

# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL: Healthier Communities for Children and their Families to Walk, Bike, and Thrive

CHANGE CAN HAPPEN



## JURUPA VALLEY CASE STUDY

*This case study highlights communities facing environmental justice issues in Southern California and the health disparities they face as a result of their built environment.*

In Jurupa Valley, in Riverside County, at least 11 schools are located within the smog-filled zone created by the goods movement industry in its heavy use of nearby highways. For community members and advocates working to ensure children can safely walk and bicycle to school, the dangers posed by air quality are a central part of the conversation.

As in other parts of the country, in Southern California environmental justice concerns are deeply intertwined with Safe Routes to School issues. For many low-income families, walking or taking transit is the only way to get to school. But children walking to and from school often risk their health and safety due to poor air quality and dangerous streets. Many low-income communities lack proper sidewalks, paths, or street crossings, which makes conditions unsafe for walking or biking. Connecting Safe Routes to School issues and environmental justice issues and partnering together is critical.

### BACKGROUND: WHY ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MATTERS

The strong belief that people in all communities deserve the right to live, work, and play in healthy, toxin-free environments

is at the core of the environmental justice agenda. Environmental justice brings together social movements around justice for low-income people, women, and communities of color who experience poor air quality, water sanitation, pesticide toxicity, and other hazards from the built environment in their daily lives. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 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.”<sup>1</sup> Many low-income populations and communities of color live near environmental hazards due to financial constraints, disproportionately exposing these communities to health problems and creating health disparities. The number one factor in determining the likelihood that a person lives near contaminated air, water, or soil is race and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> Environmental justice advocates are charged with calling out the industries responsible for environmental degradation and correcting these hazards. To change poor health outcomes, it is essential to understand how planning and land use decisions create healthy or unhealthy communities.



## THE EFFECT OF GOODS MOVEMENT IN JURUPA VALLEY

In Southern California, many of the environmental hazards and public health issues are created by the goods movement industry along its route corridors. Goods movement has major industries from the Port of Long Beach/Los Angeles to the distribution warehousing centers in the Inland Empire, including Riverside and San Bernardino Counties.<sup>3</sup> Jurupa Valley is a city nestled in between the 60, 15, and 10 freeways in Riverside County, major arterials for goods movement warehousing centers. A study found that children residing in this area had the weakest lung capacity and the slowest lung growth of all children in the region due to exposure to diesel exhaust;<sup>4</sup> the majority of these children are Latino and live in low-income neighborhoods. Overall, children within the region were found to be highly prone to conditions such as asthma and other cardiovascular diseases associated with poor air quality, with children in low-income areas and children of color especially at risk.<sup>5</sup> The impacts of freight and other environmental justice hazards on environmentally vulnerable communities are considerable. According to a 2016 study, the Southern California region leads the nation in air pollution deaths.<sup>6</sup>

Data captured from public agencies is just one piece of the picture. Another important piece is highlighting the narratives from environmental justice communities themselves. Many community-based organizations<sup>7</sup> have made it their mission to promote mitigation strategies that come from the grassroots organizing of environmental justice communities in both urban and rural areas of California. Community-based organizations have urged governmental jurisdictions to prioritize meaningful public engagement from diverse communities when developing local and regional plans. Environmental justice community organizations like those noted above work with community members to tell their stories to inform officials in an effort to build stronger solutions together and ensure that policy is informed by experience.

In Jurupa Valley, for example, it was through the successful efforts of advocates from the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ) that a local environmental justice element was developed for the city's general plan. Analysis by CCA EJ revealed that between 700-800 freight trucks travel hourly through affordable housing communities in town, with around a dozen public elementary schools located near either the 60 or 10 freeway, some as close as a half mile.<sup>8</sup> These analyses and the

resulting campaign led to adoption of an environmental justice element as part of the town's general plan. With implementation of the local environmental justice plan underway, more and more advocates are taking note of this strategy.

Taking this strategy to the state level, the California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA) created a coalition that included CCA EJ to support state legislation that would ensure that environmental justice be a mandatory element in general plans for cities and counties across California. 2016's Land Use: General Plan: Safety and Environmental Justice Bill, otherwise known as Senate Bill 1000, requires that public officials consider land use planning and development and their impact on environmental justice issues in general plans. As of September 2016, SB 1000 passed both houses of the California legislature and is now awaiting Governor Brown's signature. SB 1000 is a huge win for advocates. The implementation of SB 1000 presents a great opportunity for advocate to engage and shape local general plans for environmental justice communities.<sup>9</sup>

As Safe Routes to School and environmental justice stakeholders continue to partner, the addition of an environmental justice hazards checklist to Complete Streets and walk audit assessments provides a promising way to engage with the community and collect environmental justice data for schools. Data collected can also be a tool to improve future school siting practices. How can this play out? The Federal Environmental Protection Agency has issued guidelines to aid school districts with recommendations on what factors need to be considered when choosing a location for a new school.<sup>10</sup> For many school districts located in disadvantaged areas, the cheapest and most accessible lands happen to be in environmental justice areas that are in close proximity to freeways or industrial warehouses and that lack proper infrastructure for safe walking and biking. Partnerships allow communities to advocate for better outcomes, benefitting from an understanding of both environmental justice concerns and Safe Routes to School opportunities in school siting and other community design and policy areas.

With a clear understanding of the intersection of environmental justice, active transportation, and Safe Routes to School, along with more collaboration and deeper community engagement, there is tremendous potential to increase the safety, health, and equity of our communities.

- 1 <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>
- 2 <https://www.thenation.com/article/race-best-predicts-whether-you-live-near-pollution/>
- 3 [http://scagrtpscs.net/Documents/2016/final/f2016RTPSCS\\_GoodsMovement.pdf](http://scagrtpscs.net/Documents/2016/final/f2016RTPSCS_GoodsMovement.pdf)
- 4 pg. 13, <http://jurupavalley.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=JZt5BZnnUzA%3D&portalid=21>
- 5 pg. 137, [http://scagrtpscs.net/Documents/2016/final/f2016RTPSCS\\_EnvironmentalJustice.pdf](http://scagrtpscs.net/Documents/2016/final/f2016RTPSCS_EnvironmentalJustice.pdf)
- 6 <http://www.sbsun.com/environment-and-nature/20160810/southern-california-leads-the-nation-in-air-pollution-deaths-new-study-says>
- 7 Eg, California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA), Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ), Communities for a Better Environment, and East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice
- 8 <http://jurupausd.org/schools/District%20Maps/District%20-%20Elementary%20Boundaries.pdf>
- 9 Senate Bill 1000 (2016), [http://ct3k1.capitoltrack.com/Bills/15Bills/sen/sb\\_0951-1000/sb\\_1000\\_bill\\_20160210\\_introduced.pdf](http://ct3k1.capitoltrack.com/Bills/15Bills/sen/sb_0951-1000/sb_1000_bill_20160210_introduced.pdf)
- 10 <https://www.epa.gov/schools/school-siting-guidelines>