



VICE News

Rotten Eggs, Paint, and Garbage: What Environmental Racism Smells Like

Neighborhoods of color across the country are coping with horrible smells—and their health impacts. It's racism on full display.

EO

By [Emma Ockerman](#)

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PROTESTERS FROM DETROIT PEOPLE'S PLATFORM PROTEST ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES DURING A PRESS CONFERENCE, THURSDAY, JUNE 3, 2021, IN DETROIT. (CLARENCE TABB JR./DETROIT NEWS VIA AP)



“They can never feel at home in their neighborhood,” said Nick Leonard, the executive director of the [Great Lakes Environmental Law Center](#), which is representing five residents of the street in a [civil rights complaint](#) with the Environmental Protection Agency. “Many of them just don’t do basic things like have their grandkids over, have family and friends over. It’s largely just because they’re constantly worried.”

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“Nobody wants that stigma of living in a smelly neighborhood,” he added. “It’s embarrassing.”

Residents blame a paint or gas-like odor they say emanates from a nearby plant where Jeep Grand Cherokees are built, according to the complaint, which alleges discrimination from the state environmental regulator that permitted the plant. People living in the neighborhood, which is located just a few miles away from the 86% white suburb of Grosse Pointe Park, say the operation is also making them sick with symptoms of respiratory distress—which seemingly go away whenever they



“I’m just sitting here, and I can taste it in my mouth, like, on my tongue,” Tlaib, a progressive Democrat, said in a [Facebook livestream](#) while visiting the neighborhood Nov. 10. “This is not the way that people can live in our community.”

But all too often, that is how people of color in the U.S. are forced to live—whether on Beniteau Street or in the plethora of other communities plagued by concerning odors. Just across the state from Detroit, residents of Kalamazoo’s majority-Black Northside neighborhood say a paper mill is [making their community stink](#). And on the other side of Lake Michigan, [McKinley Park in Chicago](#), a heavily [Latino and Asian neighborhood](#), also [has a strong stench](#) that [residents believe wafts from an asphalt plant](#).

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Outside the Midwest, bad smells have [also been reported](#) in the majority-Black city of [Brunswick, Georgia](#), which is home to four Superfund sites and a Facebook group called “[SMELL SOMETHING, TELL SOMETHING!](#)”; residents there have described the scent, which may be coming from an area surrounding a pulp mill, as akin to [rotten fish](#), chemicals, dead shrimp, and [garbage](#). And lest we forget the rank



It's not just the stench that's dragging these neighborhoods down, either. Detroit's east side, like many other communities with environmental justice concerns, has more than one public health issue: People living near the Jeep plant, for example, tend to have higher lead levels in their blood, according to residents' complaint against state regulators. The area also has high rates of asthma, and residents there are also exposed to greater levels of ozone and diesel particulate matter pollution, the complaint notes.

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In effect, Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) "participated in the creation of a class of internally displaced peoples, forced from their homes by decades of compounding discriminatory decisions that have resulted in this man-made crisis" when it permitted the automaker Stellantis to expand the operation and increase emissions, the complaint alleges. (Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, owns the Jeep brand and the Detroit assembly complex.)

Shockingly, according to the complaint, Stellantis was also permitted to offset its increased emissions at the Detroit plant by decreasing its emissions at a plant in Warren, a majority-white suburb.



And everybody basically shrugged their shoulders and said, ‘We either can’t do anything about this, or we’re not going to do anything about this.’”

That feeling of disrespect extends well beyond Detroit. When compared to the average U.S. resident, Black Americans are 75 percent more likely to live in “fence-line communities,” or residential areas abutting a company or industrial facility that directly impact their lives with noise, odor, traffic, or emissions. The arrangement is robbing communities of their health *and* wealth—since it’s difficult to sell a home for a good price when it’s located by a smelly, loud plant, according to Robert Bullard, the director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University.

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“America is segregated,” he said, “and so is pollution.”

The Beniteau Street residents’ complaint also notes the Stellantis complex has made it extremely hard for them to sell their properties, and suggests a voluntary relocation program as relief. Last month, Rep. Tlaib joined a Detroit City Council



“We hope you will prioritize our residents’ health and well-being as you consider Stellantis’ recurring and flagrant air quality violations,” their letter to Michigan’s EGLE read.

Since September, however, the EGLE has handed Stellantis three violation notices regarding odors and improperly stalled equipment at the Detroit complex. The EGLE has also announced that it plans to financially penalize Stellantis and implement a compliance plan as part of an “escalated enforcement action,” but told VICE News it couldn’t comment on the civil rights complaint. The agency was scheduled to meet with Stellantis this week as well as on Dec. 20 to discuss possible resolutions, according to Jill Greenberg, a spokesperson for the EGLE.

Stellantis declined to comment when asked about residents’ civil rights complaint.

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“We take these issues very seriously and want to assure you that the emissions from the plant, including occasional odors, do not present a health risk to our neighbors,” the company said in a community update addressing the notices



Stellantis is hardly the only company to be accused of making a Michigan neighborhood stink. In fact, “nowhere are the air pollution burdens on communities of color more disparate than the Midwest,” according to Beniteau Street residents’ complaint. Of the 15 states where Black exposure to fine particulate matter is the highest, a third are located in the 12-state region.

Michigan's most polluted ZIP code, 48217, is in a predominantly Black southwest Detroit neighborhood—and a local Marathon refinery there sometimes smells so bad it makes residents nauseated or wakes them up in the middle of the night, according to a 2020 report from the Metro Times

More recently, residents of Kalamazoo’s Northside neighborhood, which is also majority-Black, have publicly fought for a community they feel they lost to a local stench. The neighborhood is home to a paper packaging plant that Michigan has cited eight times for odor violations eight times since 2012, though the facility is also located next to the city’s wastewater treatment plant, as MLive.com noted.

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they've been inundated with asthma, according to WWMT, a [CBS affiliate in Kalamazoo](#). Toxicologists for the state of Michigan said short-term exposure to the emissions wasn't harmful, though the effects of long-term exposure are still being investigated. The primary source of the odor wasn't exactly clear, WWMT reported.

"They don't care if we live or don't care if we die," Deann Winfield told the station, adding that her 17-year-old daughter died of an asthma attack in 2009, while her son is currently on a breathing machine.

In September, one former resident of the neighborhood filed a complaint with the EPA that—similar to the complaint alleging bad smells from Stellantis—accused the state regulatory agency of violating the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The federal agency is now investigating, according to the [Detroit News](#).

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"We are reviewing the complaint, and look forward to participating in the process to better protect environmental justice communities," Greenberg, the EGLE's spokesperson, told VICE News in a statement.



“They know what’s going on over there. To have a factory like that, that close to a residential area, it was something that was going to come to light eventually,” resident Jeremy Avery told MLive.

Graphic Packaging International, which is based out of Atlanta, said in a statement that it hadn’t been provided with a copy of the EPA complaint and was unaware of any civil rights violation connected to the regulatory agency’s permits or oversight.

“Graphic Packaging has taken significant steps to mitigate the potential for nuisance odors at its Kalamazoo operations, including improving its chemical treatment process, installing monitoring equipment, and participating in the city’s odor task force,” the company wrote in a follow-up statement, saying the company works closely with EGLE.

“After EGLE review and approval,” the statement continued, “the company commissioned an odor study last year through RK & Associates that concluded that Graphic Packaging does not emit nuisance odors.”

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