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Introduction

From its inception, New York City has had a problem with its waste. As it rose to prominence as an industrial and mercantile powerhouse, waste piled on the streets, was discarded into the ocean, and burned in incinerators. As the city grew wealthier, a disturbing trend– in which both waste and people deemed undesirable for wealthier residents to reside near – namely ill, immigrant, and incarcerated populations – were colocated together on Islands surrounding Manhattan’s mainland, where they were physically and visibly isolated. (Melosi, Fresh Kills)

As NYC began to pivot to a finance/real estate based clientele and the fight for environmental justice began, regulations banning incinerators and closing local landfills (notable Staten Island’s Fresh Kills in 2001) began to materialize long fought battles for justice within the city. The problem of waste did not go away – in fact, NYC now produces over 14 million tons of trash a year, which it now exports out of state. (Melosi, Fresh Kills) Much of this waste from the west side of Manhattan, a region in which Columbia University, the largest private landowner in NYC, owns significant property is burned in the densely populated, predominately working class Latino and Black neighborhood of the Ironbound. (Newark, ERI).

As defined by Ironbound-based activist Maria Lopez-Núñez, the intense industrial clustering adjacent to her neighborhood denotes her community as a “Sacrifice Zone,” in which the health and well being of residents is harmed to fuel the consumerist lifestyles of whiter, wealthier cities. (The Sacrifice Zone). I will explore how Columbia's relationship with the Ironbound manifests within the greater phenomenon of the Sacrifice Zone.

Goals

Examine the Columbia University’s sustainability efforts in through the lens of environmental theory and the history and lived reality of the those living in the Ironbound

Methods

Materials/Resources: Publicly accessible historical and government documents. published sociological theory, academic studies and literature, publically accessible statements by local community groups, and Columbia University’s published policy,

Analysis: It is extremely difficult, given the societal barriers to scientific research and clustering of industry, to ‘prove’ harm through data alone. Instead, I attempt to follow Bullard’s framework for environmental justice research, weaving historical context, community resistance and advocacy, and academically collected data to illustrate the relationship between Columbia and the Ironbound. I utilize theory from environmental sociologists including Bullard, Agyeman, Fraser, Young, Pulido, and DeLaura to guide my framework of environmental justice as something both inextricable from sustainability and which requires targeted action, centering of impacted communities in policy, and acknowledgement of privillage/harm

Sources

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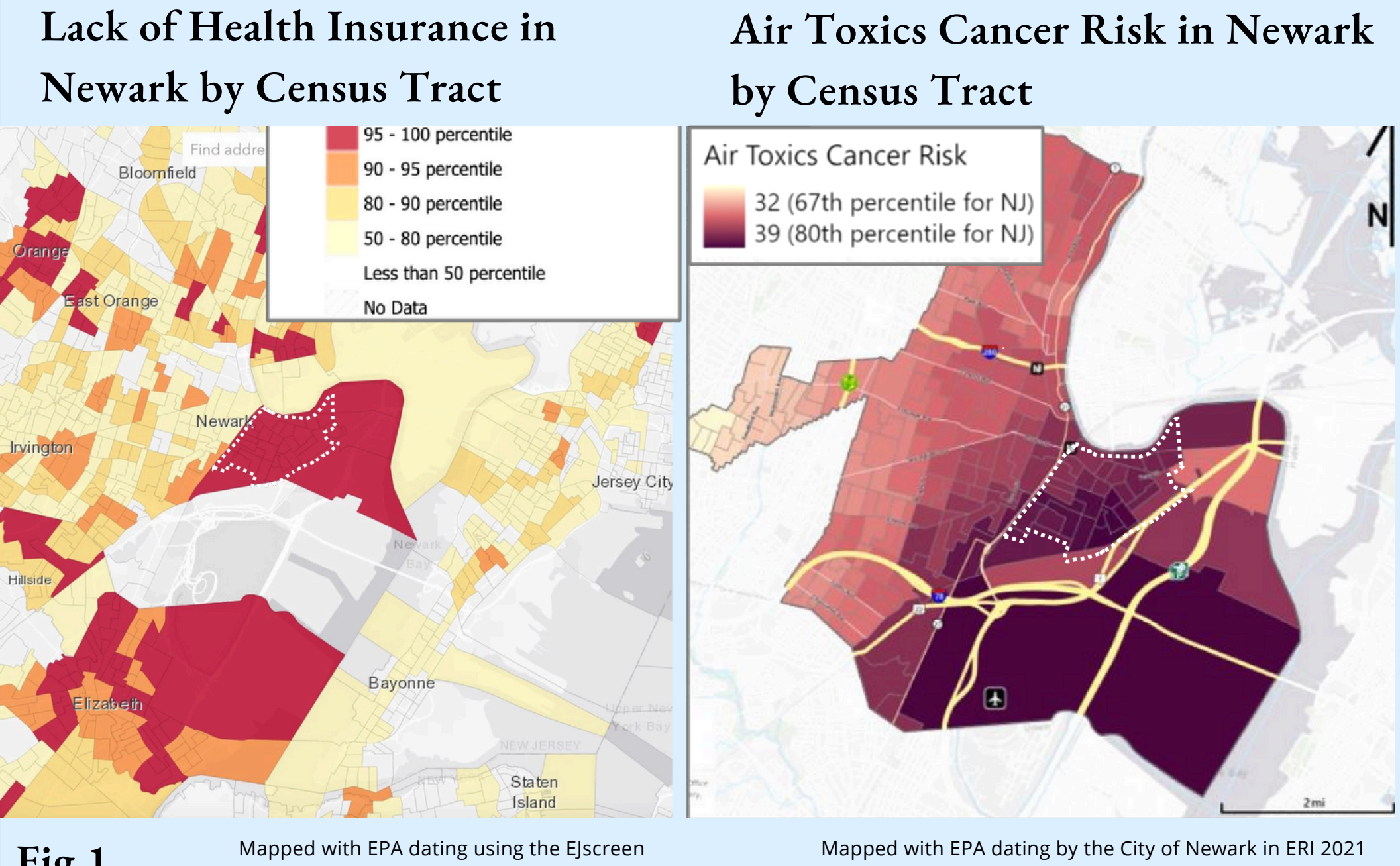
Findings

The Ironbound

The Ironbound is a historically immigrant neighborhood that was redlined in the 1930s, described as “Newark’s worst slum” in which “sales had been made,..to Negros.” It later experienced a large wave of Latino immigrants from Central America and is now a primarily Black and Latino, working class neighborhood. (2020 Census) It is currently home or directly adjacent to two superfund sites, four power plants, an international airport, three major highways, multiple chemical plants and a sewage treatment plant (among others). (The Sacrifice Zone).

Although proposed to residents of Newark as one of many incinerators that would reduce price of landfilling in Essex county, members of the Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) were skeptical of this – with some arguing that the incinerator’s capacity was deliberately oversized – Newark indeed could only supply half of the trash it paid for when the incinerator opened, and officials, years before operation, designated that the incinerator could take waste from out of state should local sources be insufficient. The majority of waste burned there is now from Manhattan.

There was also resistance on the grounds of pollutant concerns (Covanta has violated their permit over 900 times) and the EPA has repeatedly been sued for their inaction on pollution control. While residents of the Ironbound are particaurly at risk given disproportionate exposure to toxic air pollutants, they also face some of the highest rates of health uninsurance in the U.S. (Fig 1). Living near incinrators have been demonstrated to impact respiratory functioning, which impacts the 1 in 4 children in Newark have asthma (asthma attacks are the leading cause of children missing school).



Columbia

Columbia’s Morningside Campus generated 4116.18 tons (or about 588 African Elephants) worth of waste in 2018, the last publicly available waste survey. 78% of waste was sent to the incinerator in the Ironbound, and while the Office of Sustainability was unable to provide me with more recent figures, the have stated that they diversion rate is “relatively stagnant” (Responsible Materials Management)

Much of Columbia’s waste diversion and reduction policy is proposed in their 2030 plan – current programs include compliance with NYC recycling laws, composting/donation at dining halls in Lerner and John Jay buildings, a reuse marketplace for office supplies and a donation/recycling initiative twice a year. While the university has committed itself to reducing waste, it lacks any actionable targets for reduction or acknowledgment of enviornmental justice, privilege, or impacted communities.

In addition to their inaction, the University also actively promotes their reliance on incinerators as landfill diversion, despite questionable environmental benefits (UN, Global Waste) and disproportionate citing in low income communities and/or communities of color (Baptista). Columbia also hosts a research organization (WtERT) dedicated to promoting incinerators ad producing pro-incinerator research. This group has partnered with Covanta, the company which manages the incinerators, and the Columbia Professor who head it has testified on the company’s behalf to gain it more clean energy credits.

Discussion

Per Bullard and Agyeman, there can be no sustainability without justice.Columbia University, as a major university and the largest private landowner in NYC, contributes and normalizes to the racialized and classist structure of the Sacrifice Zone in which the consumption habits of whiter, wealthier urban cores are sustained through industrial activity that primarily harms lower-income communities of color. Consequently, the university’s lack of action towards diversion/reduction of waste, acknowledgement of harm, and promotion of pro-incinerator science comes directly at the expense of the lungs and livelihoods of those Ironbound. However, the University is unique in its situation – it is one of many major universities located in wealthy urban centers. While this positionality allows Columbia to contribute to harm, it also provides the potential for innovation in university waste practices that can help promote circular economic functioning and economic/enviornmental justice on campuses and cities everywhere.

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