

**INTEGRATE STRATEGIES TO
IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL
AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE**





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Reproductive justice recognizes the impact that environments—both our living and working environments—have on health and the importance of ensuring that women and their families live in healthy communities. The Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as “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.”¹ The environmental justice and reproductive justice movements are particularly linked around toxics that impact pregnancy and fertility. Low-income women and children living in urban areas are disproportionately exposed to environmental toxics, many of which adversely impact overall health and reproductive, maternal, and child health in particular. The increasing attention on the effects of chemical exposures on health, as well as new efforts to “green” cities, provides a ripe opportunity to integrate environmental and reproductive justice education and advocacy strategies. Through strategic collaborations between the reproductive and environmental justice movements, we move closer toward our shared goal that every woman be able to bear and raise healthy children and live in healthy communities.

URBAN TOXICS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

There are numerous toxic chemicals in the urban environment. Residents can be exposed to these chemicals from a variety of sources, including but not limited to air pollution and contaminated water, as well as the workplace, home, and schools. While many of these toxics have deleterious effects on health, there are some prevalent in urban areas that have particular reproductive health effects. These toxics include lead, air pollutants, insecticides, and pesticides.

The United States is suffering from an affordable housing crisis, and urban low-income residents are disproportionately affected by the consequences.² Urban residents living in public housing or low-income neighborhoods often lack control over their housing environments and location and may experience increased levels of toxic exposures including lead, air pollutants, insecticides, and pesticides. For instance, living in neighborhoods with high traffic density, which are more prevalent in urban environments, can lead to increased exposure to toxicants that have an adverse impact on reproductive health. Sources of pollution can include industrial facilities, diesel bus depots, and large roadways. In Los Angeles, a study found that air pollution from heavy-traffic roadways led to low birthweight and preterm births.³ Another study determined that the clearest indicator in

determining environmental lead exposure was living in an area with highly traveled roads.⁴ In addition to its well-known neurological health effects on children, lead poisoning can lead to miscarriage and birth defects.⁵ Prenatal exposure to lead has been linked to delays in the onset of puberty and to menstrual cycle irregularities.⁶

Urban low-income residents are also often exposed to lead and pesticides inside their homes. Low-income and children of color are more likely to have been exposed to lead, either from peeling indoor paint or lead dust settled in soil outside.⁷ Other toxicants inside urban homes include pesticides used to control insects such as cockroaches and rodenticides used to control rodents. One study that surveyed women of color living in low-income urban neighborhoods found that 100% of the pregnant women had been exposed to insecticides and/or pesticides.⁸ Research suggests that some pesticides and insecticides may be linked to reproductive health problems, including reduced fertility, miscarriage, and menstrual irregularities.⁹ Toxic exposures can be reduced if landlords and housing officials are willing to use integrated pest management, which addresses pest problems by cleaning food residue, sealing cracks in apartments and, when necessary, using the least toxic pesticides available.¹⁰

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Women living in cities can also be exposed to harmful chemicals at work. Females working in dry cleaners were found to have an increased risk of ovarian cancer and miscarriage.¹¹ Women employed as janitors have a heightened risk of stillbirth and preterm delivery, while women working in the food service industry have an increased risk of preterm

delivery and stillbirth.¹² Nail technicians and cosmetologists are often exposed to chemicals that can cause reproductive harm. One study found an increased risk of miscarriage among cosmetologists in salons where manicuring or nail sculpturing was performed.¹³

DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN ON PEOPLE OF COLOR

Low-income people and people of color live in communities that are disproportionately exposed to harmful toxics. For example, in Birmingham, Alabama, the low-income population's share of the health risk from toxic air pollution is 24% even though low-income people represent only 13% of the overall population.¹⁴ In Chicago, the share of the health risk from toxic air pollution for people of color is

61%, although their share of the population is 42%.¹⁵ One study of forty-four large metropolitan areas determined that in each area analyzed, Black residents were more likely to live in an area with high toxic levels than White residents.¹⁶ Additionally, studies have shown that White mothers are less likely to live in areas with high air pollution than mothers who are women of color.¹⁷



RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTEGRATE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Local advocates can improve reproductive, maternal, and child health by reducing the burden of environmental contaminants in urban low-income communities and workplaces. Local officials often oversee urban infrastructure, including public transportation and housing, where a significant amount of exposure to toxics occurs. Building the social, political, and economic power of low-income women and women of color most affected by environmental toxics will be essential to promoting reproductive and environmental justice in these communities.¹⁸

WE CALL ON LOCAL LEADERS TO INTEGRATE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE BY:

Employing reproductive health and justice frameworks into local environmental initiatives. Because of mounting environmental concerns, more and more local governments are promoting green environmental initiatives. While these local environmental efforts are essential to creating and supporting healthy and sustainable communities, reproductive health and justice must be priorities within these initiatives in order to truly foster health and sustainability. Efforts to advance climate justice must also take into account workers' rights and health in efforts to reduce greenhouse gasses and promote green policies.¹⁹

- We urge local leaders to create or expand local greening and climate change initiatives to include goals for the reproductive health and justice of workers and residents.
- We urge local leaders to ensure that efforts to regulate toxic exposures take into account workers' rights and do not threaten people's livelihoods.

Reducing the toxics prevalent in the urban environment.

Toxics in the urban environment must be reduced in order to foster health for ourselves and the Earth. The health of women and children living in urban communities is currently being harmed by the prevalence of toxics. This is particularly true for urban women and children living in low-income neighborhoods or public housing, where toxics are often concentrated.

- We urge local leaders to promote local policies that reduce air pollution and its effects on urban women and children.
- We urge local leaders to reduce toxic exposures by implementing integrated pest management programs in public housing facilities, public schools, and public buildings, parks, and playgrounds.
- We urge local leaders to call on Congress to pass comprehensive chemical reform, which would regulate how chemicals are approved for use.

Integrating environmental health screenings and health history collection into the provision of reproductive and maternal health care. There is growing evidence that toxics adversely affect reproductive, maternal, and child health. Reproductive health care providers have an opportunity to educate women about the effects of their environments on their reproductive health.

- We urge local leaders to work with local public health programs and service providers to screen and educate women about the adverse effects that toxics can have on their reproductive and maternal health.
- We urge local leaders to provide training to health care providers about the impact of chemicals on reproductive health.

LOCAL EXAMPLES:

- **Santa Cruz, CA** has adopted a landmark Green Business standard for the types of products that may be used in nail salons that wish to be labeled green.
- **New York City** passed legislation phasing out the city's use of carcinogenic pesticides and requiring 48-hour notice of the commercial use of pesticides to neighbors.

ENDNOTES

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- 12 David A. Savitz, Andrew F. Olshan, and Kelly Gallagher, "Maternal Occupation and Pregnancy Outcome," *Epidemiology* 7, no. 3 (May 1996): 269-274.
- 13 E.M. John, D.A. Savitz, and C.M. Shy, "Spontaneous Abortions Among Cosmetologists," *Epidemiology* 5, no. 2 (March 1994): 147-155.
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- 15 Michael Ash and others, "Justice in the Air."
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The Urban Initiative for Reproductive Health is a program of the National Institute for Reproductive Health (National Institute).

The National Institute is an innovation institute for state and local organizations working on reproductive health issues. We offer strategic guidance, hands-on support and funding to help state and local leaders remove barriers to health care, win public battles and change public policies. Together, we are helping women in communities across the country gain access to the full range of quality reproductive health care options, the freedom to exercise their reproductive rights and the opportunity to have healthy pregnancies.

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