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Title

The Rapidly Spreading Delta Variant is our call to Reform Zoning and Planning Laws Now

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Revised Research Question: COVID-19 revealed how the housing crisis is connected to environmental and racial injustice. Is this moment a potential catalyst to reform zoning policies in California?

The Rapidly Spreading Delta Variant is our call to Reform Zoning and Planning Laws Now

The coronavirus pandemic exposed the explicit correlation between environmental and social injustice by spotlighting the disproportionate rate of covid-19 infection in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. These trends are correlated to systemic and structural inequalities, such as our outdated zoning and planning laws that exacerbate environmental racism and continue to influence health disparities in urban areas.

In this country there is a structural association between race and class which shapes the social and environmental conditions in communities of color. These structural inequalities are a major driver to the different patterns in land use and affordable housing development, transportation networks, industrial activity, accessibility and proximity to resources within the built environment. America's history of racial housing segregation ("redlining") coupled by California's outdated zoning and planning policies have exacerbated environmental injustices, pushing affordable and sustainable housing landscapes further away from communities who need it most. These restrictive housing policies have invisibilized communities of color causing them to embody disproportionate health risks as a result of living in environmentally hazardous regions with high rates of pollution and industrial activity.

A recent Harvard study shows that higher levels of air pollution were linked to an 8% rise in the Covid-19 death rates and African American and Latinx communities are more likely to reside in such environmentally polluted areas.¹ Historically marginalized communities of color embody higher rates of underlying health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease which increases their susceptibility to death from infection with the coronavirus. Experts say the biggest factor accounting for the disproportionate rate of COVID-19 infection is the presence of such underlying health conditions, rather than any genetic or biological predisposition. These health conditions are attributed to social, economic, and environmental

¹ <https://e360.yale.edu/features/connecting-the-dots-between-environmental-injustice-and-the-coronavirus>

inequalities created from urban segregation, such as, inaccessibility to healthy foods, green space, excess exposure to toxic environmental hazards, and deprivation of social safety nets.²

Specifically, the history of zoning and planning laws in the US contribute to inequitable urban development that has led to an inadequate distribution of resources across disadvantaged communities and negative public health outcomes. In 1916 New York City established the first zoning ordinance which was implemented nationally through the Standard Zoning and Enabling Act (SZA) and still provides the basis of contemporary zoning regulations. These standards serve as the precursor to exclusionary zoning and discrimination that continues to hinder the development of high-density housing, increases housing costs and segregates communities along the lines of race while systemically overlooking the needs of disadvantaged communities.³

As the Delta variant to the coronavirus spreads globally, data suggest the Delta variant poses higher risks and more severe illness than previous strains in unvaccinated persons. Statistics show that across 40 states, the percent of White people who have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose (49%) was roughly 1.3 times higher than the rate for Black people (38%) and 1.1 times higher than the rate for Hispanic people (43%) as of August 2, 2021.⁴

These statistics are extremely alarming because Black and Hispanic communities tend to be clustered by region and thus may embody higher risks of infection, leading to heightened transmissibility rates to the Delta variant by location. In short, our most vulnerable, disadvantaged communities are in danger due to a history of societal failures.

The time to act is now. We must push our state legislators to make drastic changes to reform current zoning and planning policies in order to promote more affordable housing and sustainable development in disadvantaged communities of color. This anxious moment in history is an opportunity for public health, urban planning, and environmental law to work together to rethink how zoning reform can be utilized to decrease health disparities in urban environments. If we remain silent, the prior and ongoing Covid-19 infection trends attributed to environmental racism will exacerbate with the Delta variant.

[WC: 635]

² <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/when-virus-exposes-environmental-injustice>

³ http://www.ced.berkeley.edu/downloads/pubs/faculty/hutson_2008_environ-health.pdf

⁴ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/latest-data-on-covid-19-vaccinations-race-ethnicity/>