

**Building an Egalitarian Detroit Through Combating Environmental Racism**

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### **Abstract**

Environmental racism has been a problem in the state of Michigan for many years now, and in this paper we investigate the instance of this issue in the city of Detroit specifically—exploring the causes, effects, and solutions that can be implemented to help solve this problem. In recent years Detroit has faced a water crisis that has disproportionately affected black residents, and is currently home to one of the most toxic zip codes in the country, which has left hundreds of children severely asthmatic, and endangered the lives of countless others. While this seems bleak, there are things that can be done to stop the spread of this environmental racism. Solutions proposed include multidisciplinary perspectives that link social justice, policy, and environmental sustainability. It is essential that the predatory legal policies that allow for the existence of such inequality be revised and changed and it is necessary to take measures to improve air quality in the city. This includes plans to restrict and monitor emissions from companies within the area and examine the urban structure of the city and how it can be reimagined in a way that is not designed to harm black populations. In addition to the implementation of these actions, it is important that healthcare measures are provided to those who have already been affected by these occurrences, so some of the damage that has already happened can be remedied.

### **Building an Egalitarian Detroit Through Combating Environmental Racism**

Detroit has had a long history of air pollution and environmental hazards plaguing the city. Take the zip code 48217 for example– in this 3 mile radius there are over 3 dozen polluting facilities and is home highway I-75 that sees 100,000 cars and trucks spewing enormous amounts of gasoline and diesel fumes every day (Neavling, 2023). These combined factors make the zip code Michigan’s most toxic, which affects its residents, who find themselves struggling to breathe. People who live in the area face disproportionate rates of asthma, illness, and cancer. The soil itself is even toxic– tests show that it is saturated with high levels of lead and arsenics (Neavling, 2023). The area also houses one of the most notorious polluters of the modern day– Marathon Oil. Marathon oil is one of the largest contributors to the toxic air and soil, and since 2016 they have failed 3 inspections by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and had 9 environmental violations in the year of 2018 alone (Neavling, 2023).

Unfortunately, this issue is not just one of environmental sustainability, but also one that is centered around racism. Environmental racism is institutional rules, regulations, and corporate decisions and actions that disproportionately expose a certain race to dangerous chemicals or toxins (Greenaction, n.d.). This seems to be at play here in the city. The zipcode of 48217 is predominantly black, and has a large hispanic population. This is no coincidence either– black people are 75% more likely to live near industrial facilities, and in the city of Detroit, people of color are exposed to pollution at a rate that is 40% higher than their white counterparts (Neavling, 2023).

Air and soil pollution is not the only environmental justice issue that the city of Detroit faces. Water shut offs in the city have become so common and widespread that residents and

professionals are demanding it be considered a public health emergency. From 2014-2020, over 140,000 families in Detroit have had their water shut off at one point or another (Ignaczak, 2020). The effects of this shut off are not to be taken lightly: a 2017 study showed that people who contracted waterborne illness were 1.42 times more likely to have lived on a block that experienced water shut offs, and people who lived on these water shut off blocks were 1.55 times more likely to contract a waterborne illness (Ignaczak, 2020). A separate 2017 study also showed residents who faced water shut offs had their mental health severely negatively impacted, and even the fear of having their water shut off was enough to have this effect (Ignaczak, 2020).

Upon investigation of these shut offs, it was clear that these instances have a component of racial inequity. The water company in the parts of Detroit that are predominantly African American and low income whites is authorized to shut off water when customers have accounts that are 45 days past due, while water authorities in the surrounding suburbs are much more lenient and allow longer periods before shutting their water off (We the People of Detroit, 2016). This creates a disparity where the predominantly black and low income populations are facing water shut offs at a rate that is much higher than the residents who are middle class and mostly white (We the People of Detroit, 2016).

Considering these instances of inequality in the city, we pose a very important question: What can be done to combat environmental racism for the city of Detroit in hopes of creating a more egalitarian society? In the following pages we will discuss solutions that may help solve this problem, and propose new ideas on how the city can accomplish this moving forward.

### **Proposed Solutions**

The issue of environmental racism is not a simple one to fix– if it was easy to solve it would not still be such a prevalent issue in our society. The complexity of this problem stems from the fact that there are multiple causal factors that contribute to environmental racism. These causes include neglect on the part of the government and/or companies, low land values in areas of people of color, and an overall lack of institutional intervention and power (Greenaction, n.d.). This means, in order to solve this problem, we must address all of these causal contributors as well as help those who have already been affected by this issue.

### **The Issue of Neglect and Lack of Institutional Power**

For many years, companies like Marathon Oil have been dumping pollutants into the air and soil with little regard to the health and safety of the people who live close by and the environment itself. By doing so, they are neglecting the responsibility they have to not cause harm to living beings and people. All the while this has been occurring, the government has stood by and done nothing to stop this from happening.

As previously mentioned, Marathon Oil has had multiple environmental violations and failed screenings by the EPA, and yet they continue to run smoothly with little consequence. Since the year 2000, Marathon Oil has received 1.3 trillion dollars worth of fines due to environmental violations (Violation Tracker Current Parent Company Summary, n.d.). While this may seem like a lot, it is hardly enough to discourage Marathon Oil's actions– in a single year (2022), Marathon Oil had a net income of almost triple that amount (M. O. Corporation, 2023) that was accumulated over 22 years. This means that for Marathon, these fines add up to little

compared to the money they are making, and if this isn't changed in some way they will continue down the destructive path they are on.

There are things that can be done to fix this issue. Fines given by the EPA for environmental violations can be steepened, and the consequences of violating agreements and guidelines needs to be harsher. The general rate of fines should be increased, and companies should face a spike in the cost of fines for repeat offenses. While this is the case already in some instances, the price of fines still needs to increase enough to the point where it costs more money to pay these fines than pay for more sustainable options— and they need to be expensive enough that they are making a significant dent in annual net income, otherwise large companies like Marathon will never bat an eye at these costs.

However, the EPA is not totally to blame for the continuation of environmental violations, especially in predominantly black neighborhoods. Policies from the government— especially in the state of Michigan— allow for this to happen as well. Michigan legislature views racial discrimination cases through the dominant predators perspective, meaning proof of racist intent is required for a racial discrimination claim to be valid (Benz, 2019). This is something that is extremely difficult to do as intent is rarely stated and is otherwise hard to prove. This dominant predator's perspective is in opposition to the victim's perspective, which allows evidence of disparate impacts to be reviewed as evidence of inequality under the law (Benz, 2019). This policy of the perpetrators perspective allows for the continuation of many racist practices, ranging from discriminatory housing practices to environmental racism, and the only way to stop this is to readopt the victim's perspective. When people are being disproportionately impacted in a way that is systematic, intent doesn't matter— only outcomes do.

This is not the only legislative failure in Michigan that is affecting the city of Detroit. Over the past years, neoliberal legislatures have been giving budget cuts to many agencies that regulate businesses and corporations (Benz, 2019). Both Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality and the EPA have faced heavy budget cuts that have left them understaffed, underfunded, and with limited resources (Benz, 2019). These issues combined have left them unable to properly function, and many of the environmental issues have been slipping through the cracks. More of the state budget needs to be allocated to environmental sustainability and justice, so this problem does not continue festering.

### **Changing Legislature in Michigan**

After pointing out these glaring issues with the Michigan legislature, the question must be asked: how can we change legislation in the state of Michigan?

Legislation similar to that of Assembly Bill 617 (AB-617) can be used as a template for creating legislation going forward in Detroit. AB-617 is a bill that was passed in California that works to address air pollution through the use of advanced technologies that are used to monitor air quality and would enforce steps that will lessen air pollution in areas with poor air quality (Biagi, et al., 2020). The state would also have to set forth a plan that monitors and reduces emissions in the communities that are of the highest risk. In doing so, this state intervention increases accountability between the companies responsible for pollution and the affected communities (Biagi, et al., 2020). It is also thought to be a good idea for this bill to be modified to include designation of a manufacturing zone that limits where companies that emit toxins can be located, and would keep them out of residential zones (Biagi, et al., 2020).

According to the Michigan constitution, citizens are able to change legislation by filing a petition with the secretary of state and gaining signatures from other citizens. If enough signatures are provided, initiatives can be put on the ballot for the next election, and residents can vote to pass them (Bensen, 2022). Michigan residents have the power to pass legislation that will work to uphold the health of citizens and the environment and help combat this problem of environmental racism in the state and the city of Detroit. With this proposed change in legislation, it is also important for Michigan residents to vote in elections, and vote for representatives who will prioritize the environment and residents above free market policies such as the perpetrators perspective.

### **The Issue of Property Values and Segregation**

Racial segregation is an issue that is unfortunately still alive and real even today– and is especially prominent in the city of Detroit. In fact, reports in 2021 highlighted Detroit as the most segregated city in America (WXYZ 7 Action News Detroit, 2021). Historically, properties in majority black neighborhoods are undervalued and cost less, leading corporations such as Marathon to purchase these properties for cheap and build pollution spewing facilities on them. Detroiters, such as those in 48217, find themselves unable to leave these now heavily polluted areas, as it is almost impossible to sell houses that are shadowed by these facilities (Neavling 2023). People find themselves trapped in these areas, and raise their families in these toxic environments, and the cycle of systematic racism continues.

### **Racial Segregation and Greenspaces**

Racial segregation is tightly interlinked with the prevalence of environmental racism. Redlining, a practice that was implemented in the 1930s, designated communities

that were deemed to be hazardous for federal mortgage lending said to be due to their low-income status, worse quality of housing, diverse ethnicities, and industrial exposures (Kaufman, Hajat). Redlining was a prominent practice in Detroit, and districts that were redlined still feel the negative effects of this practice even today. In a 2021 study, access to greenspace— spaces where vegetation and nature are encouraged to thrive in urban settings— was measured in redline districts using normalized Differential Vegetation Index (NDVI) values. Results were clear— districts that had been redlined in the past still show lower NDVI values by a significant amount (Kaufman, Hajat). This means that it is likely that this legacy of racist policies contributes to environmental injustice— causing these segregated, redlined neighborhoods to have less access to greenspace. If there were more accessible greenspaces to these communities, this would help the local environment thrive. Greenspaces can help reduce pollution effects and heat island effects within cities, and provide carbon into the soil which can boost biodiversity (Kirby, 2020). If greenspaces were more accessible, these effects would improve the environmental conditions in polluted areas.

### **So how do we create greenspace?**

One way the city of Detroit has been combating racial segregation and unequal opportunity is through a practice called placemaking. Placemaking is a way to design spaces that reflect the priorities of the community and create a sense of belonging that can improve the quality of life of residents (Burrowes, 2019). Placemaking can include many practices: creating parks, installing art, and promoting walking paths in cities (Burrowes, 2019). Using placemaking, communities can really focus on cultivating

already existing parks and creating green spaces in the cities. This can be done a number of ways, a diverse range of trees can be planted in the city, canopied areas can be created to protect existing plants from continual heat and sun, and incorporating surfaces that are permeable to greens to allow stormwater to run off so plants can thrive (Barkla, 2020).

Achieving these things through placemaking can help revitalize distressed areas and has already helped black-owned businesses grow in the city of Detroit (Burrowes, 2019). Placemaking can be used in a way that not only promotes greenspace, but also encourages investments in communities spread across the city of Detroit, which can grow whole communities and strengthen local economies (Burrowes, 2019). If these economies become stronger and resources are more available to these communities, neighborhoods can grow more equitably (Burrowes, 2019). This development of more equitable communities can help end the damaging effects of racial segregation in Detroit, and this idea, along with implementing the other proposed solutions would allow for a more egalitarian Detroit and help prevent the targeting of communities, which contributes to environmental racism.

### **Giving Back to Those Affected**

Marathon Oil and other similarly pollutants companies have raked up trillions of dollars worth of environmental fines in the last twenty years. One possible solution would be to give a large fraction of these fees to those in Detroit who have been directly impacted by these companies (Neavling, 2023). By doing so, some residents may be able to afford moving and selling their house, and escape the pollution plaguing the area. This money could also be used to seek medical treatment for those who have contracted illnesses from the toxins that have polluted

their homes. In addition to this, people who are found to have fallen ill from exposure to chemicals produced at facilities in the area should have their treatments medically covered by the companies who have caused this harm. This could be enforced by the government via the new proposed legislation, and punishments for violating would again include harsher penalties.

### **Limitations**

Throughout my research, I have focused on solutions that can be employed across the city at a community level or individual level, but some of these solutions are placing the burden of improving situations on the people who have been affected. There are a couple reasons for this: 1) I try to suggest solutions that can be implemented at a level that is realistic and doable for the reader. I do propose changes at a legislative level, but many times this change is spurred by the people who have concerns. 2) These issues have been present for years and years, and authoritative figures and companies have had the power to change these things, and they still have not. If change was going to happen without community level action, it would have. I acknowledge that this burden should not fall on communities who have been harmed, and further research should be pursued that can hold the perpetrators accountable.

### **Conclusion**

Environmental racism is an issue that is plaguing the city of Detroit, and if nothing is done about it, it will continue to affect resident's lives. It is a problem that is not easy to solve, and is rooted in faulty policies and racial segregation within the city. To solve this pressing matter, multiple approaches must be employed. These solutions include focusing on legislative change, stricter penalties for environmental violations, new technology for monitoring emissions,

creating greenspace to boost the environment, and using placemaking strategies to boost local economies to create equal opportunity that may prevent further instances of environmental racism. Taking these steps is necessary if we ever want Detroit to be truly egalitarian. Inequality continues to exist in the city as it is right now, especially when it comes to environmental justice— whether current legislation acknowledges it or not.

In the future, further research should be conducted to help solve this problem. Issues such as how the use of greenspace can improve environmental quality in urban living, how combating housing inequality can help solve environmental racism, and how the government can improve these problems should continue to be researched. Racism is an issue that exists in many facets of life, and all of these ways are connected. The best way we can end the issue of environmental racism is to end all kinds of racism along with it— a task that is not easily done, and will take many more years of research and work to accomplish.

### References

Barkla, C. (2020, January 28). *8 practical ways to add more green to city landscapes*. Create. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://createdigital.org.au/8-practical-ways-add-more-green-city-landscapes/#:~:text=Create%20refuge%3A%20Provide%20shade%20protection,allow%20stormwater%20runoff%20to%20escape.>

Bringing greenspace and nature into the cities benefits the communities within them. Research highlighted by Barkala shows eight ways to incorporate greenspace into urban environments. These ways are incorporating green views within buildings, creating green entrances to buildings, create spaces where people can relax by nature, retaining mature trees, planting a diverse range of plants and trees, providing shaded areas where plants can escape scorching heat and sun, design pathways that are shaded to encourage physical activity, and optimizing green infrastructure.

Benz, T. A. (2019). Toxic cities: Neoliberalism and environmental racism in Flint and Detroit Michigan. *Critical Sociology*, 45(1), 49-62.

This article examines Michigan's environmental legal history through two different lenses, one being the victim's perspective and one being the dominant perpetrator perspective. The victim's perspective allows evidence of differing impact to be proof of unequal protection under the law, while the dominant perpetrator perspective requires proof of the intent to discriminate for a racial discrimination claim to be valid. Tracing the history of Michigan and the Federal government, it can be clearly seen that the dominant perpetrator perspective is being used to create racial environmental inequality, particularly in cases such as the Flint water crisis and Marathon Oil in Detroit. The author argues that these inequalities rise not because of intent to be racist, but out of neoliberal policies that refuse to see color being passed.

Biagi, S., Rooney, H., & Sunil, S. (2020). Improving Air Quality to Fight Environmental Racism in Detroit. *Students for Democracy*, 22.

Biagi et al. highlights the disproportionate incidence of black people who have asthma or are hospitalized compared with state averages, pointing to air quality as the cause for this. Biagi et al. suggests adopting legislation similar to some that have already passed, such as AB-617, a legislation that California has adopted that combats air pollution by using modern technologies and increasing penalties for toxic emissions. This would allow the

city of Detroit to measure the level of toxins in the air and penalize those who violate regulations, thus lowering the level of air pollution and making Detroit a healthier city as a whole.

Burrowes, K. (2019, July 15). *Detroit shows how placemaking can undo neighborhood segregation*. Urban Institute. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/detroit-shows-how-placemaking-can-undo-neighborhood-segregation>

Burrowes talks about how racial policies have led to racially segregated neighborhoods that have allowed for the continuation of exclusion and inequality. This problem is especially noticeable in the city of Detroit, and one way Detroiters are fighting back is through the use of placemaking. Placemaking allows communities to come together and cultivate their spaces to be their own, which strengthens the local economies and creates more equal opportunities, which will help reduce the harmful effects of this segregation.

M. O. Corporation, (2023, February 15). *Marathon oil announces 2023 Capital Budget and reports fourth quarter and full year 2022 results*. PR Newswire: press release distribution, targeting, monitoring and marketing. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/marathon-oil-announces-2023-capital-budget-and-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2022-results-301747985.html>

This article details the income and budget reports for Marathon Oil for the year 2022. Net income information listed in the paper for the year 2022 come from this article. Also detailed in the article is budgets, revenue, etc.

Greenaction. (n.d.). *Environmental Justice & Environmental racism*. Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <http://greenaction.org/what-is-environmental-justice/>

Greenaction provides a detailed description of what is defined as environmental racism, as well as some of the causes of this issue. It also describes the 17 pillars of environmental justice. A helpful distinction of environmental equality and environmental justice is provided, and the difference between the two is highlighted.

Ignaczak, N. M. (2020, August 27). *Detroit water shutoffs and a crisis of public health - belt magazine*. Belt Magazine - Dispatches From the Rust Belt and Greater Midwest. Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://beltmag.com/detroit-water-shutoffs-crisis-public-health-coronavirus/>

This article reports on the Detroit water crisis and how it is a crisis of public health matters. Over many years, thousands of Detroiters have had their water shut off, and how this is a matter of inequality. People being affected by these shut offs are majority black, and are more likely to contract waterborne illnesses. It is also pointed out how water shut offs are negatively impacting mental health of residents as well as physical illnesses. Now that covid-19 has been rampant all over the country, the government is finally regarding the water crisis in Detroit as a problem worth addressing.

Kaufman, J. D., & Hajat, A. (2021). Confronting environmental racism. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 129(5), 051001.

Kaufman and Hajat discuss how racist policies of the present and future affect environmental justice today. Districts that have been redlined in the past are shown to have less access to greenspace and face more environmental hazards, pointing to these policies as a reason that environmental racism is an issue today.

Kirby, N. (2020, November 6). *The importance of urban green spaces*. Denver Urban Gardens. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://dug.org/urban-green-spaces/>

Green Spaces in urban environments have been shown to increase human health and biodiversity in environments. Urban greenspaces have been shown to boost physical and mental health, promote relaxation and sense of peace, reduce premature deaths, reduce heat island effects in cities as well as pollution levels and traffic noise. These greenspaces also sequester carbon in the soils and promote more biodiverse living environments which improve overall environmental health.

Neavling, S. (2023, April 15). *Struggling to breathe in 48217, Michigan's most toxic ZIP code*. Detroit Metro Times. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/struggling-to-breathe-in-48217-michigans-most-toxic-zip-code-23542211>

In zip code 48217, residents are struggling to breathe. Residing within the city of Detroit, this zip code is easily the most toxic area in the whole state. Dozens of pollution-spewing factories are located here, pumping toxins, chemicals, and fumes into the air, water, and soil. Residents in the area have disproportionate rates of respiratory illnesses such as asthma, and face other adverse effects in addition to that. People find themselves unable to move, as houses that fall under the shadow of Marathon Oil have a really hard time selling. Marathon Oil continues to pollute the area and cause harm to the environment and those

living there with little remorse or regard to any of the damage they have caused. New strategies such as giving fine money back to those affected are proposed as a way to help solve this solution.

Secretary of State, & Bensen, J., SPONSORING A STATEWIDE INITIATIVE, REFERENDUM OR CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PETITION 1–27 (2022). Lansing, MI; State of Michigan.

Michigan Secretary of State highlights how to sponsor a statewide initiative, referendum, or constitutional amendment petition. For an initiative, signatures are needed to put a proposal on the ballot. Referendums are similar, but instead of initiating action, they work to redo what has already been done by the state. Signatures are also required to get on the ballot as well.

*Violation Tracker Current Parent Company Summary*. goodjobsfirst.org. (n.d.). Retrieved April 13, 2023, from <https://violationtracker.goodjobsfirst.org/?parent=marathon-petroleum&page=4>

This is a tracker of different kinds of violations companies have acquired since the year 2000. Categories include, but are not limited to, environment-related offenses, employment-related offenses, safety-related offenses, and financial offenses. Marathon Oil violations are listed here, and they are the numbers referred to in the body of the paper.

We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective. (2016). *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit, I*, 1–36.

The water crisis in Detroit has been developing since the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department came to the city in 1900. Since then, disparities involving water shut-offs have become a huge issue for the city of Detroit. Low-income people of color face harsher punishments and less time to pay water bills than their middle-class white counterparts, leading to more shut-offs in these communities. Adding to this issue, the board of Great Lakes Water Authority has always been swayed in Detroit's favor, as Detroit only has two representatives and are always out voted by the other three.

WXYZ 7 Action News Detroit. (2021, June 21). *Detroit is the most segregated city in the U.S., New Study finds*. WXYZ 7 Action News Detroit. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://www.wxyz.com/news/detroit-is-the-most-segregated-city-in-the-u-s-new-study-finds>

University of California Berkeley released a report in 2021, naming Detroit as the most segregated city in the entire nation. The report found that 169 out of 209 metro areas in the city have increased their levels of segregation in the 29 years between 1990 and 2019. Regarding income and poverty levels, white dominated areas fared the best while black segregated areas fared the worst. The black population of Detroit is 78%, while the metro area is only 28%, which is what makes it earn the title of the most segregated city in the United States.