

Toxic Waste Next Door

Everyone should check out Garance Franke-Ruta's [new-ish blog](#). It's a good one. Today she points us to [this](#) grim *Los Angeles Times* story:

California has the nation's highest concentration of minorities living near hazardous waste facilities, according to a newly released study. Greater Los Angeles has 1.2 million people living less than two miles from such facilities and 91%, or 1.1 million, are minorities. Statewide, the figure was 81%.

Garance calls this "environmental racism." I think she's right. But some of her commenters see things differently, arguing that there's a less-insidious explanation at work: Toxic waste facilities tend to get sited in poorer neighborhoods because it's cheaper to do so, and it just so happens that a lot of minorities are clustered in those poorer neighborhoods. In other words, to the extent that there's racial injustice at work here, it merely reflects *preexisting* patterns of racial segregation and racial inequality. The site owners aren't making racist decisions per se, even if the hazardous facilities are obviously exacerbating these patterns.

I'd say it's a bit more complicated than that. If you look at the [study](#) in question, it notes rather clearly that "race [is] more important than socioeconomic status in predicting the location of the nation's commercial hazardous facilities." So this pattern *can't*, it seems, be explained away simply by saying that minorities just happen to live in poorer neighborhoods. And that conclusion jibes with previous research on the topic. See [this 1997 study](#) on Los Angeles, for instance. And in 1995, James Hamilton [found](#) that the wealth of a community didn't predict the location of hazardous-waste sites nearly as well as race did.

What Hamilton found, in fact, was that polluting industries were more likely to build in a neighborhood if they thought the residents were less likely to engage in collective action against the new facility. And since minorities tend to have less political power--not least because they're poorly represented in state and local governments--these industries tend to assume they won't put up as much of a fight. So they saunter on in. (This probably explains why toxic facilities tend to "cluster" in certain regions--if an incinerator can move into neighborhood A without much hassle, then developers figure they can also put, say, a chemical plant there rather easily.)

So there are several things going on here: Not only are African-Americans and Hispanics more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods--due in no small part to general economic inequality and discriminatory housing policies--but their neighborhoods are more likely to be targeted by hazardous facilities, thanks to their relative lack of political power. And these things all reinforce each other. Living near a toxic dump can often be bad for your health. Inequality begets more inequality. And so on. Now, in 1994, Bill Clinton [ordered](#) the EPA to take "environmental justice" into consideration during its reviews of new facilities. But the EPA hasn't really enforced the rule (if it ever did), and it's not exactly a high priority in the current administration. So that's that.