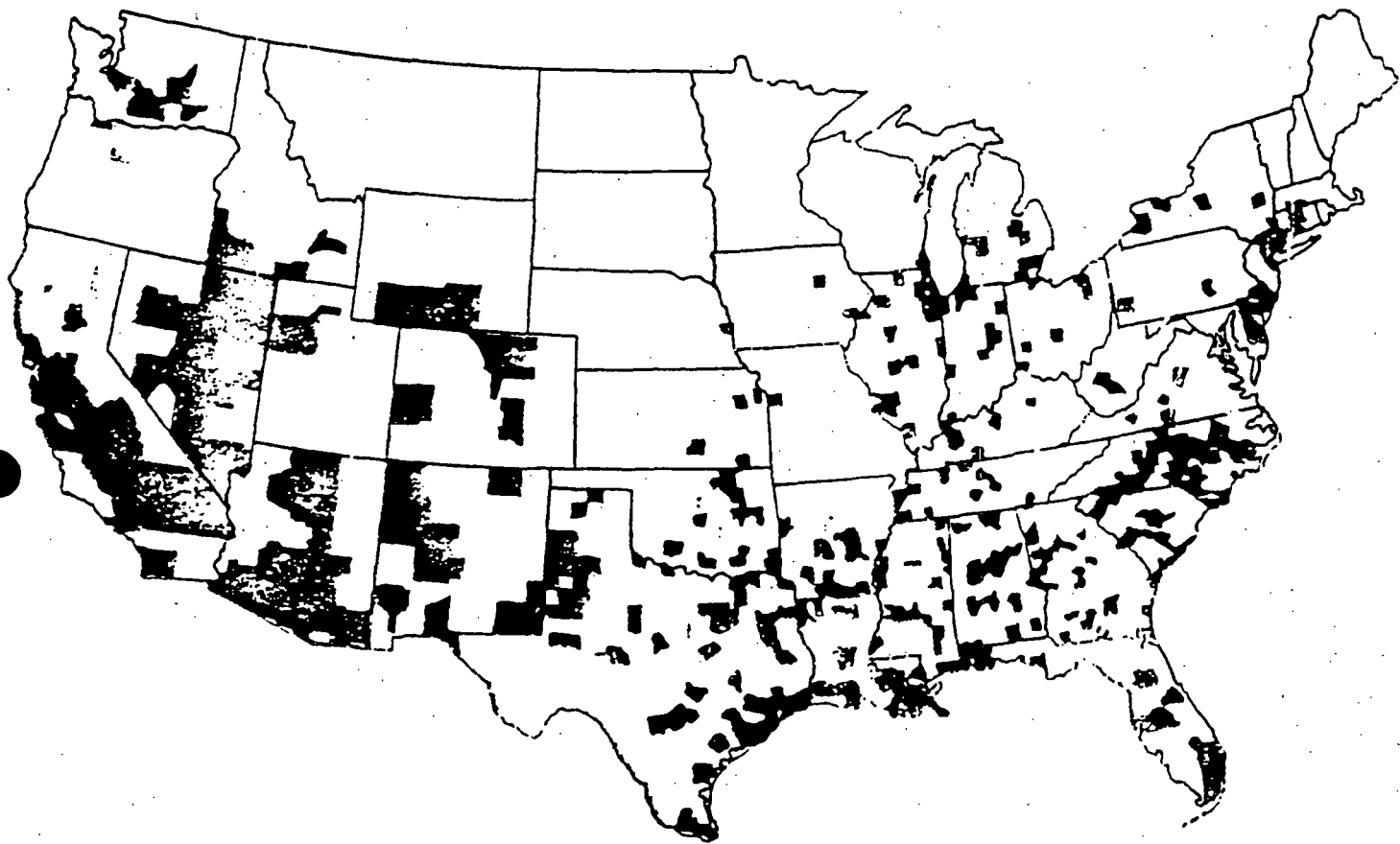


# TOXIC WASTES AND RACE

## In The United States

**A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic  
Characteristics of Communities  
with Hazardous Waste Sites**



**COMMISSION FOR RACIAL JUSTICE**  
United Church of Christ  
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**COVER DESIGN KEY:**

Shaded areas represent counties where the Black and/or Hispanic percentage of the population is greater than their respective national percentages.

(Black percentage of the population in U.S.: 12 percent)

(Hispanic percentage of the population in U.S.: 6 percent)

Dark areas represent counties where the Black and/or Hispanic percentage of the population is greater than their respective national percentages and where five or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites are located.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Copies of map on cover are available upon request. Additional copies of this report are available for \$15.00, plus \$2.50 for postage and handling.

All inquiries regarding this report should be directed to:

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## PREFACE

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The Commission for Racial Justice of the 1.7 million-member United Church of Christ is pleased to release this report. Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites. We believe that this report is of utmost importance, not only to racial and ethnic communities, but also to the nation as a whole. It is the first national report to comprehensively document the presence of hazardous wastes in racial and ethnic communities throughout the United States.

Since 1982, we have investigated and challenged the alarming presence of toxic substances in residential areas across the country. These investigations led us to examine the relationship between the treatment, storage and disposal of hazardous wastes and the issue of race.

In January 1986, two cross-sectional studies were initiated, utilizing appropriate statistical techniques, to determine the extent to which African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and others are exposed to hazardous wastes in their communities. These were the first national studies to examine this subject. One study focused on commercial hazardous waste facilities; the other focused on uncontrolled toxic waste sites. The data presented in this report are the result of both studies.

Much of the data exhibited in this report has never before been compiled for public review. It is our hope that this information will be used by all persons committed to racial and environmental justice to challenge what we believe to be an insidious form of racism. We share a common definition of racism with the National Council of Churches Racial Justice Working Group:

Racism is racial prejudice plus power. Racism is the intentional or unintentional use of power to isolate, separate and exploit others. This use of power is based on a belief in superior racial origin, identity or supposed racial characteristics. Racism confers certain privileges on and defends the dominant group, which in turn sustains

and perpetuates racism. Both consciously and unconsciously, racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, environmental and military institutions of societies. Racism is more than just a personal attitude; it is the institutionalized form of that attitude.

This report is intended to better enable the victims of this insidious form of racism not only to become more aware of the problem, but also to participate in the formulation of viable strategies. Too often African Americans and other racial and ethnic peoples are the victims of racism but are relegated to a defensive or reactive response, rather than a proactive position.

We are releasing this report in the interests of the millions of people who live in potentially health-threatening situations. In particular, we call attention to the fact that race is a major factor related to the presence of hazardous wastes in residential communities throughout the United States.

The United Church of Christ, through the Commission for Racial Justice, has made a long-term commitment to seeing that justice is done across the lines of race. As a national church-based civil rights agency, we believe that the time has come for all church and civil rights organizations to take this issue seriously.

We realize that involvement in this type of research is a departure from our traditional protest methodology. However, if we are to advance our struggle in the future, it will depend largely on the availability of timely and reliable information. We believe this data should be utilized by federal, state and municipal governments to prevent hazardous wastes from becoming an even greater national problem. No residential community, regardless of race, should be left defenseless in the midst of this mounting crisis.

We are grateful to the Special Appeals Committee of the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ for providing funding from the Neighbors In Need Offering for the studies and for this report. Special recognition should be given to Charles Lee, Director, Special Project Toxic Injustice of the Commission for Racial Justice, who was responsible for coordinating the publication of Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States.

Benjamin F. Chavis Jr.  
Executive Director

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Recently, there has been unprecedented national concern over the problem of hazardous wastes. This concern has been focused upon the adverse environmental and health effects of toxic chemicals and other hazardous substances emanating from operating hazardous waste treatment, storage and disposal facilities as well as thousands of abandoned waste sites. Efforts to address this issue, however, have largely ignored the specific concerns of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans. Unfortunately, racial and ethnic Americans are far more likely to be unknowing victims of exposure to such substances.

Public policies ushered in by the Reagan Administration signaled a reduction of domestic programs to monitor the environment and protect public health. Reduction of efforts to protect public health is especially disturbing in light of the many citizens who unknowingly may be exposed to substances emanating from hazardous waste sites. According to a December 1986 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "does not know if it has identified 90 percent of the potentially hazardous wastes or only 10 percent."

Issues surrounding the siting of hazardous waste facilities in racial and ethnic communities gained national prominence in 1982. The Commission for Racial Justice joined ranks with residents of predominantly Black and poor Warren County, North Carolina in opposing the establishment of a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) disposal landfill. This opposition culminated in a nonviolent civil disobedience campaign and more than 500 arrests. As a result of the protests in Warren County, the GAO studied the racial and socio-economic status of communities surrounding four landfills in southeastern United States. It found that Blacks comprised the majority of the population in three of the four communities studied.

Previous to the Warren County demonstrations, racial and ethnic communities had been marginally involved with issues of hazardous wastes. One reason for this can be traced to the nature of the environmental movement which has historically been white middle and upper-class in its orientation. This does not mean, however, that racial and ethnic communities do not care

about the quality of their environment and its effect on their lives. Throughout the course of the Commission for Racial Justice's involvement with issues of hazardous wastes and environmental pollution, we have found numerous grassroots racial and ethnic groups actively seeking to deal with this problem in their communities.

Racial and ethnic communities have been and continue to be beset by poverty, unemployment and problems related to poor housing, education and health. These communities cannot afford the luxury of being primarily concerned about the quality of their environment when confronted by a plethora of pressing problems related to their day-to-day survival. Within this context, racial and ethnic communities become particularly vulnerable to those who advocate the siting of a hazardous waste facility as an avenue for employment and economic development. Thus, proposals that economic incentives be offered to mitigate local opposition to the establishment of new hazardous waste facilities raise disturbing social policy questions.

Having observed these developments, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice decided, in 1986, to conduct extensive research on the relationship between the location of sites containing hazardous wastes and the racial and socio-economic characteristics of persons living in close proximity to those sites. The Commission for Racial Justice employed Public Data Access, Inc., a New York-based research firm, to assist in these investigations. It was hoped that these studies would lead, for the first time, to a comprehensive national analysis of the relationship between hazardous wastes and racial and ethnic communities.

"Hazardous wastes" is the term used by the EPA to define by-products of industrial production which present particularly troublesome health and environmental problems. Newly generated hazardous wastes must be managed in an approved "facility", which is defined by the EPA as any land and structures thereon which are used for treating, storing or disposing of hazardous wastes (TSD facility). Such facilities may include landfills, surface impoundments or incinerators. A "commercial" facility is defined as any facility (public or private) which accepts hazardous wastes from a third party for a fee or other remuneration.

"Uncontrolled toxic waste sites" refer to closed and abandoned sites on the EPA's list of sites which pose a present and potential threat to human health and the environment. The problem of human exposure to uncontrolled hazardous wastes is national in its scope. By 1985, the EPA had inventoried approximately 20,000 uncontrolled sites containing hazardous wastes across the nation. The potential health problems associated with the existence of these sites is highlighted by the fact that approximately 75 percent of U.S. cities derive their water supplies, in total or in part, from groundwater.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

This report presents findings from two cross-sectional studies on demographic patterns associated with (1) commercial hazardous waste facilities and (2) uncontrolled toxic waste sites. The first was an analytical study which revealed a striking relationship between the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities and race. The second was a descriptive study which documented the widespread presence of uncontrolled toxic waste sites in racial and ethnic communities throughout the United States. Among the many findings that emerged from these studies, the following are most important:

### Demographic Characteristics of Communities with Commercial Hazardous Waste Facilities

- Race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. This represented a consistent national pattern.
- Communities with the greatest number of commercial hazardous waste facilities had the highest composition of racial and ethnic residents. In communities with two or more facilities or one of the nation's five largest landfills, the average minority percentage of the population\* was more than three times that of communities without facilities (38 percent vs. 12 percent).
- In communities with one commercial hazardous waste facility, the average minority percentage of the population was twice the average minority percentage of the population in communities without such facilities (24 percent vs. 12 percent).
- Although socio-economic status appeared to play an important role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities, race still proved to be more significant. This remained true after the study controlled for urbanization and regional differences. Incomes and home values were substantially lower when communities with commercial facilities were compared to communities in the surrounding counties without facilities.

\* In this report, "minority percentage of the population" was used as a measure of "race".

- Three out of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the United States were located in predominantly Black\* or Hispanic communities. These three landfills accounted for 40 percent of the total estimated commercial landfill capacity in the nation.

#### **Demographic Characteristics of Communities with Uncontrolled Toxic Waste Sites**

- Three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
- More than 15 million Blacks lived in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
- More than 8 million Hispanics lived in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
- Blacks were heavily over-represented in the populations of metropolitan areas with the largest number of uncontrolled toxic waste sites. These areas include:

Memphis, TN	(173 sites)	Cleveland, OH	(106 sites)
St. Louis, MO	(160 sites)	Chicago, IL	(103 sites)
Houston, TX	(152 sites)	Atlanta, GA	( 94 sites)
- Los Angeles, California had more Hispanics living in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites than any other metropolitan area in the United States.
- Approximately half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indians lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.
- Overall, the presence of uncontrolled toxic waste sites was highly pervasive. More than half of the total population in the United States resided in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites.

\* In this report, the terminology used to describe various racial and ethnic populations was based on categories defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census: Blacks, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indians.



## MAJOR CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the analytical study on the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities suggest the existence of clear patterns which show that communities with greater minority percentages of the population are more likely to be the sites of such facilities. The possibility that these patterns resulted by chance is virtually impossible,\* strongly suggesting that some underlying factor or factors, which are related to race, played a role in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. Therefore, the Commission for Racial Justice concludes that, indeed, race has been a factor in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities in the United States.

The findings of the descriptive study on the location of uncontrolled toxic waste sites suggest an inordinate concentration of such sites in Black and Hispanic communities, particularly in urban areas. This situation reveals that the issue of race is an important factor in describing the problem of uncontrolled toxic waste sites. We, therefore, conclude that the cleanup of uncontrolled toxic waste sites in Black and Hispanic communities in the United States should be given the highest possible priority.

These findings expose a serious void in present government programs addressing racial and ethnic concerns in this area. This report, therefore, strongly urges the formation of necessary offices and task forces by federal, state and local governments to fill this void. Among the many recommendations of this report, we call special attention to the following:

- We urge the President of the United States to issue an executive order mandating federal agencies to consider the impact of current policies and regulations on racial and ethnic communities.
- We urge the formation of an Office of Hazardous Wastes and Racial and Ethnic Affairs by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This office should insure that racial and ethnic concerns regarding hazardous wastes, such as the cleanup of uncontrolled sites, are adequately addressed. In addition, we urge the EPA to establish a National Advisory Council on Racial and Ethnic Concerns.
- We urge state governments to evaluate and make appropriate revisions in their criteria for the siting of new hazardous waste facilities to adequately take into account the racial and socio-economic characteristics of potential host communities.

\* All of the national findings were found to be statistically significant with 99.99 percent confidence (that is, findings with a probability of less than 1 in 10,000 that they occurred by chance).

- We urge the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Conference of Black Mayors and the National League of Cities to convene a national conference to address these issues from a municipal perspective.
- We urge civil rights and political organizations to gear up voter registration campaigns as a means to further empower racial and ethnic communities to effectively respond to hazardous waste issues and to place hazardous wastes in racial and ethnic communities at the top of state and national legislative agendas.
- We urge local communities to initiate education and action programs around racial and ethnic concerns regarding hazardous wastes.

We also call for a series of additional actions. Of paramount importance are further epidemiological and demographic research and the provision of information on hazardous wastes to racial and ethnic communities.

This report firmly concludes that hazardous wastes in Black, Hispanic and other racial and ethnic communities should be made a priority issue at all levels of government. This issue is not currently at the forefront of the nation's attention. Therefore, concerned citizens and policy-makers, who are cognizant of this growing national problem, must make this a priority concern.