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The Co-Development of Environmental Justice and Children's Environmental Health at the EPA

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Abstract

Background: In the early 1990s, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was confronting multiple challenges to its regulatory decision making. Regulated industries and congressional supporters were criticizing the agency for overestimating risk and producing regulations that were too costly. At the same time, environmental and public health advocates were criticizing the agency for not doing enough to protect communities of color, low-income communities, and children. Environmental justice activists urged EPA to address the disproportionate burdens that Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and poor communities bore, and children's environmental health advocates urged the agency to address the unique vulnerabilities of children. EPA responded to these critiques by developing two separate programs with similar infrastructures, including mid-level offices and federal advisory committees. Two Presidential Executive Orders helped to structure these programs.

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Children's Environmental Health (CEH) and Environmental Justice (EJ) and the EPA context at the time they were institutionalized.

Findings: We argue that the two programs were not successful in fundamentally reorienting environmental protection around environmental justice concerns or children's vulnerabilities. However, by improving public participation, encouraging cross-media approaches, and improving science underlying risk assessment, they helped EPA address some agency challenges. Outside of EPA, the agency's support for EJ and CEH supported students and scholars, broadened the focus of environmental health science, and helped to elaborate conceptual models of risk.

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