



# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLICY AGENDA

## Why Environmental Justice

Every American, no matter who they are or where they live, deserves to breathe clean air, drink clean water, and live on unpolluted land safe from the environmental extremes occurring due to climate change. Yet minority and low-income communities bear the disproportionate burden of air and water pollution, poor sanitation, the dumping of toxic waste, and impacts of climate change. Longstanding policies of social and racial discrimination have created an unjust system that inequitably distributes environmental harm upon Black, Brown, Indigenous and poor communities.

Minority and low-income communities across Alabama face ongoing harm from pollution and environmental damage and are increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events such as flooding and record-setting heat. In addition to facing disproportionate environmental impacts, minority and low-income communities lack the social capital, money, and resources to address the harm caused by existing environmental injustices or prevent new environmentally unjust actions that target their neighborhoods.

## Our Environmental Justice Mission

AISJ works to achieve meaningful and sustainable systems change that addresses the disparities and harm resulting from environmental injustice that Black, Brown, indigenous and low-income communities face.

Through the advancement of a bold organizational policy agenda rooted in racial equity and social justice, we seek to go beyond adjustments to the status quo and drive transformational change in public policy, organizational culture, and the public narrative within government, businesses, and our communities.

AISJ engages in advocacy to promote sound environmental policies and practices and ensure that the decisions made by our local, state, and national elected officials will protect the people and places we love. Our work varies by issue but always centers five core policy goals: Intentionality, Integrity, Inclusion, Investment, and Impact.

## Environmental Justice Policy Agenda

- **Center Justice and Equity Within Environmental Action** – Change the approach to environmental policy to prevent disadvantaged communities from being disproportionately harmed and ensure that justice and equity are priorities in law-making, regulation, and social action.
- **Repair Environmental Harm** – Take restorative action to repair damage to the local environment from pollution and address environmental health disparities within minority and low-income communities impacted by longstanding environmental injustices.
- **Protect Communities from Climate Change** – Invest in minority and low-income communities, creating plans for long-term resiliency, and building the necessary infrastructure to lessen the impacts of climate change and prevent future harm.

## Center Justice and Equity within Environmental Action

The existing governmental approach to environmental policy is insufficient to address the extent and severity of environmental injustice that minority and low-income communities face. Alabama Institute for Social Justice works to change environmental policy to prevent disadvantaged communities from being disproportionately harmed and ensure that justice and equity are priorities in law-making, regulation, and social action.

### The Problem

Despite decades of policy aimed at reducing pollution and improving environmental quality, minorities have not seen the same benefits as their white counterparts. Black, brown and Indigenous communities continue to suffer disproportionate negative health and environmental impacts from pollution, chemical exposure, and climate impacts in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

New research<sup>1</sup> has confirmed that minorities are exposed to higher levels of dangerous particulate matter from industry, light-duty vehicles, diesel-powered heavy trucks and construction. These fine particles, can become embedded in the lungs and are responsible for between 85,000 and 200,000 premature deaths in the U.S. annually. Exposure to this particulate matter is 21 percent higher for Black Americans, 18 percent higher for Asian Americans and 11 percent higher for Hispanic Americans than average. Meanwhile, exposure rates for White Americans are 8 percent lower than average. Separate research<sup>2</sup> has identified that urban tree cover is on average 15.2 percent lower for low-income census blocks compared to high income ones, resulting in temperatures that are hotter by an average of 1.5°C

The environmental disparities between minority and white populations can be traced to decades of racially discriminatory policy which created segregated communities surrounded by industrial factories and highways. This legacy of structural racism has ensured that minority communities continue to suffer environmental harm even when overall exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards has decreased. Health conditions related to poverty, coupled with a lack of access to quality health care may also compound the harm from exposure to environmental hazards in some communities.

Yet minority communities face an uphill battle in proving these environmental injustices. A lack of political and economic power, resulting from racial discrimination and poverty, often prevents residents from participating in environmental policy decision-making and implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> Science Advances. PM2.5 pollutants disproportionately and systemically affect people of color in the United States. 28 Apr 2021. Vol 7, Issue 18. [www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abf4491](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abf4491)

<sup>2</sup> PLOS One. The tree cover and temperature disparity in US urbanized areas: Quantifying the association with income across 5,723 communities. McDonald, Robert I. et. al 21 April, 2021. [journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249715](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249715)



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## The Solution

For too long our state and national environmental policies have unequally distributed the burden of pollution, toxic waste, and climate change on minority and low-income communities. At the same time, government policies have created health and social inequities within disadvantaged communities which are exacerbated by these negative environmental conditions. In order to achieve environmental justice, policy-making must center the experiences and needs of historically disenfranchised communities and commit to ensuring equitable outcomes.

Centering Justice and Equity within Environmental Action will:

- Elevate and empower the voices of minority and low-income communities directly impacted by environmental injustice and ensure they have a leading role in environmental policy formation.
- Prioritize the needs of disadvantaged communities most impacted by a history of environmental injustice when making environmental policy.
- Prevent further environmental harm to disproportionately impacted communities and improve future environmental outcomes for all communities.
- Invest in mitigation and resiliency efforts to address the legacy of environmental harm within impacted communities.



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## Repair Environmental Harm

Alabama Institute for Social Justice advocates for restorative action to repair damage to the local environment from pollution and address environmental health disparities within minority and low-income communities impacted by longstanding environmental injustices.

### The Problem

For decades minority and low-income communities have borne the disproportionate burden of air and water pollution, poor sanitation, and the dumping of toxic waste. Numerous studies have documented that Black communities throughout the South are hosts to disproportionately high numbers of hazardous waste sites.

Uniontown, Alabama is one such community, where the Arrowhead Landfill has become the disposal site for 4 million tons of coal ash and continues to advertise as a disposal site for additional coal ash, asbestos, and contaminants. Coal ash particulates, which contain pollutants such as arsenic, mercury, and lead can travel deep into the lungs. Despite the coal ash being designated a hazardous substance while located in the white community of its origin, it was classified as non-hazardous upon arrival in Uniontown.

As is often the case in such communities, the coal ash site is not the only environmental hazard in Uniontown. A nearby industrial plant deposits wastewater into the city's deteriorating and leaky sewer system which sprays partially treated sewer water into the air and leaks into nearby streams. The coal ash mound, sewer system, and other local industrial facilities emit noxious odors into the air.

Surrounded by industrial plants which have polluted the local environment with hazardous waste, water pollution, carcinogenic emissions, and contaminated soil, part of North Birmingham was designated by the Environmental Protection Agency as a Superfund site due to elevated levels of lead, arsenic and other carcinogens. In addition to the soil contamination recognized by the EPA, the community has identified other health concerns including sinus and upper respiratory tract infections as well as increased symptoms of asthma, COPD, and cancer.

This primarily Black community, with lower-than-average annual incomes, a significant percentage of people living below the poverty level, and low rates of health insurance was kept racially segregated by zoning ordinances for decades as a matter of government policy.

Existing environmental policy has failed to adequately or equitably address the environmental justice communities such as Uniontown and North Birmingham face. Uniontown residents protested against the disposal of coal ash within their community; but the Alabama Department of Environmental Management approved the location despite their concerns. In North Birmingham, toxic cleanup still continues nearly ten years after designation as a Superfund site. Despite meeting the requirements to be placed on the Superfund program's National Priorities List, the site remains unlisted.



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## The Solution

Minority and low-income communities across Alabama face ongoing harm from pollution and environmental damage. Longstanding policies of social and racial discrimination have created an unjust system that inequitably distributes environmental harm upon Black, Brown, Indigenous and poor communities. We can no longer wait to take restorative action against the environmental harm caused by the injustice of these policies.

Alabama Institute for Social Justice advocates for restorative action to repair damage to the local environment from pollution and address environmental health disparities within minority and low-income communities impacted by longstanding environmental injustices.

Repairing Environmental Harm will:

- End ongoing pollution from existing industrial and hazardous waste facilities.
- Cleanup remaining pollution and toxic chemicals within the impacted communities and restore environmental quality.
- Invest in infrastructure to support safe sanitation and community health.
- Equitably address health disparities within communities that have been exposed to environmental hazards.

## Protect Communities from Climate Change

Alabama Institute for Social Justice advocates for both government and private investment in minority and low-income communities impacted by climate change including the creation and implementation of plans for long-term resiliency and construction of necessary infrastructure to lessen the current impacts and prevent future harm.

### The Problem

Climate change is here. Global temperatures are rising, glaciers are melting causing rising sea levels, weather patterns are shifting, and extreme weather events are increasing. These changes are projected to increase in both scope and number in the decades to come, affecting all aspects of our lives from our health, to our economy, to the environments in which we live.

But the effects of climate change will not be equally felt by all Americans. Low-income and minority communities are increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to systemic historical and social factors that make them least able to prepare for, manage, and recover from harm.

A September 2021 report by the Environmental Protection Agency, *Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts*<sup>3</sup>, analyzed the impacts of climate change on various populations in scenarios with 2°C of global warming<sup>4</sup> or 50 cm of global sea level rise.

The report found that while low-income populations in general are at relatively greater risk of the impacts of climate change than those of higher-income, minority populations are the most likely to live in areas with the highest projected levels of climate change impacts. Black individuals have the highest risk.

Black individuals are more likely than others to live in communities facing the highest increases in childhood asthma diagnoses from climate-driven changes in particulate matter; the highest increases in mortality rates due to climate-driven changes in extreme temperatures; and the highest rates of labor hour losses for weather-exposed workers due to extreme temperatures.

And Black individuals are 40 percent more likely than other groups to live in locations where extreme temperatures driven by climate change will result in higher mortality rates. In the Southeast alone, 2°C of global warming is projected to result in an annual increase of 1,900 premature deaths from climate-driven changes in particulate matter.

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<sup>3</sup> EPA. 2021. Climate Change and Social Vulnerability in the United States: A Focus on Six Impacts. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA 430-R-21-003. [www.epa.gov/cira/social-vulnerability-report](http://www.epa.gov/cira/social-vulnerability-report)

<sup>4</sup> Using a baseline period from 1986 to 2005. The world has warmed by an increase of 0.65°C since the baseline.



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## The Solution

The data is clear. Climate change will have disproportionately negative health and environmental impacts on low-income and minority populations least able to prepare for, manage, and recover from harm. Black communities will be hit the hardest. We must develop plans for climate change resiliency and invest in infrastructure to lessen the impacts of climate change and prevent future harm.

Protecting Communities from Climate Change will:

- Engage frontline communities in identification of both the challenges they face due to climate change and solutions to those challenges.
- Prevent community displacement whenever possible and provide appropriate supports for populations displaced by climate change.
- Ensure disaster and climate change preparedness and relief funding is directed to communities in an equitable manner, accounting for risk disparities and population vulnerabilities.
- Address shelter, transportation, health, and workforce challenges arising from both the decrease in environmental quality and increase in natural disasters associated with climate change.