



# Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

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## Air Pollution and Racial Disparity

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### EXPERIENCE

**P**ower plants are the second largest source of climate pollution in the United States, (transportation is number one). In 2022, approximately 60% of the electricity generated came from the burning of fossil fuels like coal, natural gas, and petroleum, according to the US Energy Information Administration. This produces greenhouse gas emissions which are a major factor in global warming but also produce fine particulate air pollution that impacts human health.

A 2022 Harvard study used 17 years of data to examine exposure to air pollution among racial, ethnic minorities, and low-income groups in the United States. The researchers found that areas of the United States where larger portions of the population are Black, Asian, and Hispanic or Latino have significantly higher rates of fine particulate air pollution than areas where white or Native Americans reside. This is especially true when the concentration of Black, Asian, and Hispanics or Latinos make up more than 85% of the population.

Abdulrahman Jbaily, PhD, the first author of the Harvard study shared, “Our findings regarding relative disparities indicate the importance of strong, targeted air-pollution-reduction strategies, not only to reduce overall air-pollution levels but also to move closer toward the EPA’s aim to provide all people with the same degree of protection from environmental hazards.” [1]

A 2020 Princeton study says, “More than one million African Americans live within a half-mile of natural gas facilities, over one million African Americans face a ‘cancer risk above EPA’s level of concern’ due to unclean air, and more than 6.7 million African Americans live in the 91 US counties with oil refineries. In total, African Americans are 75% more likely than white people to live in ‘fence-line’ communities (areas near commercial facilities that produce noise, odor, traffic, or emissions that directly affect the population). Additionally, exposure to poor air quality can cause numerous health problems such as asthma. Approximately 13.4% of African American children suffer from asthma as compared to only 7.3% of white children.” [2]

The NAACP notes that “Overall coal-fired power plants are not only disproportionately located in low income communities, but they’re also disproportionately located in communities of color—and not necessarily low-income communities of color, but communities of color in and of themselves. It’s not always that they’re being built in these communities — often, the plants are already there and the communities come later.” [3]

*Resolutions to Action* is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Margaret Anderson, OP; Susan Dunning, CSJ; Susan Francois, CSJP; Christine Garcia, SSND; Fran Gorsuch, CBS; Donna Marie Gribschaw, CDP; Patty Johnson, CSJ; Melinda Pellerin, SSJ; Verónica Esparza Ramírez, OP; and Bridget Bearss, RSCJ, staff. Please address

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## REFLECTION

Reading and responding to the “signs of the times” has been the call of Catholic Social Teaching for decades. *Laudato Si’* adds the challenge of “ecological conversion” as an essential component of living our Catholic faith. What we now know about the impacts of air pollution invites us to think deeply about the intersection of climate change and racism. In the United States the evidence of the link between the harmful effects of air pollution and racial disparity is obvious. What difference does that make for the choices we make and the actions we take? How can we deepen our understanding of the impact that this is having on Black, Asian, and Hispanic or Latino neighbors?

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis says, “When we speak of the ‘environment,’ what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. ... Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (LS 139)

“We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environ-

ment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (LS 49)

## ACTION

1. As part of your ongoing ecological conversion, what personal changes in your behavior are you willing to make that address your electricity usage? What social action will you take to address the racial disparity of air pollution in your area? How often will you push yourself to see the intersection of issues of climate change and the impact that it has on all your neighbors?
2. Sierra Club tells us that there are 172 active coal plants left in the United States. They are spread among states where women religious reside. Visit the [Sierra Club](#) map site to locate plants near you.
3. EarthJustice is an essential partner in the struggle to transform the US

energy sector into one that is clean, renewable, modern, and equitable. To receive mailings and to respond to action alerts, visit [EarthJustice](#).

4. Write to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator at Regan.[Michael@epa.gov](mailto:Michael@epa.gov) to express your support for the new EPA regulations that limit emissions at power plants.

## Endnotes

1. *Harvard Gazette*, “Study shows stark disparities in race and pollution exposure,” January 5, 2022
2. Aneesh Patnaik, Jiahn Son, Alice Feng, Crystal Ade, “Racial Disparities and Climate Change,” Princeton Student Climate Initiative, 2020
3. *Living on Earth*, “The NAACP Cites Discriminatory Impacts from Coal Fired Power Plants,” November 30, 2012



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