

The Geography of Injustice

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THE AIR WE breathe, the water we drink, the temperature outside—all are influenced by where we live, and each has a distinct effect on our health. Over the past few decades an abundance of research has shown that the environment can have dramatic impacts on health and that those who have the healthiest environments tend to have the most privilege. Conversely, those who bear the brunt of environmental health threats tend to have limited power to bring about real change.

Robert D. Bullard, known as the father of environmental justice, was one of the first people to systematically document the connection between race and exposure to pollution. His work showed clearly how U.S. policies such as redlining had burdened majority-Black communities with far more contaminated air and water than their white neighbors were exposed to. Because of those same historical policies, people of color on average live in neighborhoods with higher surface heat than do non-Hispanic white people. One result of these urban heat islands is that people who already have a higher risk of respiratory and heart disease end up living in environments that exacerbate those illnesses.

Around the world, people breathing the most toxic air are consistently the poorest and most disadvantaged. This pattern is apparent at every level, from the smallest towns to the largest countries. Wealthy nations have shown that reducing air pollution saves lives, and some poorer countries are proving that clean energy can fuel economic development.

Snakebite envenomation is one of the deadliest tropical diseases. Like so many other conditions, it is most dangerous to the people with the fewest resources because they are least able to protect themselves from being bitten or to access the best care. New treatments could save lives and limbs.

The climate crisis is changing the range and prevalence of many diseases. Valley fever has expanded into new locations, and those working outdoors in construction sites and dusty agricultural fields are the most at risk. The illness also disproportionately affects Latino, Asian and Indigenous American people, who are more likely to contract it than white people and who often experience more severe symptoms.

Solutions exist, and they require better understanding and a fresh approach. Innovative researchers are devising healthier buildings, designing clinical trials with community involvement, and monitoring the air and water to empower people to protect themselves. They are creating a movement toward a more livable and more just world.

—LAUREN GRAVITZ,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

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