far higher scores than those in the Near North Side.

The city will publish a dashboard this month that will allow the public to toggle risk and vulnerability measurements on and off to see how the pollution scores are tallied.

Fixing deep-seated problems

Southeast Side activists have pressured the city—through hunger strikes, federal lawsuits and years of protests—to build stronger defenses against the cumulative impacts of pollution.

Many of these same activists, along with their counterparts on the Southwest Side, helped the city develop its environmental justice index.

So far, they're accepting some of its unexpected findings as the kind of birthing pain that happens when pursuing immense goals, like eliminating the life expectancy gap of eight years or more between Black

Chicagoans and everybody else.

Olga Bautista, executive director of the Southeast Environmental Task Force, finds it promising that marginalized people who have historically had to resort to protesting can now work directly with the city.

Her organization filed a civil rights complaint that sparked a federal investigation of the RMG permitting process, and now she is the project management co-chair for the city's cumulative impact assessment team.

But she said change will take time.

"With something as big as fixing problems so deep-seated in the city—we're literally trying to dismantle institutional racism—you're not going to get it right in one process," said Bautista. "There are a lot of things that need to happen, so this is the first, and I'm proud of the work."

To account for potential oversights in the index, the city is developing a process to allow communities to self-designate as environmental justice neighborhoods.

"The index is not a yes or no to say "You're gonna get protected and others are not,"" said Kim Wasserman, executive director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization.

"The communities can still come in and say, "Hey, the data is missing some components or wasn't collected properly in our neighborhood,"" said Wasserman, who is also on the assessment's project management team. "We know this happens all the time."

But even with its imperfections, she said, the index will make it harder for developers to apply for project permits without addressing the

impact they will have on surrounding neighborhoods.

"If folks have an issue with that, then it's really about your view of human life, and about who gets to have longer longevity and who doesn't," she said.

The city helped set the stage for the coming debates by including plenty of caveats in its cumulative impact assessment, including that it's based on preliminary data and could be revised.

Sometime this month, the city will release a technical report including "identified data gaps and limitations," according to a health department data sheet released in October.

This technical report will help pave the way for an environmental justice ordinance that Mayor Brandon Johnson has pledged to send to the City Council early next year.

'First step in a long process'

Chicago developed its environmental justice index after studying a California screening tool used since 2013 to identify health threats.

California published its fourth updated version in 2021.

Cailas predicted a similar evolution for Chicago, calling the city's map and index "the first step in a long process."

For the initial version of its environmental justice index, Chicago paid nearly \$500,000 to Tetra Tech, a Pasadena, California-based consultancy with 550 offices worldwide, according to health department records. The city also relied on the health department staff and volunteer efforts from dozens of environmental and neighborhood groups and hundreds of city

residents.

Chicago promised to start evaluating the so-called cumulative impact of long-term pollution threats in a historic agreement with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in May.

The agreement was the culmination of a federal investigation that began in 2020 after RMG took over and closed metal shredder General Iron in the affluent, mostly white Lincoln Park neighborhood. The company's plan is still to move these operations to 11600 S. Burley Ave. on the Southeast Side, a largely Latino, working-class community.

Heavily industrialized neighborhoods along the Calumet River were already scarred by 250 polluted sites actively monitored by federal and state authorities, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator Michael Regan noted in a letter to then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot in 2021.

In a 2020 study commissioned by Lightfoot, the health department determined that Southeast Side residents breathe some of the city's dirtiest air.

Facing mounting pressure in 2022, Lightfoot backtracked and rejected a permit for RMG's Southeast Side shredder. The city and company are still fighting over this permit in court.

Chicago's new environmental justice index has nothing to do with this permitting dispute, according to Randall Samborn, a spokesman for RMG.

In June, an administrative law judge ruled in favor of the company, citing the city's own consultant who concluded the shredder would not pose an unacceptable cancer risk. The Johnson administration quickly appealed this ruling.

Dick Simpson, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said the sheer complexity of the index meant it was bound to have some glitches at the outset.

Residents and aldermen can still challenge the [index](#), and they can still try to block permits for a specific industry or factory, he said.

Even with these glitches, Simpson credits Johnson with being much more committed to environmental justice than predecessors including Richard J. Daley, who was mayor for 21 years ending in 1976, and Daley's son Richard, who served from 1989 to 2011.

For both the Daley mayors, the goal was to continue building until opposition arose that was strong enough to make them stop, said Simpson.

During his eight years as mayor ending in 2019, Rahm Emanuel seemed as disinterested in [environmental justice](#) as the Daleys, Simpson said. Lori Lightfoot wanted to do more. But the RMG dispute sapped much of her momentum.

And now, Brandon Johnson is poised to prevail on the cumulative impact ordinance by the same 60% margin he's brought to bear on other City Council votes, Simpson said.

The vote would never have happened without protesters like Oscar Sanchez, who lost 20 pounds during a 30-day hunger strike over the RMG shredder in 2021.

Sanchez said he joined the strike because Chicago is still making choices that reinforce its environmental inequities.

For instance, the city is spending up to \$1.3 billion in incremental tax

revenue for office and residential towers after RMG leaves the North Side.

This economic growth will mostly benefit the North Side, and Sanchez said any future benefits for the South Side won't come in time for two of his grandparents. They died within the past two years with "holes in their lungs," he said.

But Sanchez also warned of "a false narrative" that could arise if Chicagoans conclude that only neighborhoods with industrial pollution concerns will benefit from the cumulative impact ordinance, and not the entire city.

"When we're talking about protections, it's the same for all," Sanchez said. "To end sacrifice zones is not to create new ones."

2023 Chicago Tribune. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Chicago's cumulative report on pollution sparks debate (2023, December 14) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-chicago-cumulative-pollution-debate.html>

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.