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Queering environmental justice

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Discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States is well documented, though the public discourse tends to focus on interpersonal acts of bigotry and legislative debates. What has received less attention, however, is how this discrimination puts the LGBTQ+ disproportionately at risk to environmental exposures—and, in particular, how these challenges intersect with issues of public health.

In a recent paper published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Michelle Bell, Mary E. Pinchot Professor of Environmental Health at Yale, and Leo Goldsmith '20 MEM, who worked in Bell's lab while at YSE, lay out the unequal environmental burden that the LGBTQ+ community faces and the ways in which the environmental justice movement can be more inclusive.

"The LGBTQ+ population is at more risk to environmental challenges because, just like many other marginalized populations, they face social, economic, and health inequities and disparities," says Goldsmith. "The resilience of LGBTQ+ populations can also be affected as they are less likely to be able to access necessary resources, aid, and health care due to structural policies."

According to the Center of American Progress, Goldsmith says, more than 1 in 3 LGBTQ+ Americans faced discrimination of some kind during 2020, including more than 3 in 5 transgender Americans. This discrimination is seen most starkly in their access to employment, housing, and health care, but also their mental health and safety.

This discrimination, the authors say, reduces the LGBTQ+ community's capacity to respond to environmental harm. Much like social determinants of health have been shown to be associated with unequal harmful environmental exposure based on race and socioeconomic status, chronic diseases associated with environmental exposure—respiratory diseases, cardiovascular diseases and cancer, for example—are found at a higher rate in the LGBTQ+ community than in cisgender, heterosexual populations.

The authors say insufficient research has been conducted on the associations between environment and health inequalities in LGBTQ+ populations, and see an urgent need to address them. The paper outlines specific recommendations, including: implementation of a system to collect sexual orientation and gender identity data nationally and locally; anti-discriminatory policies within health care and the federal government; policies to aid the ability of transgender and non-binary individuals to obtain appropriate identification documents; and the incorporation of LGBTQ+ issues into environmental justice research and organizations.

"There has been a start to addressing LGBTQ+ issues within the environmental justice movement with an intersectional environmental justice social media campaign meant to educate those on the issue," says Goldsmith, who is Latinx and identifies as queer and transgender. "However, LGBTQ+ populations need to become a focal point of the environmental justice movement and academics to fully capture the impact from environmental injustices and the needs of those who are Black, Latinx, indigenous, low-income, and/or identify as LGBTQ+."

As a student, Goldsmith co-chaired the student interest groups (SIGs) Environmental Justice at Yale and Out in the Woods, an LGBTQ affinity group at the School. He also organized an event in 2019, "Queer and Present Danger in the Context of Climate Change," a workshop that

brought climate experts to campus to discuss the climate impacts and risks specific to the queer community.

More information: Leo Goldsmith et al, Queering Environmental Justice: Unequal Environmental Health Burden on the LGBTQ+ Community, *American Journal of Public Health* (2021). DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2021.306406

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