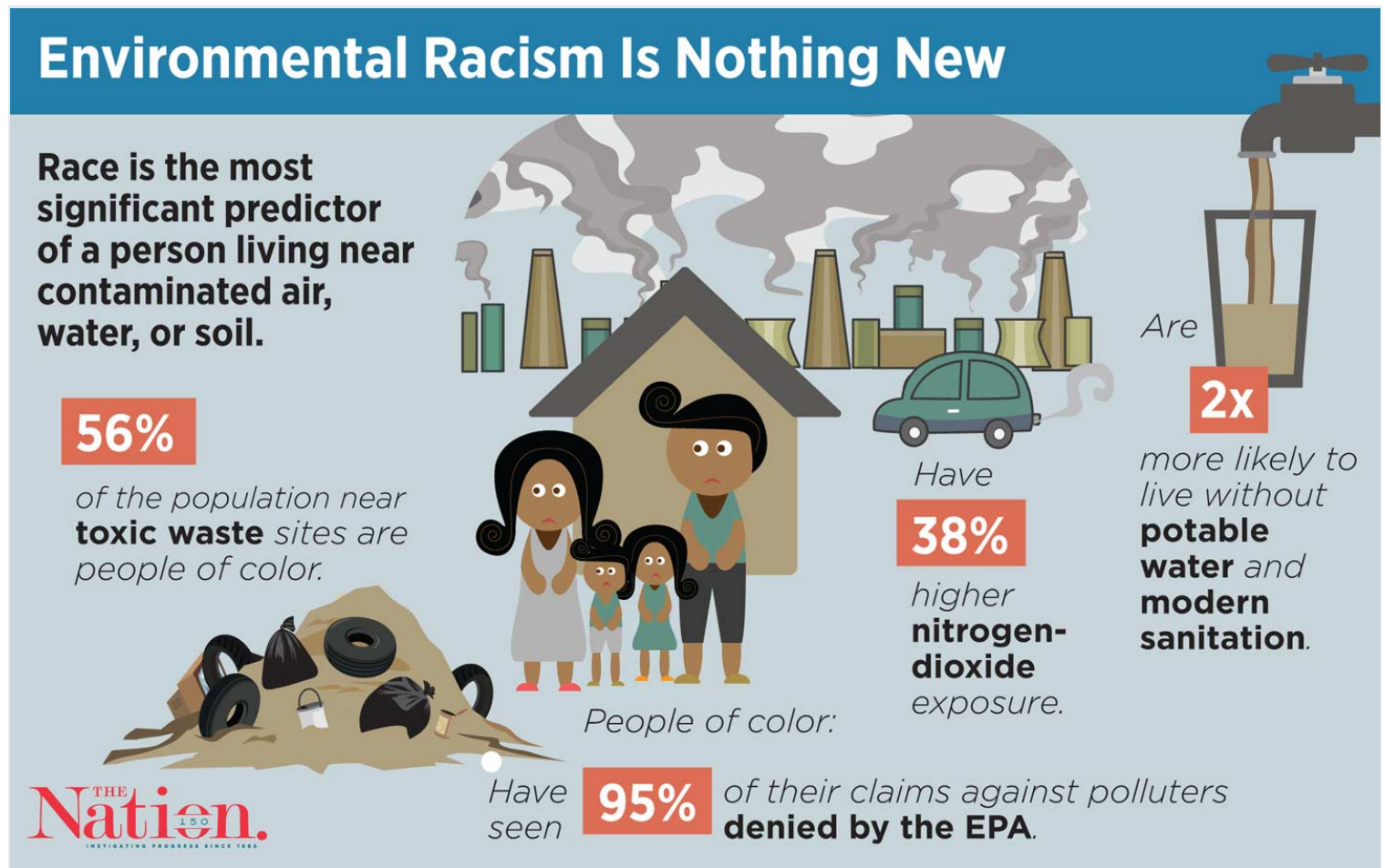


Race Best Predicts Whether You Live Near Pollution



(Tracy Loeffelholz Dunn / The Nation. Shutterstock images from Lorelyn Medina, Augusto Cabral)

When asked directly whether environmental racism was at play in Flint's water crisis, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder [replied last month](#), "Absolutely not." But the city's money-saving shortcuts have now poisoned, with their own tap water, up to 8,000 children as well as many other residents, most of them black.

"Environmental racism" describes the fact that people of color and low-income people are most likely to be situated near sources of contamination and away from clean water, air, and soil. A city like Flint, where [more than half](#) of the population is black in a state that's nearly 80 percent white, and where the poverty rate is above 40 percent, is a textbook case, whatever Governor Snyder says.

Across the country, African Americans are [more than twice as likely](#) as whites to live in a home with substandard plumbing. [More than 1 percent](#) of black people live in houses

without potable water and modern sanitation, compared to less than 0.5 percent of whites. They are also, understandably, [twice as likely](#) as white people to mistrust the water that flows from their taps and to say that more regulation is needed.

It's not just water: A 1987 report found that race was the [most significant predictor](#) of a person living near hazardous waste. Communities that were located near multiple commercial hazardous-waste facilities or a landfill had three times the amount of minority residents as communities that were far away from such dump sites. The Government Accountability Office found in 1983 that black people [made up the majority](#) of communities near landfills. Decades later, a 2007 report found that things were actually [worse](#): Communities near commercial hazardous-waste facilities consisted mainly of people of color. Finally, people of color are exposed to a level of nitrogen dioxide—which emanates from cars and industrial sources and can cause respiratory problems—at an average rate [38 percent higher](#) than white people.

The location of black and brown communities near sources of pollution springs from racist government policy that can be traced back to the early part of the century. In the 1930s, federal housing agencies redlined black neighborhoods, locking black people into crowded city centers, while helping white people flee to the more pleasant suburbs. In Flint, for example, [maps](#) from the time show these neighborhoods literally colored in red. Redlining exacerbated poverty in the black community as black people were shut out of the wealth accumulation accessed by whites through cheap home loans. By the mid-1960s, Flint was [94 percent](#) segregated.

As the authors of *A Twenty-First Century U.S. Water Policy* [write](#), “Whereas many of the water-related impacts of urbanization are related to local planning and permitting decisions, it is also local-level planning that has influenced the concentration of low-income communities and communities of color into marginal urban geographies.”

Visit Cuba with The Nation!

Once they were trapped in the inner city, these communities were routinely selected as dumping grounds for urban sources of pollution and contamination. With few resources and little political clout, poor black communities were ill-equipped to resist their new role. The facilities that are the most noxious polluters are [disproportionately located](#) near

communities of color.

Flint residents have grappled with environmental racism long before the latest crisis. In the 1990s, residents [fought against](#) an air permit for a steel “mini-mill,” which would operate within the city limits and spew 100 tons of lead and other pollutants into the air each year, adding to the existing air pollution generated by the Genesee Power Station. Residents charged that the quantity of pollution would violate their civil rights.

But the complaints of black and poor communities usually go ignored. The Environmental Protection Agency ruled against Flint residents in the steel-mill case. It has also denied [95 percent of the civil-rights claims](#) brought by communities of color against polluters, and it has never once made a formal finding of a civil-rights violation. When sour-smelling, discolored water came out of Flint residents’ pipes in the spring of 2014, their complaints went ignored for nearly two years.