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## Cal-in-Sac Undergraduate Research Products

### Title

Environmental Justice: Environmental Policies for Resilience Amidst Pandemic

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# POLICY BRIEF

AUGUST 2021

## Environmental Justice

### ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES FOR RESILIENCE AMIDST PANDEMIC

- Research shows that pre-existing environmental injustices are leaving low-income communities in Los Angeles County, like Pacoima and Boyle Heights, more vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Community member awareness regarding this correlation remains low despite their shared belief that environmental problems affect their health.
- Community members point towards policy changes, environmental education, and community organizing as potential solutions for the environmental injustices in their neighborhoods.
- Providing greater access to environmental education and COVID-19 resources can help bridge the gap between the research and community members.

#### Introduction

While cities throughout Los Angeles County are facing higher surges of COVID-19 cases, none have been hit harder than local low-income communities of color. Two of the cities that have been hit the hardest have been Boyle Heights and Pacoima, both showing extremely high rates of COVID-19 when compared to other cities in L.A. County. Alongside these rates, both cities are also some of the most environmentally burdened due to lack of greenspace, air pollution, and proximity to industry sites, among other things. Research has shown that these and other pre-existing environmental problems can be linked to the higher rates of COVID-19. With COVID-19 cases on the rise throughout L.A. County again, there is an urgent need to address and educate communities on the underlying environmental injustices to ensure protection and resilience of the most vulnerable.

#### What's the issue?

As of today, L.A. County has had 1,300,312 total cases reported since March 16, 2020.<sup>1</sup> Within this county there have been unequal case rate numbers, leaving mainly people of color in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities at higher risk. Boyle Heights, a predominantly Hispanic/Latino city with a lack of health insurance and other resources, has experienced some of the highest COVID-19 rates ranging around 17,000 cases. Similarly, Pacoima which is also made up of Hispanic/Latino individuals shares the same range in COVID-19 cases. Throughout the pandemic Hispanics and Latinos have been the most affected group making up 650,126 of the total rates.<sup>2</sup>

This unequal distribution of COVID-19 cases can be tied to various socio-economic factors and underlying injustices prevalent throughout their city. Research

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<sup>1</sup><http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/coronavirus/data/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

studies have also established links between pre-existing environmental injustices and COVID-19 rates and deaths in California. It is crucial to keep this in mind because according to CalEnviroScreen, Boyle Heights and Pacoima rank among those 95%-100% most environmentally burdened. Toxic releases, traffic density, air pollution, and water contamination, have all increased the likelihood of developing health problems like asthma or cardiovascular disease. These health problems are exacerbated by COVID-19 outbreaks, leaving communities at higher risks of contracting COVID-19.

### What do community members think?

18 participants from Boyle Heights and Pacoima were surveyed to get an idea of their awareness regarding the relationship between environmental issues and COVID-19. Among the participants there was a range of familiarity regarding environmental problems, but overall acknowledgement of environmental hazards was shown (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). Participants all agreed that these

hazards influence their health to some degree (see Figure 1.3). However, the same participants failed to establish a link between environmental problems and their cities' higher COVID-19 rates (see Figure 1.4). This difference in responses is interesting to see as it shows us that there is a lack of environmental education within the communities most burdened.

Do you think these environmental hazards play a role in creating health problems throughout your city?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0

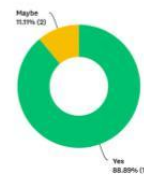


Figure 1.3

Do you think these environmental hazards played a role in the high rates of COVID-19 seen throughout your city?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0

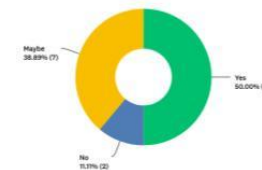


Figure 1.4

How familiar are you with the environmental hazards in your city?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0

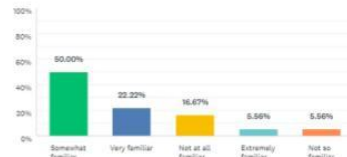


Figure: 1.1

\*regardless of previous answer\* Which of the following environmental hazards, do you think are most prevalent in your city?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0

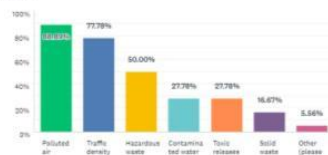


Figure: 1.2

### Why is this important?

This is important because it shows us that there is a clear disconnect between adequate environmental education as well as COVID-19 information. This has left many individuals and families unknowingly at higher risks of COVID-19 without the necessary resources to combat or adapt to the problems currently affecting their individual health. Community members are currently left alone to solve these large issues that require larger policy changes. The same survey also asked members what they believe is needed to create environmental change, and a majority of respondents point towards policy change and community organizing as means for change (see Figure 1.5). There is a clear need for both community-based with local and/or state efforts,

to achieve effective changes and ensure environmental justice.

Which of the following actions do you think are needed to achieve environmental change/justice in your city?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0

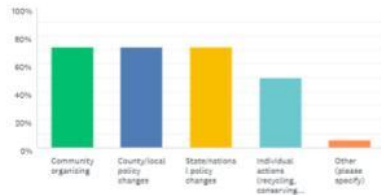


Figure 1.5

Lack of action and lack of access to information regarding environmental problems and their relation to COVID-19 will keep communities stuck in a cycle which alters their ability to fully combat and defend themselves from the pandemic. Without more environmental and educational measures, an increase in COVID-19 rates is sure to be seen in the same communities as before. By addressing the environmental injustices, at any scale, and increasing community awareness there can be an improvement in people's defensive practices from COVID-19.

### What should policymakers do?

- Invest in efforts that will increase education regarding both environmental injustices and COVID-19 injustices in low-income communities.
- Expand support for projects led by community organizations, aimed to address and improve awareness about the injustices and health inequities caused by environmental problems.
- Increase access to COVID-19 relief and resource information, in cities most

burdened throughout the L.A. County amidst the pandemic.

### Further reading

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medRxiv 2020.11.02.20215657; doi:

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Bashir, Muhammad Farhan, et al. "Correlation between Environmental Pollution Indicators and COVID-19 Pandemic: A Brief Study in Californian Context." *Environmental Research*, vol. 187, 2020, p. 109652, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2020.109652>

Hendryx, Michael, and Juhua Luo. "COVID-19 Prevalence and Fatality Rates in Association with Air Pollution Emission Concentrations and Emission Sources." *Environmental Pollution*, vol. 265, 2020, p. 115126,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2020.115126>

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