

We are
Called

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.



Team Reflection

No. 18 – Environment and Environmental Health Justice

In 2014, an environmental health crisis erupted in Flint, Michigan. Old pipes leached dangerous levels of lead into the drinking water supply for 100,000 residents. The contamination exposure lasted for 18 months before a physician discovered unusually high lead levels in blood tests of her pediatric patients. A vulnerable population – children – revealed the shocking breach in health and safety in a community that is more than 56% African American. The effects of childhood lead poisoning include developmental delays, learning difficulties, irritability as well as physical symptoms such as abdominal pain, hearing loss and seizures.

The environment impacts the health of entire communities within geographical regions. It includes a broad range of issues such as air quality, temperature and climate change, food safety, mold, noise levels, radiation, natural disasters and more. Environmental conditions have greater adverse impact on communities with increased social needs and social inequities, as well as other vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly and people with disabilities. Thus, environmental health must be a part of a holistic public and population health strategy.

In addition to the experience in Flint, Michigan, another example of an environmental impact on population involves Native Americans. Nearly half live in 13 western states where there are an estimated 161,000 abandoned rock mines — more than 4,000 of these are abandoned uranium mines. The reliance of tribal communities on natural resources to maintain traditional diets, lifestyles, customs and languages, results in frequent contact with metal residuals from the mine sites. This creates exposures by inhalation, drinking water and ingestion of contaminated food sources. [18.1]

Many hospitals across the country are named after St. Francis, the beloved patron of animals and the environment. His famous *Canticle of the Creatures* identifies his brothers and sisters as wind, water, fire, the sun and moon. Pope Francis observes how his namesake draws a deep connection between nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and one's own interior peace. [18.2] There is a universal unity as all of creation is intimately interconnected.

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Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, or our “common home” as he calls it, squarely placed Earth’s environmental health within the Catholic social tradition. When the pope lived in Argentina, he frequented the poorest neighborhoods or slums. There he saw how the toxins, poor water and food access, and the destruction of natural environments impacted the health of those already struggling with employment, housing and other family needs.

All kinds of pollutants from industrial and transport fumes to fertilizers and fungicides weaken a fragile environment and create health hazards. Just as residents in Flint experienced an impact on their mental health, Pope Francis also understands the connection between the environment and mental health. With the Earth as our common home, the question before us remains: how do we want our home to look as we pass it on to our children and grandchildren? Like the ripples created by a rock thrown into the pond, the sustained concern and care we give to the environment today impacts the health of those around us, including vulnerable communities and the generations to come.

Consider

- What are the environmental hazards and threats in the communities served by my health care system or facility? How does this impact minority and vulnerable communities?
- As an anchor institution and employer in the community, what can our health care facility do (or is doing) to lead positive change?

Let us pray together,

All-powerful God,

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey toward your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

- Excerpted from Pope Francis' “Prayer for our earth” in *Laudato Si*.

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[18.1] <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/supported/centers/ehd/grantees/unm/index.cfm>; See also: <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/environmental>

[18.2] Pope Francis, *Ladauto Si*, para. 10.

[18.3] *Ladauto Si*, para. 183.