

**Uncovering Environmental Injustice Using Community-Based  
Participatory Research in Albany, NY**

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## **Abstract**

Literature on environmental justice often fails to incorporate the perspectives of underrepresented communities most affected by environmental ills. Our research serves to incorporate communities' perspectives on what issues are their top priorities, how they are addressing them, and whether they consider them environmental injustices. Research was conducted through qualitative interviews with community leaders and professional advocates and surveys with community members. Our research found differing understandings of the meaning of environmental justice, a discrepancy between formal organizations and community groups in terms of which issues were top priorities, and an overall division between the mainstream environmental movement and environmental justice communities. To begin repairing this divide, it is necessary to incorporate place-based knowledge through community based participatory research.

Key Words: environmental justice, community perspectives, personal narrative, underrepresented groups, environmental racism, community based participatory research

## **1. Introduction**

Issues of environmental justice are complex, place-specific, and can take many different forms. These complexities lead to various understandings that communities and people might have with regards to environmental justice. Our research emphasizes personal narrative as a tool to explore what issues are considered most relevant in environmental justice communities. Below we address the foundations of environmental justice through the exploration of three case studies: Love Canal, Warren County, and Convent, Louisiana, and provide a literature review. We explore past literature on environmental justice, environmental racism, and the inclusion of marginalized voices through personal narratives. This background addresses our research goals in order to incorporate the voices of those facing environmental and/or social justice struggles in their communities.

### **1.1 Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is an examination of internal perceptions of environmental justice within potential environmental justice areas of Albany, New York as defined by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). This research works to identify how these populations are defining relevant environmental and social justice issues in their community through personal narratives. It assesses how, and if, they are addressing these issues. While past literature and understandings of environmental justice can serve as a framework for our research, we recognize that the intricacies of social and environmental injustice and strategies for addressing these issues are unique and place-specific. The research questions that guided this effort include:

1. What are the most pressing issues facing lower income and communities of color in the Albany-area, in their opinion?
- 2.

3. How do these communities interpret the role that various stakeholders are having

While environmental justice has come a long way from its origins there is still much work to be done to incorporate the perspectives of underrepresented communities. Although the term is now widely recognized within the larger environmental movement,

Johnson, 2000 p. 556). The protesters put environmental racism on the national radar and eventually what started as one community turned into a multi regional and multiethnic movement that is now the environmental justice movement.

strategic influence within the environmental movement, with frontline communities





access to best markets; however, manufacturing has shifted from city centers into the suburbs due to larger space availability (Shiro, 1989). There are currently new industries moving into the suburbs outside of Albany, but since the decline of manufacturing no major industries have moved into the city center leaving the city center economically depressed. There are currently five active superfund sites in the broader Albany metro area, which are all a produce of past industry operations (EPA, 2013).

It was important for us to identify preexisting groups through which we could make connections with community leaders. We identified several means by which to discover the individuals who were important for the interview stage of our research. We contacted several activists, local governmental representatives, and professional advocates in the communities in which we thought there could be potential issues of environmental justice. We identified groups working specifically on environmental justice issues in the Albany area, who provided us information on their experiences in Albany and were able to provide us with other contacts within the community. Through these groups we were able to

that the conversations would digress from the structured questions that were formulated prior to the interviews. We conducted a total of eight interviews. All respondents were informed of the anonymity and confidential nature of their participation. Actual respondent names and representative group (NGO, agency, etc) names have only been included with the expressed desire of the respondent.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

In order to collect survey data, we attended three meetings and forums, including a community meeting for People of Albany United for Safe Energy (PAUSE), an open forum for the Council of Albany Neighborhood Associations (CANA), and the Albany Farmers Market. Interview participants were connected with a variety of organizations, including PAUSE, Environmental Advocates of New York, 100 Black Men, RADIX, Sierra, and the Albany Common Council. Many participants were involved in additional form of community engagement as well. Both survey and interview participants resided in the immediate Albany area and eight (8/12 who listed their specific location) lived in what the DEC designated as a potential environmental justice area. All three of the professional advocates whom we interviewed lived outside of the potential environmental justice area. A total of four females and five males were surveyed and a total of two females and six males were interviewed. Additionally, all surveyed participants self-identified as Caucasian or white and five out of eight interview participants identified as Caucasian or white.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

## **4. Results & Discussion**

### **4.1 People's Understanding of Environmental (In)justice**

The purpose of our research was to provide an opening to broaden our understanding of environmental justice beyond the traditional definitions and applications provided by governmental agencies in order to incorporate other perspectives,

However, it is also important to note that more than half (5/9) of survey respondents considered themselves “very involved” in addressing these issues, and only one interviewee considered themselves “not at all involved,” so this proportionate understanding of environmental justice cannot be generalized beyond this particular sample of respondents. Since interview respondents were selected based on their involvement with environmental and social issues, it can be inferred from our conversations that all interview respondents were well versed with environmental justice, as well.

Familiarity with environmental justice is open-ended and could have a host of meanings. In order to parse out peoples’ complex understandings of environmental justice, we asked both interview and survey respondents to define the term in their own words (see below chart).

Table 1. Interview and survey respondents’ definitions of “environmental justice”



Three themes arose in respondents' own definitions of environmental justice and the below are a few responses. People had a tendency to define what environmental justice was by contrasting it with environmental . This is reflective of the ease in which people had identifying what was injustice and unfair, but had a harder time conceptualizing what justice would look like without discussion of the current injustices. While this only occurred directly in two definitions, most people spent the majority of time discussing environmental injustice, rather than a conceptualization of environmental justice.

The second theme that emerged relates to the fact that many respondents discussed issues around equity and fair treatment regardless of social identities, with race or class, and geographic location being the most common ones identified as pertinent identifiers. Many respondents also referenced the disproportionate effect of environmental injustice on low income and/or communities of color (some referenced both, others referenced one or the other). The biggest takeaway of this is that, in a society that frequently ignores class disparity and argues that we live in a post-racial nation, respondents in this research were able to identify the disparities that exist with relation to race and class from geographical perspective of their community. However, while 11 respondents directly referenced class, only five directly referenced race, and four of those 16 referenced both. This indicates that, while individuals have differing opinions about the importance of race and class in environmental injustices, more people were comfortable references environmental injustice being based in class oppression than race oppression. It should also be noted that while race and class were a consistent theme in many respondents' definitions, other respondents emphasized "equality," "justice," and "exploitation" without necessarily pinpointing which communities the current burden falls upon.

The third theme that consistently came up in respondents' definitions and discussions around environmental justice was that of infrastructure: particular stresses, financial resources, and pollution. A total of six respondents referred directly to financial resource distribution, pollution, or other particular stressors in their description of what environmental justice is (more broadly, not in references to Albany in particular). Some respondents highlighted corporate influence and exploitation of communities, placing the burden of proof for this exploitation on a tangible stakeholder. While this point was discussed in more depth with many interview respondents, only a select few included this point in their actual definitions of environmental justice. Others highlighted particular stressors that they believed were indicative of environmental injustice in the definition, which most frequently included pollution, health, and safety concerns. Others referenced unfair financial resources distribution or, on the flip side, the need for equitable resource distribution within their conceptualization of environmental justice. However, across the board respondents' own definitions included components that were not always the same components as were included in the EPA's official definition of environmental justice, a point we chose to explore.

As stated in the introduction, the EPA defines environmental justice as, "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national

origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (US EPA, 2012). When presented to our respondents, zero respondents disagreed with this definition, but many believed it was not as encompassing as they believed it should be. However, there were a variety of results with the majority of survey respondents (>50%) believing this definition matched their understanding of environmental justice and other respondents (primarily interview respondents) saying that yes, it did, but then continuing to explain further intricacies that were not represented in that definition. The following response from a survey respondent indicates the hesitation and difficulty many seemed to have answering the question of whether this definition matched theirs. As states by one respondent: “this more or less matches my interpretation. Again, environmental justice ensures that these groups are not taken advantage of.” Another survey response:

Yes, but I would add that policies and implementation should recognize that lower socio-economic neighborhoods have been disproportionately impacted by previous discriminatory practices and we should look to rectify the past practices and implement new projects taking into consideration the cumulative impact of projects on poorer neighborhoods. (personal communication, 2014).

Only three (3/9) survey respondents (and no interview respondents, 0/8) stated that yes,

This quote exemplifies one of the root limitations with the EPA's definition of environmental justice that respondents highlighted. That, beyond just policies, there is limited or no meaningful involvement of people affected by environmental injustices in creating or implementing policies. Although there are opportunities for public input, such as during the NEPA process, lower income residents often lack access to these forums due to time or financial constraints or are not aware of these forums. While laws that





derailment, human error, collision, or potentially pose as a target for terrorists. Many in the community and the city in general are both angry and dismayed at the current situation, especially NYDEC's failure to comply with the law (Earth Justice Letter, 2014).

As expected, many of those we interviewed mentioned the bomb trains as a major issue, for as previously stated, it is the timely issue facing Albany. Scott Kellogg, of the Radix Ecological Sustainability Center in Albany, felt that the boiler plant and the general practice of bomb trains posed a major risk to public safety for several reasons:

As that oil is being heated it is producing volatiles and danger because it exposes a significant risk of an explosion. The train carts are not engineered for that and they are not routinely pressure tested. Derailments are a real possibility as well, granted trains

The people are looking at it as an immediate problem they are facing. While, the environmental groups are still looking at it as more of a global climate change issue. ...right now people are focusing on more of their immediate safety and health than that of climate change. They're concerned that this thing will blow up in their backyard (personal communication, 2014).

Although this was the most prevalent issue that was came across in our research we also identified it as the issue that will potentially not have a long lasting impact on the city and its residents, for over the past few months it has become clear that the issue of bomb trains will be dealt with in a swift manner. However many of the other issues identified by our research are more systemic and endemic issues that have existed for decades and have no short-term solution in sight, many of which are not unique to Albany but can be found in most post-industrial cities. The issues we are highlighting are not all encompassing, but rather are the ones that came up the most in our data.

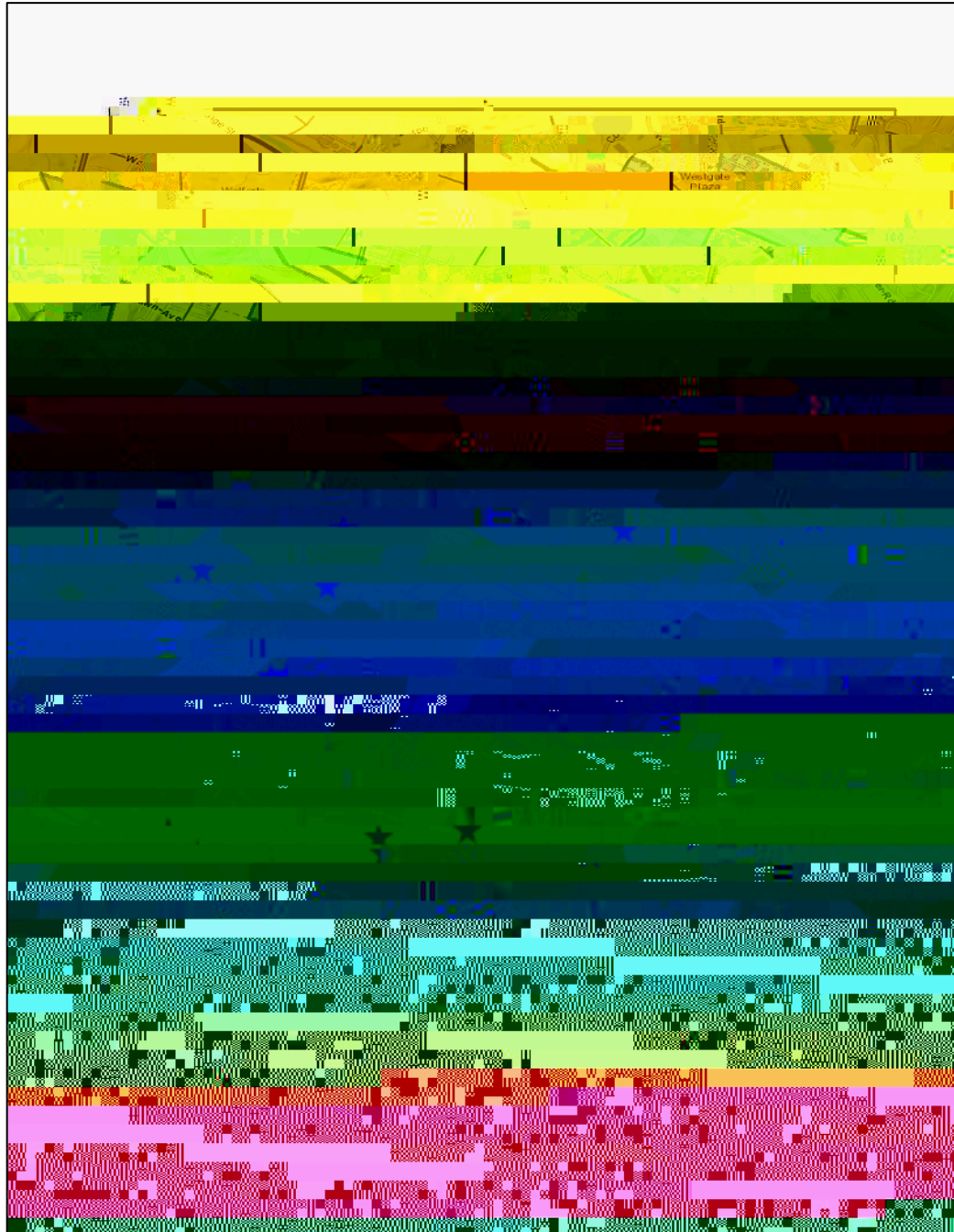
The second most cited issue by our respondents was that of pollution. However, pollution comes in many different forms, and although many respondents deemed it a problem, they gave a specific form of pollution they felt plagued their community. Brother Yusuff works in the Arbor Hill neighborhood of Albany and cited the pollution of Patroone Creek as the

Several of those we interviewed connected the issue of health to the issue of food access and quality. Conor Bambrick, of Environmental Advocates of New York, stated that in the downtown area of Albany, “there is a lack of access to health food or a place where [residents] could go purchase fruits.” (personal communication, 2014). He argued that many supermarkets are located outside of downtown, but most inner city residents do not have access to a car to visit these stores. Community organizer Brother Yusuff further supported this idea, stating that although many people call this issue “food deserts” it is really “food apartheid,” because inner city residents are forced to “feed off of higher prices, bad food, sugar, chips and McDonalds, so they are not eating right” (personal communication, 2014). It is a terrible cycle that often can lead to further health problems, such as diabetes and obesity, which predominantly affects lower income minorities living in urban centers.

Throughout our research several respondents mentioned more systemic problems that have plagued inner city communities since the decline of the industrial era. These issues are unequal distribution of financial resources, education, and infrastructure, which ultimately are all connected to the central idea of distribution of financial resources, for it is these resources that drive educational systems and infrastructure. Brother

1. At least 51.1% of the population in an urban area reported themselves to be members of minority groups; or
2. At least 33.8% of the population in a rural area reported themselves to be members of minority groups; or
3. At least 23.59% of the population in an urban or rural area had household incomes below the federal poverty level (NYDEC, year).

Figure 3. Map of where respondents' live from those of who provided information





majority of their community. The single respondent who identified as upper class believed that he/she was of a higher class than the majority of his/her community. From this data it was clear that the majority of respondents were located in neighborhoods that were primarily lower-

Figure 7. Self-identified socio-economic class (particularly in terms of income and employment) of survey respondents (n=9).

From our interviews we wanted to get a sense of how demographics, specifically race and socio-economic status, play a role in environmental justice, and perhaps if there is a correlation between these factors. In our interviews we asked if our respondents believed that environmental justice issues in their community were a result of the demographics of the area. We received many different answers to this question, and certain respondents were clearly uncomfortable with the question and chose to ignore it. Several respondents felt that race and racism were intrinsically connected to environmental injustices, but for rather different reasons. Roger Downs, from the Sierra Club, felt that there was a preponderance of environmental injustices that were, “dumped on communities of color that you would never see fly in traditional white suburban neighborhoods.” We asked him then if he thought that it was because they were communities of color or because urban lower income areas are statistically home to higher percentages of minorities. His answer was that even though class plays an important role, he still felt as though, “race trumps class a lot of the time” (personal communication, 2014), meaning that even if you had a poor white neighborhood and a slightly more affluent minority community, most likely the minority community would bear the burden of an environmental injustice. He followed this by saying that he didn't believe that companies went looking for communities of color to burden, but in his opinion these communities are statistically overburdened by injustices.

Another respondent, community organizer Brother Yusuff, did not hesitate to answer that he felt the connection was “systemic racism.” It was his belief that systemic racism has contributed to communities of color being provided with insufficient

pollution running in the creeks of his community that was there because politicians and city planners re-routed it into the neighborhoods of color because they knew that these neighborhoods did not have proper representation at the local level, so there would be no one to question their actions. Scott K



**Scott Kellogg  
(Radix)**

Mansion  
Neighborhood

I don't know the exact  
demographic make-up  
but it is definitely  
majority people of  
color and low income

don't have access to other  
social webs about what is going  
on so I think this contributes to  
why this is an environmental  
justice issue.

I'm not from this neighborhood  
or have a similar background  
and that is always a challenge.

For example, Brother Yusuf discussed a disconnect with the natural environment as a common theme he's seen among youth in communities of color he's worked with in the

better job of integrating the needs of EJ communities and the goals the environmental movement.”

“I think in some ways advocacy for one's environment is almost everyone's responsibility... I just think that this movement has got to grow and that everyone has to have an interest in the health of the community. And so maybe we have to redefine to be mainstream environmental movement because I hope to include the majority of our society in the effort.”

**Saima Anjam**  
**(Env. Advocates)**





knowledge to the conversation for creative solutions. These perspectives can be

## **6. References**

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## **Appendix 1: Survey**

An Exploration of Environmental Justice  
Nicole Shepherd, Janet Vidal, & Eliza Sherpa  
Skidmore College- Environmental Studies Department

We are a group of students conducting research for our senior capstone on the topic of

Do you perceive there to be health, environmental, or social issues facing your community?

- a. Yes, a lot
- b. Some
- c. I don't know of any

In your opinion, what are the three most important health, environmental, or social issues in your community.

- a.
- b.
- c.

To what extent are they effective in working to solve the problem? Please explain

Are you personally involved in working to solve any of these issues?

- a. Yes, very active
- b. Somewhat involved/involved when I can be
- c. Not involved, but I would like to be
- d. Not at all involved

Have you heard the term “environmental justice” before?

- a. Yes, I am well versed with it
- b. Yes, but I don’t use it regularly
- c. Yes, but I don’t know what it means
- d. No, I’ve never heard it before conducting this survey

How would you define environmental justice?

Environmental justice can be defined as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the developmen

## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

Where do you live now? How long have you lived there? Is it the same community in which you work?

If you consider yourself an active member of your community, what role do you see yourself playing?

What social and/or environmental issues do you see as being the most important for this community?

In what ways are you/your organization actively engaged in bringing about change,