

# **Environmental Justice and Reparations from Systemic Racism**

A memo for the Washington State Environmental Justice Task Force

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It is a historic fact that racial disparities in health are rooted in legacies of slavery and colonialism. Washington State's Environmental Health Disparities Map outlines the current land-based relationships between human health, income, race, and pollution. This tool, developed through community-based participatory research, documents present inequities and shows the links between social vulnerabilities and exposure to pollution.

But today's geographic and racial health disparities did not arise by complacency or individual acts. Racial discrimination in New Deal housing and transportation policy, indigenous land theft, broken treaties, and other forms of institutional (and often unconstitutional) harms shaped these current multigenerational inequalities.

In support of the Washington States Environmental Justice Task Force, this memo does two things:

1. Draws links between historical discrimination and contemporary health and environmental disparities specific to Washington State.
2. Provides an (incomplete) list of resources, writings and reports to support the development of reparations proposals to redress historic and current harms.

## I. Multigenerational Environmental Health Disparities

*To heal was to be familiar with what was destroyed*

-Ray Young Bear, Meskwaki poet<sup>1</sup>

Racial segregation across the country was shaped in the Jim Crow era by the exclusionary zoning of The Federal Housing Administration's redlining maps which banks used to determine who received federal mortgage loans for homeownership. Redlining maps of [Seattle](#), [Tacoma](#), and [Spokane](#) are available through the University of Richmond's *Mapping Inequality* project.

The 1936 of commercial map of the greater Seattle area outlined 6 security areas, graded 'A' through 'E'. This was supervised by deputy state appraiser, E.G. Wendland and the chief valuator of the Federal Housing Administration. Here are few of the [descriptions of neighborhoods](#) and their resulting grades:

- "A" rating: a waterfront area in the Seward Park neighborhood, described as *"a new area sparsely settled but protected by building and [racial restrictions](#)."*
- "B" rating: the Ballard neighborhood, *"the locality is populated by working men, skilled mechanics, and white-collar workers. This is the 'Scandinavian' section of Seattle."*
- "B" rating: The Capitol Hill Neighborhood surrounding Volunteer Park, because *"Notwithstanding the age of the district, [the locality has no racial problems](#), nor has it a problem of the influx of people of a lower earning standard."*
- "C" rating: a neighborhood described by its proximity to *"a gas plant which is causing a smoke and odor nuisance."*
- "D" rating: A neighborhood in the Central District, described in one short sentence: *"This is the Negro area of Seattle."*

In addition to redlining, racist property deeds and covenants barred the sale to or occupancy by African Americans across the country and in Seattle. Richard Rothstein<sup>2</sup> describes how, between 1935 and 1944 W.E. Boeing, founder of Boeing

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in *An American Sunrise* by Muskogee Creek poet Joy Harjo

<sup>2</sup> "The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government segregated America" 2017, Liveright Publishers

Company, developed suburbs north of Seattle. During this period and after WWII, more suburbs were constructed with other developers which all wrote racially restrictive language and covenants into their property deeds. The result was a city whose African American population was encircled by all-white suburbs and restricted to purchasing houses in urban areas closest to polluting industries. Boeing property deeds stated, for example, “No property in said addition shall at any time be sold, conveyed, rented, or leased in whole or in part to any person or persons not of the white or Caucasian race”

Similar racial covenants and housing policy also segregated cities in eastern Washington, including [Spokane](#).

The federal interstate highway system also segregated neighborhoods in many cities. In Spokane, [residents describe how I-90 cut through the east central neighborhoods and affected communities](#), just as in other major US cities including [Los Angeles](#) and [Atlanta](#). This led to intergenerational inequality in health and wealth.

Together, the policies of redlining, racial covenants, and infrastructure placement created intergenerational wealth gaps that persist and contribute to environmental health disparities to this day: [Research on extreme heat](#) suggests that these policies created heat burdens as low-income neighborhoods that have less tree canopy. [This causes a greater heat exposure on residents, and is rising with global warming.](#)

[Research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) shows that racialized wealth gaps and segregation have a two-pronged effect on health outcomes: on average white Americans create more pollution through their consumption than Black and Hispanic Americans, but don't breathe the full costs of this consumption:

*“in the United States, PM2.5 exposure is disproportionately caused by consumption of goods and services mainly by the non-Hispanic white majority, but disproportionately inhaled by Black and Hispanic minorities. On average, non-Hispanic whites experience a “pollution advantage”: They experience ~17% less air pollution exposure than is caused by their consumption. Blacks and Hispanics on average bear a “pollution burden” of 56% and 63% excess exposure, respectively, relative to the exposure caused by their consumption.”*

These findings are not new. Fifteen years previously, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation released their report [African Americans and Climate Change: Unequal Burden](#), noting that “policies intended to mitigate climate change can generate large health and economic benefits or costs for African Americans, depending on how they are structured.”

## I. Further Resources

### Reparations

Movement 4 Black Lives: [Reparations Platform](#), accessed September 3, 2020

Resource Generation: [Land Reparations and Indigenous Solidarity Toolkit](#)  
Accessed September 4, 2020

Catherine Millas Kaiman: [Environmental Justice and Community Based Reparations](#) Seattle University Law Review

William “Sandy” Darity and Kristen Mullen: [Black Reparations and the Racial Wealth Gap](#) June 15, 2020 Brookings Institution Report

Ta-Nehisi Coates: [The Case for Reparations](#) June 2014, The Atlantic

Yearby, Lewis, Gilbert, and Banks: [Racism is a Public Health Crisis](#) Data for Progress, September 2020

Maanvi Singh: [Native American 'Land Taxes': A step on the roadmap for reparations](#) The Guardian, December 31, 2019

Daniel R. Wildcat: [Why Native Americans Don't Want Reparations](#) Washington Post, June 10, 2014

Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman: [What South Africa can Teach the US About Reparations](#) Washington Post, June 25, 2019

Irvine Molotsky: [Senate Votes to Compensate Japanese American Internees](#) New York Times, April 21, 1988

John Tateishi: [Redress: The Inside Story of the successful Campaign for Japanese American Reparations](#) Heyday Books, 2020

Maki, Kitano, and Berthold: [Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress](#), University of Illinois Press 1999

### Racism and environmental health inequities

Beverly Wright and Robert Bullard: [The Wrong Complexion for Protection: how the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities](#), NYU Press 2012

Meg Anderson: [Racist Housing Practices from the 1930's Linked to Hotter Neighborhoods Today](#) Spokane Public Radio, January 14, 2020

[US Cities Spending millions on trees to fight heat -- but are their plans equitable?](#)  
The Guardian, August 26, 2020

Matthew Fleischer: [Want to tear down insidious monuments to racism? Bulldoze LA Freeways](#) LA Times, June 24, 2020

Hannah Weinberger: [UW Research shows racism and redlining hurt local wildlife too](#) August 20, 2020 Crosscut

Supporting research: Schell et al.: [The ecological and evolutionary consequences of systemic racism in urban environments](#) Science August 13, 2020

Brad Plummer and Nadja Popovich: [Decades of Racism Housing Policy Left Neighborhoods Sweltering](#) New York Times, August 24, 2020

Supporting research: Hoffman, Shandas, and Pendleton: [The effects of historic housing policies on residents exposure to intra-urban heat](#) Climate, January 13, 2020

Tessum et al.: [Inequities in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure](#) Proceedings in the National Academy of Sciences, March 11, 2019

Maldonado, Shearer, Bronen, Peterson, Lazarus: [Impact of Climate Change on Tribal Communities in the U.S.: Displacement, Relocation, and Human Rights](#) Climate Change, April 9, 2013

Bailey, Kreiger, Agénor, Graves, Linos, and Basset: [Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions](#) The Lancet, April 8, 2017

### Red Lining and Segregation

Shawn Vestal: [Whites-Only covenants still exist in many mid-century Spokane neighborhoods. Spokesman Review.](#) December 24, 2016

Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project: [Segregated Seattle](#)

Richard Rothstein: [The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America](#) Liveright Publishing, 2017

[Seattle's history of redlining](#) November 20, 2018 KCTS9

[Mapping Inequality: Tacoma Redlining Map](#)

[Mapping Inequality: Seattle Redlining Map](#) and [descriptions in Seattle's classification key](#)