



# TOXIC POLICIES

Activists battle pesticides in communities of color.

By Christopher Weber

**AMONG SCIENTISTS, PESTICIDES** were long regarded as an agricultural issue. They studied the impact of these chemicals on crops, rural residents and farmworkers—while by and large failing to examine their equally toxic effects in cities.

That is, until now. As scientists refocus on pesticides in urban areas, they're discovering that the effects of these poisons are particularly marked in communities of color. While this may be news to scientific researchers, it is no surprise for activists, who for years have been laboring to raise awareness of the swath of allergy, illness and risk created by pesticides.

The secretive nature of pest control, the slow progress of science and the persistent nature of some pesticides suggest this fight will last for years, perhaps generations. Meanwhile, people cough, grow sick and don't know why.

"One of the biggest misconceptions," said Barry Zucker, executive director of the Ohio Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides, "is that people think it's safe. People think that if [a pesticide] is approved by the EPA, it's safe."

But, he added, "There's a federal law prohibiting pesticide manufacturers from making

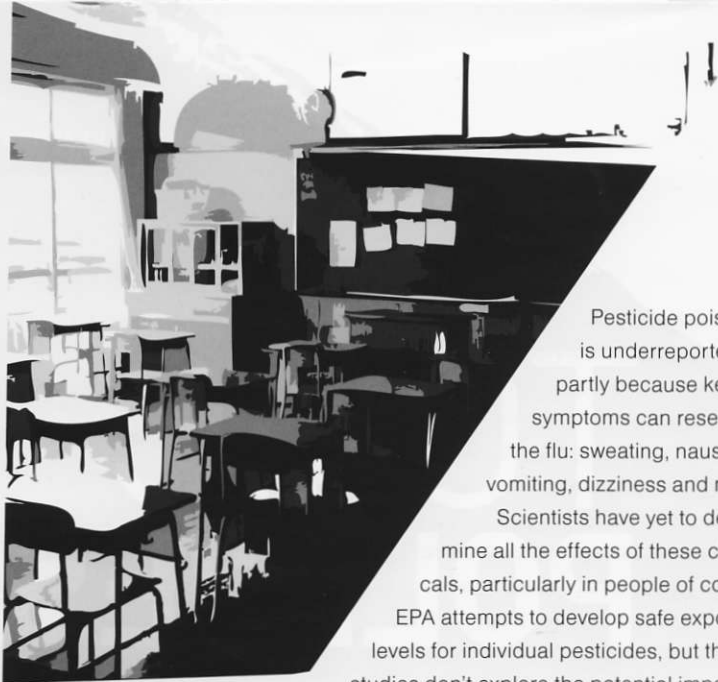
any claims of 'safety' regarding pesticides, even if they're used as directed."

As Zucker suggests, many pesticides are far from safe. They have been linked with several types of cancer, neurological damage, autism, ADHD and asthma.

There is evidence that people of color are disproportionately exposed to pesticides.

Scientists have yet to fully document such race-based patterns of exposure, and they are split on a key point: whether race or income level plays a greater role in determining a person's exposure. Researchers contacted for this story, most with prestigious academic appointments, often referred to activists as better sources on this subject. Several acknowledged, however, that they believe that people of color do suffer a greater toll from pesticides than whites.

There's little doubt that people of color are being exposed to toxic chemicals via insecticides, fungicides and rodenticides. Insecticides have been found in the blood of pregnant Latina and Black women; one study discovered traces of eight different pesticides in Black mothers-to-be. In fact, a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report found that most people have more than one pesticide in their bodies. The actual problem is likely much larger than can be proven.



Pesticide poisoning is underreported, partly because key symptoms can resemble the flu: sweating, nausea, vomiting, dizziness and more. Scientists have yet to determine all the effects of these chemicals, particularly in people of color. The EPA attempts to develop safe exposure levels for individual pesticides, but these studies don't explore the potential impacts on ethnic minorities. Researchers are finding that race and ethnicity *do* play a role in an increasing number of illnesses. But as Cecil Corbin-Mark of West Harlem Environmental Action explained at a recent conference on pesticides, the EPA doesn't require manufacturers to consider such effects.

"Science often doesn't work in the service of people who look like me," said Corbin-Mark, who is Black. "You're telling me that your process for determining what level of exposure I can have to some particular chemical doesn't even factor in me as a being?"

Children are especially vulnerable to pesticides due to their smaller size and developing organs. Despite children's vulnerability, most school districts use pesticides regularly. Several hundred children become sick every year because of pesticides encountered at school, and the rate has increased in recent years.

In a sprawling Black neighborhood in Chicago called Austin, parents are worried that schools may be making students sick. Like many Black neighborhoods, Austin has an extraordinarily high asthma rate.

So local parents decided to inspect the schools. One of the volunteers is Gloria Harris, who has asthma, as does her grandson Markice, a first-grader at Julia Ward Howe School.

"The kids are having asthma more and more, and we don't know why," explained Harris, a parent-activist with the Austin-wide Parent Network. "We're looking at the chemicals to see what might be affecting the kids."

During their initial inspection, Harris and her team found little evidence of pests. But they also discovered that pesticides were being sprayed in rooms used by children. Harris's team also discovered that very few of Howe's teachers and staff know which students have asthma.

Likewise, many parents have not yet realized the risk to their children. During a recent workshop, Harris

learned that many parents did not understand that common household sprays aggravate asthma—even though these same parents had spoken with doctors about their child's condition.

"I think there should be a pamphlet on asthma and pesticides that you can get at the doctor's office," Harris asserted, "because there are people who don't understand how it happens."

As much as families value their children's health, there may be even more at stake in activist-led interventions like Harris's: namely, educational success. Because pesticides can impact children's neurological systems, they may factor into the chronically low test scores at some schools.

"There are still some researchers out there who argue that people of color are inherently inferior—for example, James Watson's controversial comments about Blacks," explained Janean Dilworth-Bart, an assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin. "But pollutants like pesticides are pervasive, especially among low-income and ethnic minority kids. Therefore, group differences in test scores...may actually be due, in part, to exposure to toxic substances in the environment."

That toxic environment often includes the apartments and houses that children return to after school. Landlords use pesticides, of course, and residents join in with cans of Raid or with illegal pesticides like tres pasitos or Chinese chalk. But sprays often don't reach the crevices where pests hide. Pests can also become immune to regularly applied pesticides.

More importantly, sprays trigger asthma attacks. Airborne pesticides also *cause* asthma. One large study showed that children exposed to pesticides were two to four times more likely to get asthma than children who were not. Nevertheless, many landlords continue their habitual spraying.

Altgeld Gardens, a 2,000-unit housing project on Chicago's South Side, offers a compelling example. Cheryl Johnson spearheads People for Community Recovery, a volunteer organization that has been fighting to curb pesticide use there for years. She says pesticides contribute to residents' health problems. Seventy percent of Altgeld Garden's Black and Latino residents have some sort of respiratory problem, according to Johnson.

"We're concerned with what they're spraying and how they're spraying it," Johnson reported. It's been an uphill battle because the company that manages Altgeld

Gardens won't disclose what pesticides it uses. We have asked for [a copy of the pest management plan], but they won't give it to us. We would have to put in a Freedom of Information Act request. But that's a lot of paperwork for a volunteer organization, and they won't take it seriously coming from a small group like us."

This impasse illustrates the lack of accountability among landlords for their pesticide use. It's difficult for residents to stop owners from spraying without taking landlords to court.

This problem persists despite a progressive approach called integrated pest management, or IPM, which focuses on eliminating pests' food, water and hiding places with only minimal use of pesticides. The idea is to starve and seal out pests. Many activists believe that IPM offers the best way to scale back pesticide use.

Nine states have passed laws in support of IPM. All public schools in Ohio, for instance, must use IPM, as must childcare facilities in Illinois.

But in many places, IPM policies are too flimsy to offer much protection. The Chicago Housing Authority, which owns Altgeld Gardens, has emphasized IPM for years, with some success. For instance, an IPM project reduced the amount of pesticides used at one housing project by 83 percent.

Yet the Authority also awards contracts to management companies with a financial incentive to cut corners and spray more than they should. IPM costs more in the short term than pesticides. Sealing a building against pests often involves making modest repairs, and some landlords resist these improvements even though they can reduce long-term energy costs.

And residents who know they're entitled to the benefits of IPM are nervous about blowing the whistle on a landlord.

"If you get evicted," Johnson explained, "it will affect whether you can receive housing aid down the road. People tolerate bad treatment because they're afraid of losing their homes."

Even if you limit pesticide use in your home, publicly funded spraying may fill your street with the very chemicals you're trying to avoid.

When West Nile virus began turning up in dead birds in 1999, it triggered rounds of insecticide spraying that continue to this day. In some cities, spray trucks are nearly as common in summer as snowplows in winter—even though it's not clear that routine spraying prevents the mosquito-borne virus.

Activists believe that people of color aren't being given

proper notification of spraying programs. Cecil Corbin-Mark has seen the problem firsthand in Harlem.

"We were being sprayed. The way people found out the spraying was going on was that they were actually subjected to getting sprayed. Then I started calling the city and asking, 'What are you spraying? What exactly is it?' No information. They would completely shut down and not tell me. Then I said, 'We've got lots of asthmatics up here. What precautions should they be taking from having an asthma attack, as a couple people have told me has happened?' And the city said, 'Well, close the windows.'"

West Nile is not the only pretext for such spraying. When residents complained about the weedy vacant lots in another Black neighborhood in Chicago, the city responded by spraying an herbicide believed to be Roundup, which is produced by Monsanto and believed by experts who are connected with the Pesticide Action Network North America and many other scientists to be "a major threat to public health." Chicago's Department of Streets and Sanitation would not confirm or deny this incident.

When residents want to complain, it's often difficult to determine who's to blame. In Chicago and many cities, at least four municipal departments—health, sanitation, parks, and housing—run their own spraying programs. This divide-and-conquer approach helps camouflage what's being sprayed, when and by whom.

Faced with such widespread pesticide use, activists have responded by integrating pesticide issues in diverse campaigns.

Gloria Harris's inspections are part of a larger drive



to improve the health of schoolchildren that includes other goals such as increasing access to healthy school lunches and reinstating recess in elementary schools. Harris and her colleagues plan to continue their school inspections every two months. In addition, they will begin to monitor implementation of a new law that calls for the use of less toxic cleaning products at schools.

West Harlem Environmental Action is working to improve the overall air quality in Harlem. Reducing pesticides is part of these efforts, as is curbing diesel fumes from bus depots. This is also a goal in Chicago and many other places, because buses idling outside schools for an hour or more at a time are bad for asthma, to say nothing of global warming.

Cheryl Johnson's organization successfully campaigned to reduce paint fumes from an auto plant and other industries near the community. This helped ease the asthma of Altgeld Garden's residents while they continue to fight against pesticides.

In some cities, activists have organized to promote

safer, greener approaches to pest control. Chicago's Safer Pest Control Project holds workshops for landlords to explain the benefits of IPM, while the Greater Madison (Wisconsin) Healthy Lawn Team raises awareness of how spraying one lawn can affect an entire neighborhood.

In Congress, a promising bill called the School Environment Protection Act (H.R. 110) that would promote IPM at schools nationwide has languished in a subcommittee since 2005 and probably won't budge without pressure from activists.

Meanwhile, scientists are finally taking a closer look at pesticide effects in cities. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is developing a unique pesticides tracking system that synthesizes exposure reports from hospitals and poison control centers. It should prove what many activists have known for a long time—that pesticides are taking a terrible toll in our cities, as well as our nation and the planet as a whole. ■

Christopher Weber is a freelance journalist based in Chicago.



## PESTICIDES: THE USUAL SUSPECTS

**THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF PESTICIDES** being used in the U.S. today. Many have not been fully tested for their effects on humans.

To support activists in the fight against pesticides, we compiled this introduction to some of the chemicals common in urban neighborhoods. For more information on these pesticides, or to find a fuller list, visit [beyondpesticides.org/gateway/index.htm](http://beyondpesticides.org/gateway/index.htm).

**ATRAZINE**—The most widely used herbicide in the U.S., atrazine is an endocrine disruptor. It interferes with hormones regulating key body functions and is linked to breast and testicular cancers, birth defects and learning disorders.

**CARBARYL**—Common ingredient in flea and tick powders as well as gardening products, this insecticide is a potent neurotoxin easily absorbed through the skin. It can cause acute poisoning as well as severe long-term effects.

**CHLORPYRIFOS**—Used in ant and roach baits, this pesticide is associated with poisonings at schools. Damages the brain, nerves, kidneys, liver and reproductive system.

**DIAZINON**—This ingredient in lawn products as well as Ortho Hornet and Wasp Killer has been banned for residential use but can still be found in some places. It has many harmful effects.

**GLYPHOSPHATE**—Sold under the brandname Roundup, this herbicide is associated with cancer, chemical sensitivity and damage to the nervous system and internal organs.

**MALATHION**—This insecticide is used against mosquitoes and head lice. It contributes to a host of illnesses.

**PERMETHRIN**—This is found in many sprays, including Pounce, Torpedo, Buzz Off, Raid, Hot Shot, Sergeant's and Ambush. This insecticide is believed to have contributed to Gulf War Syndrome. It affects reproductive and nervous systems and damages the liver and kidneys.

**PYRETHRINS**—This is a synthetic molecule that mimics a compound in chrysanthemums. It is widely used in public buildings. It triggers asthma and allergies. It's an endocrine disrupter as well.

**SULFURYL FLUORIDE**—Used to fumigate buildings, this chemical has multiple health effects. Activists are now working to have the EPA tighten regulations on its use.