

Environmental Justice & Prison Reform in Minority Communities

Both prisons and toxic sites are considered undesirable land use and therefore they are often placed in the same area with little to no regard for the health of inmates. 589 of 1,821 federal and state prisons exist within three miles of a Superfund site, with 134 being within one mile. These sites commonly contain toxins such as arsenic, lead, mercury, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) and can cause extensive damage to human health.

When natural disasters hit, incarcerated people are often the first to be abandoned; as the climate crisis worsens, so will their suffering. After the immediate danger of an extreme weather event has passed, prisoners are often used as slave labor to clean up the areas devastated by a major storm. As they carry off the sandbags they made and piled up before a storm's coastal onslaught, or handle toxic materials amid a hurricane's wreckage, they are exposed to still more risk of disease, while their labor is stolen in order to restore a status quo that only comforts those outside the walls. The reality is that the use of prison labor by the state in this way is not new at all, as climate change worsens, prisoners will continue to be casualties of climate genocide.

The United States is the biggest carbon polluter in history. The nation's unprecedented incarceration numbers, beginning in the 1970s, brought on a surge in prison-building, often in environmentally questionable areas. The U.S. has 5 percent of the world's population in the United States, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. The U.S. also incarcerates a higher rate of its citizens than any other country in the world. The practices that have led to the kinds of ecological devastation we now face are social and economic systems, rooted in social relationships of exploitation, domination, and inequity. African Americans and Latinos make up 60% of the prison population while representing only 25% of the American population. Low-income populations also have higher rates of incarceration. At each end of the prison-industrial complex, fragile communities and delicate ecologies bear the brunt of an expanded carceral infrastructure, rather than investment, regeneration, and cultivation.



Texas state prison that was flooded in 2016

The success or failure of correctional adaptation efforts will be measured in human lives as well as public dollars. We need to do anything it takes to let the people inside know that they haven't been forgotten as the world continues to be affected by ecological change.

"The dignity of individuals, the rights of all people and the potential for human growth and development must be respected"

(American Correctional Association, 2002)



Prison Conditions Violate the 8th Amendment



Prison conditions throughout the country have been so inadequate that courts have ruled that they violate the 8th Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment. Many of these conditions are the result of environmental ills such as excessive heat or cold, exposure to asbestos, lack of drinkable water and exposure to toxic elements. Yet, while some cases have been won no national changes have been made and environmental injustice continues.

Cases of Environmental Injustice in Prisons

- Since 2007, at least fourteen prisoners have died from heat-related symptoms in Texas state prisons, and that is only one state. In addition, there are no federally mandated laws on temperature control.
- In February, inmates in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, NY were stuck in freezing cells for a week as the temperature dropped to below freezing and heating became almost nonexistent.
- Prisons also fail to adequately prepare for extreme weather events. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 over 8,000 inmates were incarcerated at Orleans Parish Prison. Despite the mandatory evacuation, prisoners were forced to remain for several days in flooded cells, with a limited supply of food and drinking water and lack of basic sanitation. Similarly, prisoners were not evacuated from flood zones in Puerto Rico during Hurricane Maria.
- In 2014, intense rains caused the basement of Escambia County Jail in Florida to flood, resulting in a gas leak and explosion that killed two prisoners and injured dozens of others. The incident illustrates the risks faced by prisoners in flood-prone areas, risks that could be elevated in coastal areas due to sea level rise
- Fayette State Correctional Institution is located on part of what used to be a massive coal preparation plant and adjacent to a massive coal ash dump. Prisoners at SCI Fayette have been complaining of higher rates of respiratory, gastrointestinal, skin, and thyroid problems that may be linked to coal dust inhalation as well as water contamination.

COVID-19 - Inmates Are At Risk

- Florida state, which oversees more than 24,000 staff and approximately 95,000 inmates, has only tested 310 inmates, according to numbers first posted on the department's website on April 16th 2020. Of those, 44 came up positive, 96 negative, and 170 are awaiting results.
- In New York City, another epicenter in the outbreak, the rate of confirmed cases is a staggering 375 cases per 10,000 inmates.



Environmental justice is "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". In other words, no community should disproportionately bear the brunt of environmental ills, such as pollution, yet in reality, minority and low-income neighborhoods are the ones to bear the brunt. Just as race-based and class-based disparities exist in the experience of environmental ills, they also exist in the criminal justice system.