



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1996 Volume II: Environmental and Occupational Health: What We Know; How We Know; What We Can Do

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## **Environmental Racism and The Urban School Child**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.02.01

by Patricia Augustine-Reaves and Pamela Augustine-Jefferson

In 1987 The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice conducted a landmark study with startling results. Memphis, Chicago, Atlanta, St. Louis, Houston and other urban areas were found to contain the greatest concentrations of hazardous waste sites. Susan Moffat noted in a 1995 Los Angeles Times article, relative to a study at Occidental College, that non-whites in the Los Angeles area are three times more likely than whites to live within half a mile of hazardous waste treatment sites or dumping centers. What's even more disturbing is that "some populations are in a one-mile radius of six or seven hazardous waste sites." The researchers at Occidental College also concluded that "race was even more important than income in determining whether a neighborhood had a toxic waste dump." The Environmental Protection Agency of California, of course, denies that race is a factor in the permitting process.

Nearly halfway across the country another urban wasteland has been created. It is a city that is populated by practically 100% peoples of African descent. This city has no obstetric services and no garbage removal. Jobs are scarce. Raw sewage backs up into homes and schools regularly. And this city, East St. Louis, has the highest rate of children's death related to asthma. East St. Louis sits directly next to Monsanto Chemical, Pfizer Chemical, Aluminum Ore, Big River Zinc and other industrial plants. It was noted at the New England Environmental Law Society in November 1992 at Harvard University that "Most of these plants have their own incorporated townships, where no one lives and are no more than legal fiction to provide shelters and immunity from the jurisdiction of East St. Louis." This is a city where "lead is found in playgrounds at an astonishing 10,000 parts per million." The fact that children play directly downstream from chemical and metal processing plants has resulted in "the highest rate of childhood asthma in the nation." Children also play in what is known as Dead Creek "which received toxic discharges in the past and now smokes by day and glows on moonlit nights. It gained notoriety for instances of spontaneous combustion created by friction when children ride their bicycles." East St. Louis has been aptly described as "America Soweto." Jonathan Kozol, in *Savage Inequalities*, further details the atrocities in East St. Louis and their effects on the urban school children there.

Lead poisoning affects an alarming 49% of African American children residing in the inner city. That figure leaps to 68% for those with an income of less than \$6,000. The implications and ramifications of widespread lead poisoning on the lives and intellectual potential of urban school children are far reaching.

The purpose of this unit will be to explore environmental racism, the resulting environmental hazards, (specifically air pollution and lead poisoning) and their affects on urban school children. Lessons and

workshops geared towards elementary school children, parents and other community members will be developed. The focus of these workshops and lessons will be to educate all concerned about these environmental perils that threaten our communities and the underlying racial implications.

(Recommended for Science, grades K-2)

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