Transcript for "Pollution and Environmental Justice in Low-Income Communities of Color"

Featuring Dorceta Taylor

Hosted by David Chancellor

In this podcast, Professor Dorceta Taylor discusses her book, *Toxic Communities*, which addresses the state of environmental justice scholarship, and the structural processes by which poor and minority Americans are disproportionately exposed to industrial pollution.

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[Chancellor] Hello, you're listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this, our April 2015 podcast, I talked with Dorceta Taylor, author of a 2014 book called *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*.

Professor Taylor is a sociologist at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and the Environment where she is also coordinator of the Environmental Justice Field of Studies program.

In the book, and during her New Perspectives in Social Policy seminar presentation here at IRP in February this year, she describes overwhelmingly low-income and minority neighborhoods across the United States that are so polluted that living there is harmful to the health of the residents. In part, *Toxic Communities* aims to explain not just how these communities came to be so polluted, but also how it isn't just a matter of chance that these neighborhoods were and continue to be home to mostly poor and minority residents.

As we turn to Professor Taylor here, one of the first questions I asked her was to describe her motivations for writing *Toxic Communities.*

[Taylor] The basic idea behind the book, or what got me going on the book was the fact that, within the field of environmental justice, the research has really been developing rapidly since the 1990s. And as the number studies coming out and the number of case studies and statistical studies coming out, I really felt like we needed to take a step back and take some time to look at these studies and put a theoretical framework around them, but also to think a little more creatively about how we were explaining some of the patterns we were seeing. So that was part of what drove the book -- first a theoretical kind of an idea of 'what are the various theories that help to explain whether or not we're seeing patterns of discrimination, where were these occurring, and then what was the best way we could think about them in categories? So there's that theoretical piece that overlays the work but then once you get beyond the theory, what are the examples of these cases?

[Chancellor] One example that Taylor writes about in her book is Triana, Alabama, which is a small, rural community on the Tennessee River. Triana is next to a federal facility, the Redstone Arsenal, where DDT was manufactured starting in 1947.

[Taylor] They realized by the early 50s that something was wrong, that the wildlife was dying off, and started running tests. They also knew at that time that the communities around were fishing. So here we are, local communities, and the closest community was Triana, a predominantly African American community. And this is a community where people fished and ate a lot of the fish. They hunted, so kind of a classic, live off the land, eat the fish, eat healthy, protein, right? But what was happening was that those fish were heavily poisoned with DDT because the DDT was coming from the facility and they let their effluents run right into the stream, which ran through this African-American community, through the wildlife reserve, and then right on into the river. So on many levels, it was affecting people in the factory, it was affecting the wildlife -- and they really focused on the wildlife -- and then it was certainly affecting all of these subsistence folks that were catching and eating the fish. And then further down the river it was affecting other white anglers also because they were catching and selling this product. Again, even though it was about the early 1950s when they discovered that this was going on, they did not test any individual, any human being until 1978. So those folks were exposed to this DDT for almost 30 years before they got tested. When they did get tested, some of the highest levels of DDT poisoning ever recorded in the world was found in these families and many of them still have the side effects of what's going on. I talked to a woman from that community just last year and she says they have a lot of cancers. The studies have not been able to link the cancer to the exposure, but the community folks really believe that it is linked. Even now it is not safe to eat the fish because the fish are still picking up the sediment of DDT.

[Chancellor] When we hear about communities that are polluted like this, where it seems like just living there is hazardous, one of the questions people ask is 'why don't they just move?'

[Taylor] So we can see a neighborhood, we can see a community, we can see a waste dump or a hazardous site in a community, and we can ask the question, 'why don't the people living in that neighborhood just move away from it?' That's a question I got a lot, or had been getting a lot over the years and it's not just a matter of 'let's move'. There are other structures, especially within urban settings, that constrict whether or not you can move. So that was what I wanted to get at in the book, those larger underlying factors like residential segregation, like the structures that even the federal government set up to constrain certain populations but to provide movement to other populations, that help to explain why certain racial and ethnic groups and certain social classes end up beside the waste dumps and end being unable to move as freely or as willingly as, say, if you're middle class and you have more options.

[Chancellor] Taylor says that whether we're looking at rural communities like Triana or urban areas, much of the existing environmental justice research doesn't fully account for patterns of residential inequality and segregation -- along with a host of other economic and social factors that are bound up in where people live.

[Taylor] I just came back from Birmingham, Alabama a few months ago, and I write about Birmingham in the book, *Toxic Communities*. And in Birmingham, the city was segregated such that they used the East/West freeway to completely block off the northern part of the city, the heavily African American part of the city from the southern part of the city that was white. All of the steel mills were in this northern part of the city. So not only does the freeway provide this incredible sort of barrier, but the train tracks that go in and out of the steel mills and the iron-making facilities also block the city off. As a matter of fact, when the trains are going by, they close the gates and even school children to date can't even get to school on time because the gates are sometimes closed for an hour as the train goes by. One thing I hadn't thought about until I was there and the residents were telling me this, was, if they have a health issue, they can't get to the hospital which is on the south side of town because they're literally blocked in that northern part of the city for an hour or two, sometimes two and a half hours without being able to get to the rest of the city. So, using the freeway and the rail tracks as a way to segregate a city also became a way to constrain people within a polluted area.

[Chancellor] And this northern part of Birmingham, along with residential portions of Collegeville, Harriman Park, and Fairmont were designated as an EPA Superfund site in 2012 -- mainly due to high levels of contaminants found in the soil, such as arsenic, lead, and benzo(a)pyrene, which is a highly carcinogenic byproduct of incomplete combustion, especially from coal coking and other industrial processes.

[Taylor] It's been so polluted that they can't plant anything in their gardens. They can't use anything from around. The soil is so contaminated. Many of the families have had to move out of the area. So you're getting just this wasteland around these facilities. The schools have had to

shut down and they are still some families who can't afford to move because their house value is zero. Zero dollars. All their equity is tied up in those homes. And so as you drive down the streets, you might find one or two houses where those folks have nowhere to go. They can't sell. No one is going to buy it. They have no money to get out of there and they're just sitting beside these facilities and you look at the air, you can literally see how dark it is just from the smog and the pollution. The rest of the city on the south side doesn't deal with this and they're blocked in, so you have physical barriers, you have the industrial pollution, and you have even today a residential segregation system that really prevents you from being able to move, even when you want to, when you know you should.

[Chancellor] As we step back from Birmingham and think about the how these kinds of polluting facilities are sited and, by extension how physical barriers come to be placed, some scholars have said that rather than being clear cut cases of racial bias, what we're really seeing are economic decisions – so companies wanting to build where it's cheap or municipalities running freeways through less expensive neighborhoods, for example.

[Taylor] And corporations do say that, that it's strictly economic. The land values are cheapest where we locate. We're looking for a place where we have easy transportation in and out, and freeways provide that. And you do find some of these facilities clustered right off the freeway ramp, that is true. Land is cheaper, and when the land is cheaper, people then move to where the land is cheaper. So it's not that the corporation is bad to pollute, it's that they set up first and that the people followed because they were looking for cheap lands. Apartment buildings tend to be in parts of neighborhoods like that. So there are cases where that might be the scenario, but one of the things from the data I present in the book is that this is not the case all of the time or most of the time. In reality, what you do find is, you find existing African American neighborhoods where these facilities move in after people were there. And we can look along the South. I talk about, for instance, Shell, in Norco, Louisiana, where that was an African American community, it was an old slave plantation. During the Civil War the owners left the plantation and the blacks stayed and said "hey, we've got the big house now" and built an entire community, they didn't flee the plantation. And so that community has been around since the early 19th century. Shell bought a piece of that property when they wanted to put a refinery in in 1919 and promised jobs to African American families. They of course did not provide any jobs at the facility and they kept expanding their facility by buying out the plantation and so what ended up happening was that the African American families that once had this plantation and were doing agriculture on it, were left with about a quarter mile square area right up against the Shell plant. So Shell just kept expanding all the way through into this community.

[Chancellor] Even though the examples we've looked at so far have been in the South, Professor Taylor emphasizes that this isn't just a Southern phenomenon. Instead, she says we can find examples of these kinds of processes throughout the country.

[Taylor] Folks like Manuel Pastor and his colleagues have looked at Los Angeles County and asked that very same question, because it is a valid question to ask: What comes first? Is it the facility that comes first, then people come for the jobs? And they have found that not only is it not the case, that minorities are moving to live beside these facilities, it's that minorities actually moved out of the neighborhoods. Those who can, it's a vote with your feet argument. Whites move out. If you look at Gary, the steel mills around Gary, on the south of Chicago, whites used to live very close to those facilities. And in 1919, 1920s, the wealthiest families actually lived closest to the factories because they wanted to be able to walk to work. They weren't thinking pollution. Once we get to the 1950s and 60s and they understand how pollution was affecting their families and their health, they moved away. Blacks then started to move closer because those were the only homes that blacks could buy, the ones that whites were selling, and blacks who wanted to move away to the suburbs around Gary couldn't buy there because they were prohibited from buying there. So, yes, that's a case where blacks came in later but, when they wanted to leave, they were trapped. They couldn't leave.

[Chancellor] Professor Taylor says that a key thing here is to look at the processes going on in particular cities and why minority and low-income people live in the places they do.

[Taylor] With writing this book, I really wanted to show the complexity of 'why do we get certain dynamics in certain areas? We do see that the black families who can move out also move away. We see it in Detroit. Detroit is still a predominantly black city but it's a city that went from almost 2 million in 1950, today it's less than 700,000 people. And one of the things that people don't realize is that between 2000, 2010, the massive movement of blacks out of the city -- it's black flight going out of the city. It's blacks who can leave and want to leave do leave cities like those. So we've gone past the white flight phase and in many of these cities now you're seeing black flight, you're seeing reverse migration to Southern cities. But there definitely is a part, which is the part of the story around deliberate siting in low-income, minority communities, rural communities with low educational attainment or with older folks. You do see a pattern of that.

[Chancellor] Another part of what we're seeing, says Professor Taylor, is that corporations look to place facilities in places where they won't meet a lot of resistance -- so places that are seen as not having a lot of political infrastructure or influence.

[Taylor] The whole argument around civic vitality or the path of least resistance. It's not the only phenomenon that we see, but it is a real phenomenon that we see. The communities that are most vulnerable: low income, high unemployment, low voter turnout, low education -- and those communities tend to map onto minority communities a lot of time. You see those communities being the places where new facilities are being targeted. So, Cancer Alley in those small

communities along the river. You have water transportation, you have road transportation, you have the resource that you want to develop there, and you don't tend to go and try to put it in downtown New Orleans. It's sited along these very tiny communities like that. But we do see some communities where there is resistance. Convent, Louisiana is a case of ShinTech -- a Japanese Polyvinylchloride facility, Shinitsu, they wanted to locate and they chose Convent, Louisiana. This place is so small there isn't even a stop sign much less a stoplight in this community. A massive facility was planned and the community organized and said, yes, we have about 60% unemployment, low education, but we don't want this facility because we are already very burdened and they defeated the facility and what happened was the facility went to another town -- a little bit larger -- 14 miles away, but they downsized. When they realized they weren't going to be able to site such a large facility. They put on more pollution controls, but they still have a facility in the cancer belt. And Cancer Alley, for the folks who are familiar with the term, is the stretch of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, that 90 mile stretch. One fourth of all the chemical plants in the country are located in this stretch of the river bed. So, it's a lot of oil refining, a lot of chemical manufacturing, air pollution like you wouldn't believe, a lot of toxic spills in the river, a lot of fires coming from these facilities, and a lot of cancers, and a lot of people are very convinced that these cancers are very related to both working and being exposed to all of this.

[Chancellor] Professor Taylor emphasizes that one of the important directions for environmental justice scholarship will be in developing a more cohesive narrative to explain how these processes work.

[Taylor] I think we focus both on urban and rural communities and understand how things are connected. I don't think we've done a good job of connecting the dots between, say, residential segregation and urban renewal and how that affects communities, and the inability of some people to be able to escape. So many of us are able to escape and live in a nice neighborhood. Not everyone can. And the key thing for us now is to understand what are the constraints on communities and then how can be better help them in terms of being better be able to organize and resist and also work with industry to be better corporate neighbors if that's at all possible.

[Chancellor] Thanks to Dorceta Taylor for sharing this work with us. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.