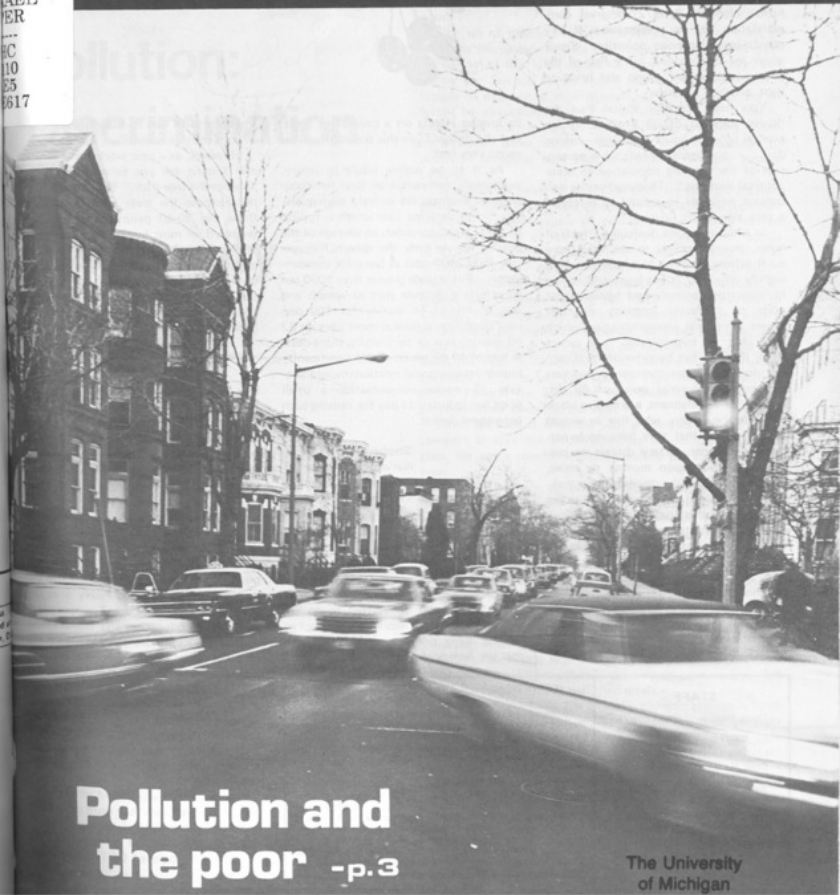


environmental action



LAEL
PER
MC
10
25
617



**Pollution and
the poor -p.3**

The University
of Michigan

AEL
 1/31/2006
 Vol 1

Pollution: Discrimination in center city

There has probably been more said and less done about poverty in America than any other social blight. We have carefully documented the number of jobless unskilled workers, the lack of adequate education for ghetto children, the immobility of the aged, the malnourishment of infants and a litany of other afflictions imposed on the 7,760,000 people considered by the economic statisticians to be the central city poor.

One set of statistics not yet compiled but which must be added to this already replete anthology of neglect is the quality of the air that is consumed daily by inner city poor. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has investigated a sample of eight cities to determine just how the poor are affected by air pollution, both on an absolute basis — that is, what concentrations low income people are breathing — and on a relative basis — that is, how poor people's exposure to pollution compares with that of middle and upper income persons.

The absolute levels to which the poor are exposed are dangerous. In inner cities, where most of the poor in metropolitan areas live, concentrations of pollutants can greatly exceed federal air quality standards: carbon monoxide concentrations of 40, 50, or even 100 parts per million (ppm) for long periods of time are not uncommon. Studies by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare indicate rampant violations of federal air standards set by the 1970 Clean Air Act. In Chicago, for example, the one-hour carbon monoxide standard of 35 parts per million is exceeded 48 times per year. The eight hour standard of nine parts per million is exceeded 713 times per year. In Washington, D.C. the one hour standard is exceeded 87 times per year and the eight hour standard 99 times. Federal law stipulates that these standards *not be exceeded more than once per year.*

When we look at what the poor are forced to breathe and compare it with the air breathed by the middle and upper class, we see a consistent discriminatory pattern against the poor.

- In Baltimore, the poor are typically exposed to carbon monoxide levels that are 30 percent or more higher than levels breathed by the affluent. In the poor section, carbon monoxide levels approach nine parts per million on a year round basis. This level is the eight hour standard not to be exceeded more than one eight-hour period per year. Ninety-six percent of this carbon monoxide is produced by motor vehicles.
- In Washington, D.C. the poor are also exposed to carbon monoxide levels that are 30 or more percent greater than levels breathed by the affluent. Ninety-eight percent of carbon monoxide in the District is automobile produced.
- In New York, where 95.5 percent of the carbon monoxide is automobile produced, virtually all poverty areas fall within the ring of highest pollution levels.
- In Philadelphia, the annual arithmetic average in 1968 was 8.6 parts per million — just 0.4 ppm less than the eight hour standard. Monthly averages exceed the eight hour standard by 60 percent. Again, the poor are exposed to pollutant levels one-third again as high as are the affluent.

The carbon monoxide figures presented here represent how the poor are affected by all the automotive pollutants — carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, oxides of nitrogen, and lead.

Noise is a second pollutant that affects the poor more severely than it does the affluent. The primary reason for the high carbon monoxide levels in the center city area is the

The poor . . .

also the major cause of urban noise. At 80 percent of sites tested in London, for example, traffic produced a higher level of noise than any other source.

What this means for the poor is just what we all expect — a noisier environment. Besides higher traffic levels, the poor are more noise burdened for additional reasons. First, in downtown areas where land is scarce, houses are built closer to the street. There are fewer trees and shrubs to absorb noise before it reaches human ears. A typical noise level at street side in cities often reaches 80 to 85 dBA (decibels on the human ear-oriented "A" scale) or more. For the same amount of traffic, this noise level could be reduced to 75 dBA by removing the house 25 to 30 feet from the street and by planting a row of shrubs along the road. Since noise measurements are made on a sliding scale, a reduction of 10 dBA corresponds to a 10-fold reduction in noise intensity.

Secondly, the poor are exposed to more noise because in hot weather they are forced to keep their windows open. A study by the Department of Housing and Urban Development found that buildings can reduce traffic noise by 20 dBA if the windows are closed but only 10 dBA if the windows are open. On the sliding noise scale, this 10 dBA difference means the open-window poor are exposed to 10 times the noise intensity of the air-conditioned affluent. (It should be noted

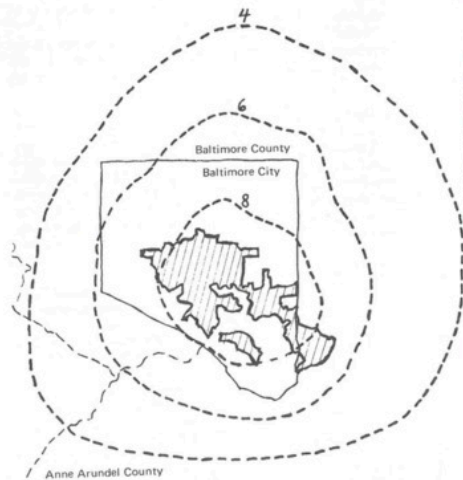
here that studies show air conditioners rather far down on the noise list.)

Why air and noise pollution discriminate this way is reducible to simple terms: vested interests. All attempts to end pollution, congestion, abandonment of houses, deterioration of neighborhoods, and decaying tax bases in some way step on the toes of a large scale enterprise — whether it be housing developers or bankers or the auto industry.

The auto-highway complex is by far the most powerful of these interests. Moreover, highways provide a common thread that allows each of the other interests to function. Developers lure urbanites to suburbia with the promise of green surroundings and easy access to downtown jobs. Roads are built to provide the access. The combination of more freeways, more traffic and increased urban congestion and pollution draw more of the affluent to the suburbs — sometimes taking their corporations with them. The poor, unable to flee the city because of discrimination or because they cannot afford it, inherit the inner city. Land values go down, lowering property taxes and causing financial difficulties in city government. To offset the crisis the city raises taxes for those who remain. This in turn, only serves to accelerate the cycle of decay.

Many people benefit from this process — developers do a landslide business providing quickly built houses, auto manufacturers profit from increased sale of autos, concrete makers, steel makers, oil producers and rubber producers all benefit from increased use of their products. This complex supports a large chunk of our economy; 800,000 businesses are dependent on the manufacturing, distributing, servicing and use of motor vehicles and one out of every six workers owes his job to a highway transport industry.

The inner city poor, subject to high unemployment and



overwhelmingly without access to an automobile, are left out of the picture. And when one comes right down to it, many people feel that we all seem to have lost something important in the process.

Attempts by city councils or other government agencies to do something about the problems almost invariably attack only one aspect at a time. Rarely is overall planning carried out to see how everything is related. Laws that require such planning are notable only because of their ineffectiveness.

The implementation plans required by the 1970 Clean Air Act, however, offer a new hope. The plans are supposed to be an action program for a city or region to meet the air quality standards set by the act. This law does not have a vague requirement for "comprehensive planning," which can be interpreted in so many ways as to be meaningless. Rather, the Clean Air Act requires that specifically defined air standards be met in each metropolitan area.

Since the automobile poses the largest air pollution hazard, and since the automobile causes numerous other urban problems, the implementation plans can make some real changes.

Transportation controls must clearly be the focal point of these implementation plans. The only ways to reduce automotive pollution is have cleaner cars or to have fewer cars. On January 27, at a hearing of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, the four auto manufacturers openly stated their inability to meet the required 1975 auto emission standards. Those in the room also felt the atmosphere of negativism and defeat that permeates the thinking of the automobile-hierarchy regarding clean cars. Our path of action is clear. If Detroit cannot produce a clean car we must have fewer cars.

Since motor vehicle emission controls are not enough to reduce air pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should reject air implementation plans that do not provide for measures to reduce motor vehicle traffic both by restrictions on automobile use (such as parking bans) and, most importantly, by curtailment of new highway construction in urban areas.

Traffic control measures were part of the original EPA guidelines to the states for acceptance of implementation plans but were deleted under pressure from the administration's Office of Management and Budget. Although states still have the power to institute such measures, it is unlikely that they will do so without a specific requirement from EPA. An exceptional case is San Francisco: commuters there are entitled to lower bridge tolls if they form car pools. To encourage similar measures in other cities, the traffic provisions of the originally proposed guidelines should be reinstated in the criteria for implementation plan acceptance.

The word is circulating that EPA will not push for strict adherence to the Clean Air Act. Our automobile-air pollution crisis will be allowed to continue unabated. And once again it will happen — as it happened in jobs, as it happened in education, as it happened in mobility for the aged, as it happened in abating hunger — the poor will be turned away. The poor can then add to their list of well documented afflictions the affliction of noise and foul air — a solution that will hardly lessen their burden.

James Sullivan

