

Environmental Impact on Health Equity in Black Communities

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Environmental justice is health justice for Black communities. Black communities in the United States continue to bear the brunt of environmental hazards, resulting in stark disparities in health outcomes. Generations of discriminatory housing and zoning policies, underinvestment in infrastructure, and proximity to industrial pollution have left Black Americans more exposed to toxic air, unsafe water, extreme heat, and other environmental stressors. These factors drive higher rates of asthma, heart disease, preterm births, and heat-related illnesses. Climate variability further intensifies these inequities. Nurses working in Black communities witness these harms daily, from children struggling to breathe in polluted neighborhoods to elders suffering during heat waves with no safe refuge. Environmental justice is not only about clean air and water; it is also about life expectancy, maternal health, and the ability to live with dignity. **The National Black Nurses Association, Inc. (NBNA) representing more than 308,000 Black nurses**, calls on Congress to prioritize environmental justice as a cornerstone of health equity.

Policy Priorities for Congressional Action

1. **Enact and fully fund environmental justice legislation** that addresses cumulative environmental impacts, and ensures frontline communities have a voice in federal decisions.
2. **Expand EPA and HHS environmental justice funding** by reinstating EPA's Environmental Justice Grants and HHS Office of Environmental Justice to support local resilience, pollution mitigation, and health initiatives for underserved communities.
3. **Invest in climate-resilient infrastructure in overburdened areas** by prioritizing green infrastructure (trees, cooling centers, clean transit), lead pipe replacement, and clean energy projects in historically redlined and high-pollution Black neighborhoods.
4. **Support community-based monitoring and data tools** by funding programs that empower residents to monitor air and water quality, map heat risk, and collect health impact data ensuring data is accessible and informs federal action.
5. **Promote workforce equity in environmental and public health fields** by expanding career pathways for professionals in environmental health, science, and nursing through Title VIII nursing workforce grants, HBCU partnerships, and community health worker program

Why This Matters

- Black children are **nearly 2 times** more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than White children, largely due to environmental exposures.¹
- Over **13 million Black Americans** live in counties with air that fails to meet EPA air quality standards.²
- Historically redlined neighborhoods face surface temperatures up to **13°F hotter** than surrounding areas.³
- Environmental-driven disasters disproportionately displace Black families and delay recovery.⁴
- Environmental exposures are linked to **higher rates** of premature birth, chronic illness, and early death in Black communities.⁵

References

1. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (2023). *Asthma and environmental justice communities*.
2. American Lung Association. (2024). *State of the air report*.
3. Hoffman, J.S. et al. (2020). The legacy of redlining: Urban heat exposure. *Climate*, 8(1), 12.
4. National Academies of Sciences. (2025). *Environmental health and disparities in Black communities*.
5. Science Advances (2025). *Air pollution from oil and gas and health impacts in the U.S.*