

'Asthma alley': why minorities bear burden of pollution inequity caused by white people

Mott Haven in the South Bronx is a classic example where black and Hispanic residents experience a particularly insidious 'environmental inequality'

Hazar Kilani *in the Bronx, New York, The Guardian* Thu 4 Apr 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/04/new-york-south-bronx-minorities-pollution-inequity>

Daniel Chervoni looked out at the busy street from the small community park he tends as a gardener in the South Bronx and clenched his fist as another Fresh Direct diesel truck roared by, spewing exhaust as it took a popular short-cut through the neighborhood.

"They are the reason for our pain, this is why the lungs of Mott Haven's residents are suffering," he said.

The park is a little patch of green squeezed between dense housing and a school in the low-income New York City neighborhood of Mott Haven, sometimes nicknamed "Asthma Alley" because it has some of the worst air pollution levels in the US.

Residents inhale the emissions of the hundreds of daily trucks going in and out of the nearby Fresh Direct warehouse, and exhaust emitted by constant traffic on the four nearby highways, as well as from the printing presses of the Wall Street Journal, a parcel depot and sewage works not far away.

They need asthma hospitalizations at five times the national average and at rates 21 times higher than other NYC neighborhoods.

And while they're physically closer to such sources of air pollution than most New Yorkers, they use Fresh Direct and read the Wall Street Journal at a lower rate, and generate a minuscule fraction of the vehicles humming along the adjacent expressways.

This all makes Mott Haven, where 97% of the population is Hispanic or black, a classic example of a place caught in a particularly insidious "pollution inequity".

A new study not only describes this as a kind of double bind – where an excessive burden is placed on the health of such a population by air pollution that's disproportionately generated by white people's consumption of goods and services – but it measures it.

"Racial–ethnic disparities in pollution exposure and in consumption of goods and services in the US are well documented. Some may find it intuitive that, on average, black and Hispanic minorities bear a disproportionate burden from the air pollution caused mainly by

non-Hispanic whites – but this effect has not previously been directly established, let alone quantified,” the report from the National Academy of Sciences stated.

Christopher Tessum, the lead author of the report, pointed out that, unfortunately, many would not be surprised by the findings.

“What our research did was reinforce what communities of color have been claiming for years,” he said.

The study found that black Americans are exposed to about 56% more pollution than is caused by their consumption, and Hispanics 63% more. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic whites breathe about 17% less air pollution than they cause, earning a “pollution advantage”.

Bronx activist-turned-lawmakers [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) went viral last month when she [told Congress](#) that the [Green New Deal](#), which [aims](#) to tackle economic and racial inequality while also fighting [climate change](#) (to which road [traffic](#) is a contributor) “is not an elitist issue. This is a quality of life issue. You want to tell people that their concern and their desire for clean air and clean water is elitist? Tell that to the kids in the South Bronx [who are] suffering from the highest rates of childhood [asthma](#) in the country.”

Among the many sources of air pollution in Mott Haven, Fresh Direct trucks are easy to spot.

Some saw the opening of the online grocer’s new facility last summer as a win-win for the borough, with the prospect of 1,000-plus local jobs and, the company said, easier access to fresh food. But local environmental justice organization [South Bronx Unite](#) had warned for years of the effect of [1,000](#) FreshDirect daily truck trips.

Critics say few of the trucks are delivering groceries in Mott Haven, most serve the more affluent Manhattan and Brooklyn. “We always see these trucks leaving the neighborhood. I’ve almost never seen one stop here to deliver to a house,” Mychal Johnson, an activist with South Bronx Unite said.

Fresh Direct did not respond to requests to comment.

Of 25 individuals walking on local shopping street Brook Avenue who spoke to the Guardian, nine said they suffered from asthma, and 13 said they knew someone who has it.

Chervoni has lived with asthma all his 62 years, most of them in Mott Haven, and said he feels the condition more with the worsening pollution. “This angers me so much. The food I consume in my mouth is my business and I have control of that, but when it’s the air, I cannot control it,” he said. The community created the park he tends so the trees could offset the foul air somewhat.

Some see the upside. “Many of my friends work in the factory and live on the money they earn. To me, the good outcomes of the Fresh Direct campus cancel out the bad,” said local resident Jose Pardo.

Johnson of South Bronx Unite disagrees.

“Why should any human ever be forced to make a choice between air and a low-wage job?” he said.

“Showing research hopefully will drive some solutions. It’s not enough for them that so many kids have asthma. If it was white kids ... they wouldn’t have even put the [industrial] plants there,” said Johnson.

More traffic passed by.

“The hospitals put a bandaid on your asthma by giving you an inhaler. We should be fixing the root cause of this problem – the environmental inequality,” he said.