

Defining Underserved Communities and Environmental Justice



The National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science vision focuses on science that serves coastal communities with a mission to deliver ecosystem science solutions for stewardship of the nation's ocean and coastal resources. To advance this mission, NCCOS is committed to working closely with coastal managers and other stakeholders to determine research needs and ensure that the science and research products delivered are valuable to decision-makers and coastal communities. This includes highlighting and supporting the scientific needs of underserved communities. NCCOS recognizes that historically, underserved communities have been disproportionately subjected to environmental injustices including climate-related hazards and impacts.

Supporting NCCOS commitment to working with underserved communities and promoting environmental justice, this document provides commonly used definitions of underserved communities, environmental justice, and related concepts.



Underserved Communities

Populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life.¹

Examples of Underserved Communities

Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.¹



Related Concepts

Under-resourced Communities

Communities with relatively large high poverty and or low-income areas that typically lack access to health care, economic, financial, and social benefits accruing to people from more affluent communities. In addition to lacking access to resources, people who live in high-poverty neighborhoods often have high rates of exposure to environmental hazards.^{2,3}

Socially Vulnerable Populations

Populations that are more likely to suffer negative impacts of a disasters, as a result of social components of a community that may hinder disaster preparation, response, and recovery. This includes communities that have special needs, such as, but not limited to, lower income communities, people without vehicles, people with disabilities, older adults, and people with limited English proficiency.^{4,5}

Historically Underrepresented

Groups who have been denied access and/or suffered past institutional discrimination in the United States. This term also describe subsets of a population that holds a smaller percentage within a significant subgroup than it holds in the general population. For example, in the United States women, persons with disabilities, and certain racial and ethnic groups are consider underrepresented in science.^{6,7,8}

Environmental Justice

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.⁹

Environmental Injustice

The disproportionate exposure of underserved communities to environmental hazards and pollution, and its associated effects on health and environment, as well as the unequal environmental protection and environmental quality provided through laws, regulations, governmental programs, enforcement, and policies.¹⁰



Related Concepts

Disproportionate Effects Instances where there exists significantly higher and more adverse health and environmental effects on underserved communities and populations.⁹

Environmental Justice Communities A geographic location with significant representation of persons of color, low-income persons, indigenous persons, or members of Tribal nations, where such persons experience, or are at risk of experiencing, higher or more adverse human health or environmental outcomes.⁹

Disadvantaged Communities Communities that are marginalized, underserved, and overburdened by pollution and environmental hazards.¹¹

Overburdened Communities Communities that potentially experience disproportionate environmental harms and risks that can be a results of greater vulnerability to environmental hazards, lack of opportunity for public participation, or other factors including environmental and socioeconomic stressors, that act cumulatively to affect health and the environment and contribute to persistent environmental health disparities.⁹

Fair Treatment The principle that no group of people, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences from industrial, municipal and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programs and policies.⁹

Meaningful Involvement Community members have an appropriate opportunity to participate in (and potential influence) decisions about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and/or health. Decision makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.⁹

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

Diversity

The mixture of the unique attributes that shape an individual's identity which help NOAA accomplish its goals. Diversity refers to demographic diversity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation), experiential diversity (e.g., affinities, hobbies, and abilities), and cognitive diversity (e.g., sensory processing and problem solving).¹²

Equity

The consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities.^{1,13}

Inclusion

A culture that values the unique attributes of all team members and an environment which is respectful, collaborative, supportive and one that allows for equal access. Inclusion requires active and intentional engagement on the part of everyone and provides a feeling of belonging.¹²

Accessibility

The design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them.¹³

Additional Resources

- [EJScreen: Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool](#)
- [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#)
- <https://www.noaa.gov/environmental-justice>

References

- ¹ [Executive Order 13985 - On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#)
- ² https://icic.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-New-Face-of_Under-Resourced-Communities.pdf
- ³ [Reed, J. A., Ballard, R. M., Hill, M., & Berrigan, D. \(2020\). Identification of effective programs to improve access to and use of trails among youth from under-resourced communities: A review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17\(21\), 7707.](#)
- ⁴ [Ojerio, R, et al. "Limited involvement of socially vulnerable populations in federal programs to mitigate wildfire risk in Arizona." Natural Hazards Review 12.1 \(2011\): 28-36.](#)
- ⁵ https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/placeandhealth/svi/at-a-glance_svi.html (Socially Vulnerable Populations)
- ⁶ <https://equityandinclusion.emory.edu/resources/self-guided-learning/common-terms.html>
- ⁷ <https://multicultural.utah.gov/poweroflanguage/>
- ⁸ <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/digest/introduction/>
- ⁹ <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice>
- ¹⁰ [Maantay, J. "Mapping environmental injustices: pitfalls and potential of geographic information systems in assessing environmental health and equity." Environmental health perspectives 110.suppl 2 \(2002\): 161-171.](#)
- ¹¹ [https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#6.03/32.32/-73.529\(Climate & Economic Justice Screening Tool\)](https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#6.03/32.32/-73.529(Climate & Economic Justice Screening Tool))
- ¹² <https://www.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/document/2020/Dec/NOAA%202020-2024%20Diversity%20and%20Inclusion%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf>
- ¹³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/>

