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## Some children are at greater risk than others

CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

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**ALL** children, wherever they live, are affected by environmental hazards. Pollution and environmental degradation know no county, state, regional, or national border; contaminants are transported around the world.

However, children living in poverty and children in racial or ethnic communities are at disproportionate risk for exposure to environmental hazards. For example, the poorest tend to be more exposed to environmental hazards such as inadequate housing and proximity to polluting industries, resulting in higher levels of indoor and outdoor air pollutants and, consequently, respiratory disease.

The burdens of asthma fall more heavily on Black and Hispanic children. In 2001-2005, Black children, regardless of family income, reported higher rates of asthma. Black children are twice as likely to be hospitalized for asthma and are four times as likely to die from asthma as white children. Hispanic children are almost twice as likely to be hospitalized for asthma as white children.

The U.S. Climate Change Science Program (CCSP) reported that “many of the expected health effects are likely to fall disproportionately on the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and the uninsured” and that, “within settlements experiencing climate change stressors, certain parts of the population may be especially vulnerable based on their circumstances” including the poor, children, those already in poor health, and the disabled.

Poorer child health is associated with the increasing number of children in poverty. Even with increased median household income, between 2006 and 2007, the child poverty rate in the United States reached the highest level since 1998 -- 18% of all children were living in poverty. Much of this increase was a result of worsening conditions among Latino and African-American families. We cannot successfully address children's environmental health issues without addressing these underlying determinants.

A 1987 study in the US conducted by the United Church of Christ showed that race was a major factor in the placement of hazardous waste facilities.<sup>i</sup> Another 1993 study confirmed racial disparities.<sup>ii</sup> In California, for example, all three of California's Class I toxic waste dumps are in or near Hispanic communities.<sup>iii</sup>

The 1994 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found higher blood lead levels among African-American and Hispanic children than among white non-Hispanic children. In central areas of large cities, 37% of African-American and 17% of Hispanic children had lead levels over 10 micrograms per deciliter of blood. Only 6% of white non-Hispanic children had

similarly elevated levels.<sup>iv</sup> Sixty percent of Hispanics versus 33% of non-Hispanic Whites live in counties of the US in which two or more pollutants exceed Environmental Protection Agency air quality standards.<sup>v</sup>

According to 1992 Census data, more than 46% of African-American children, 40% of Hispanic children, and 17% of white non-Hispanic children live in poverty.<sup>vi</sup>

Children living in poverty often have inadequate housing, poor nutrition, and limited access to health care. Coupling these factors with environmental exposures places these children at multifactorial risk for illness.

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<sup>i</sup> Commission for Racial Justice United Church of Christ. *Toxic Wastes and Race in the US: A National Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*. New York, NY: Public Data Access, 1987.

<sup>ii</sup> Goldman BA and Fitton L. *Toxic Wastes and Race Revisited: An Update of the 1987 Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites*. Washington, DC: The Center for Policy Alternatives, 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> Cole SW. Empowerment as the Key to Environmental Protection: The Need for Environmental Poverty Law. *Ecology Law Quarterly* 1992;19:620-657.

<sup>iv</sup> Pirkle, "The Decline in Blood Lead Levels in the United States: The National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES)."

<sup>v</sup> Wernette DR and Nieves LA. Breathing Polluted Air: Minorities Are Disproportionately Exposed. *EPA Journal* 1992;18:16-17.

<sup>vi</sup> US Bureau of the Census. *Poverty in the United States 1992: Current Population Reports Series P60-185*.