

Abandoned Science, Broken Promises

How the Trump Administration's Neglect of Science Is Leaving Marginalized Communities Further Behind

HIGHLIGHTS

Low-income communities, communities of color, and Indigenous communities are disproportionately harmed by the Trump administration's anti-science actions. The administration has consistently sidelined science-based policies that are designed to keep our air breathable, our water drinkable, and provide affected communities a seat at the decisionmaking table. Marginalized communities have faced generations of environmental injustice that far predate the Trump administration; however, the administration's attacks on science are exacerbating existing inequities. Communities are pushing back. It is time to act and ensure that science serve the public interest and decisionmakers prioritize policies that safeguard disenfranchised communities.

One of the most important responsibilities of the federal government is to safeguard the health and safety of people across the nation. However, the Trump administration has consistently sidelined science-based decisionmaking processes and laws that are designed to provide these protections. Importantly, these moves will adversely affect the communities our government is supposed to be serving and burdens will fall hardest on marginalized communities. The right to a “safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment” is considered by the United Nations to be a substantive right guaranteed to all people. And yet, rather than working to help people obtain this basic right across the nation, the administration’s actions put communities in harm’s way. While all communities are affected, low-income communities, communities of color, and Indigenous communities bear the brunt of the consequences of the administration’s anti-science actions. There are long-standing inequities in Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and low-income communities, from segregation, redlining, voter disenfranchisement, gerrymandering, and the lack of enforcement of environmental protections and other safeguards. Today, the Trump administration’s actions exacerbate these inequities.

People are harmed when our government officials attack science, and the Trump administration has sidelined science from decisionmaking in several different ways. President Trump, his advisors, and his appointees, along with allied members of Congress, have willfully distorted scientific information, targeted scientists for doing their jobs, impeded scientists’ ability to conduct research, limited access to taxpayer-funded scientific information, and rolled back science-based safeguards aimed at protecting and advancing public health. The administration’s



Children play basketball in Port Arthur, Texas, a predominantly Black community that is also the site of three different oil refineries.

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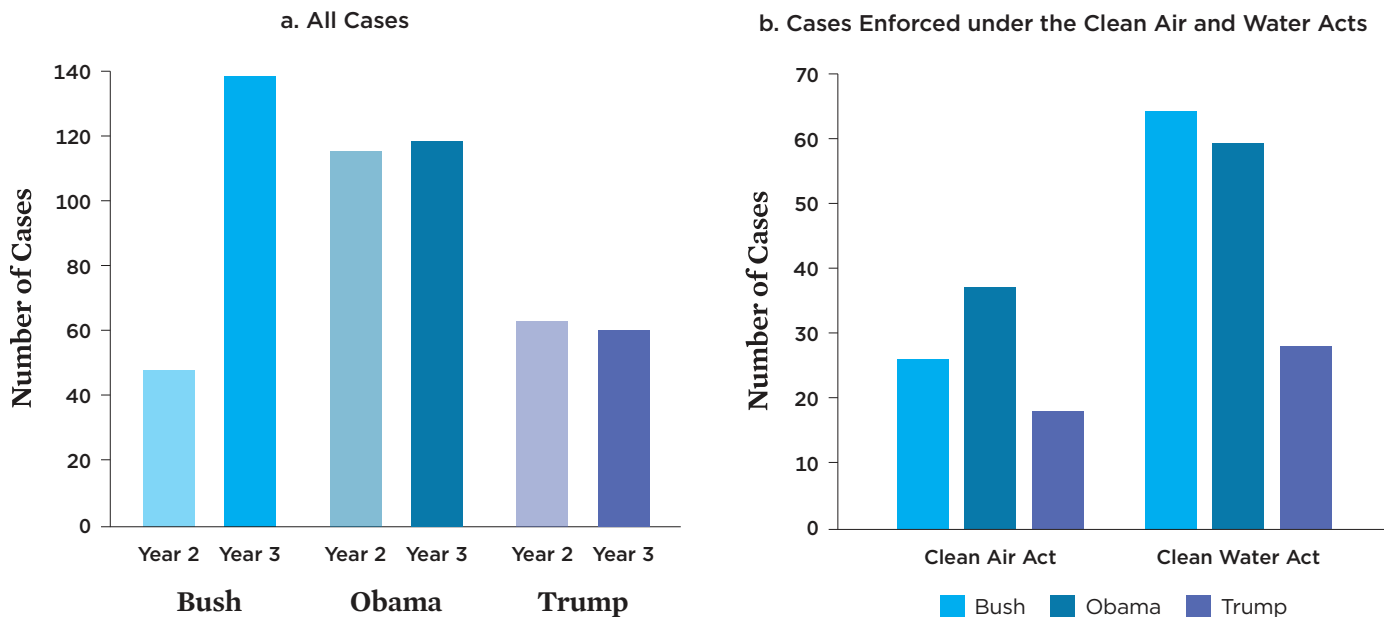
government should be working to diminish inequities in environmental pollution and in public health and safety protections, not worsen them, and science is a key tool that decisionmakers should be using to serve the public good. To counter the impacts of the Trump administration’s attacks on science and tackle existing public health and environmental challenges, communities are pushing back and working toward positive public health outcomes.

attacks on science, now numbering more than 100 in less than three years, have been documented by the Union of Concerned Scientists, and the impacts of these policy actions are being felt in communities across the country. On top of existing inequities in disenfranchised communities, these attacks on science will worsen environmental pollution, increase hazardous workplace conditions, decrease accessibility of nutritious foods, and exacerbate other public health and safety risks in our homes and communities. The federal

Exposing Communities to Health Hazards

Some of the most egregious examples of disproportionate impacts on Indigenous communities, low-income communities, and communities of color under the Trump administration come from the rollback of or failure to enforce public health and environmental protections (Figure 1). Several of the science-based safeguards being dismantled or poorly enforced by the administration are the ones that keep our air breathable, our water drinkable, and our homes and workplaces safe from hazards.

FIGURE 1. EPA Criminal Enforcement Cases That Were Concluded in the Second and Third Year of the Past Three Presidential Administrations



The prosecution of entities violating environmental laws has decreased under the Trump administration as compared with the Bush and Obama administrations. Criminal prosecutions that resulted from environmental investigations were examined in the second and third fiscal year of presidency; the first year was not included to avoid overlap with the prior administration.

Note: Years 2 and 3 of George W. Bush’s presidency correspond to 2002 and 2003; for Barack Obama, 2010 and 2011; for Donald Trump, 2018 and 2019. All years are fiscal years (October 1 to September 30).

SOURCE: EPA 2019f.

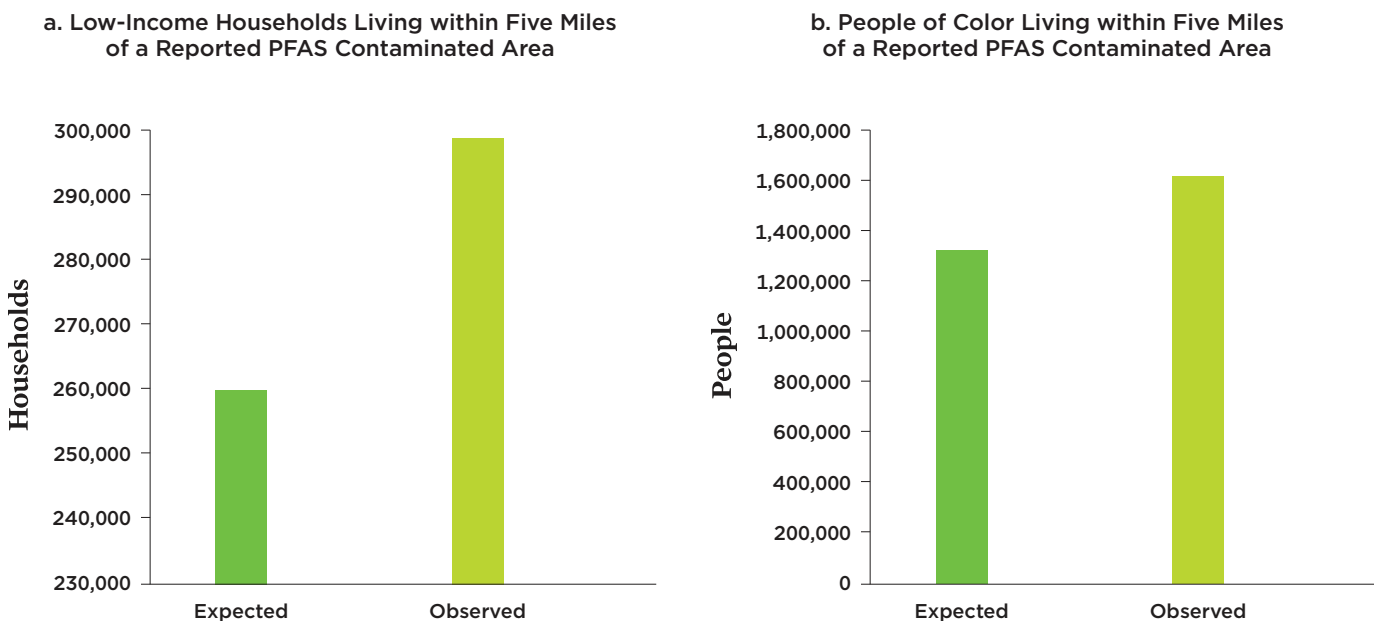
The Trump administration is ignoring the science on the health effects of air pollution and is enacting policies that will increase the health risks already faced by disenfranchised communities, especially those living immediately adjacent to industrial pollution sources. Of particular concern is the administration's disregard of the cumulative impacts of air pollution and other stressors that combine in ways to significantly worsen the health and safety of community members. As a result of systemic racism (such as segregation, redlining, poor zoning, and gerrymandering), multiple industrial sources are often located near marginalized communities and the cumulative impacts of this disproportionate air pollution exposure results in serious health conditions like asthma, heart attacks, cancer, and premature death.

Concerns about pollution and toxic waste being dumped near a community without its say or even its knowledge helped form the basis of the environmental movement in the 1970s and led to the passage of important environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. However, these science-based landmark laws are not being put to work

for all communities equally. And they are being further undermined by the current administration's environmental policies and by its refusal to enforce or enact evidence-based safeguards that would protect impacted communities from dangerous exposures to pollution and toxic chemicals (Figure 2).

Worker protections are also being undermined by the Trump administration, and low-income workers, Indigenous workers, and workers of color are likely to be especially affected. Under federal law, employers are required to maintain a workplace that is free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause serious physical harm or death. A hazard-free working environment is particularly important for low-income workers, Indigenous workers, and workers of color, as several of the most common low-income professions have some of the highest numbers of work-related injuries and illness. However, the science informing workplace injury prevention is being sidelined under the Trump administration; data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration suggest that work-related deaths or catastrophes are at the highest level seen in a decade.

FIGURE 2. Number of Low-Income Households and People of Color Living within Five Miles of a Reported PFAS Contaminated Area



We observed 38,962 more low-income households (a) and 294,591 more people of color (b) living within five miles of a site contaminated with PFAS than expected based on US census data. PFAS contamination occurs across the United States, and higher exposures are more likely to occur in communities of color and low-income communities.

Note: Residential location was considered as a proxy for PFAS exposure. A more detailed explanation of the methodology can be found in the appendix.

SOURCES: SSEHRI 2019; ACS 2017.



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Nutrition assistance programs have proven to increase food security and help lift people out of poverty, yet the Department of Agriculture has proposed critical cuts to these social safety nets. Slashing these benefits can lead underserved populations to rely more often on food banks for regular meals.

Undermining Programs Designed to Help Underserved Communities

The federal government has numerous programs designed to address existing inequities around health and prosperity outcomes, and many of them serve low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color. The need for these programs is often grounded in science; however, the Trump administration has failed to consider scientific evidence in recent decisions.

Since the Great Depression, the federal government has invested in safety-net programs such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, often called food stamps) that provide underserved communities the resources they need to obtain health care and feed their families. Scientific evidence shows that these programs are successful in lifting people out of poverty and meeting basic needs, especially for children, who show long-term positive effects from these programs in terms of health status, educational success, and future career outcomes. However, despite the demonstrated success of these programs, the Trump administration has chosen to sideline many low-income assistance programs to the detriment of the basic needs of millions of the country's most underserved people.

The most underserved communities in the United States are also under-represented at policymaking tables, even though they are often most affected by government decisions. Under the Trump administration, the work of federal offices specifically designed to correct this imbalance and address the needs of affected communities has been severely compromised (Figure 3). Community voices that attempt to inform

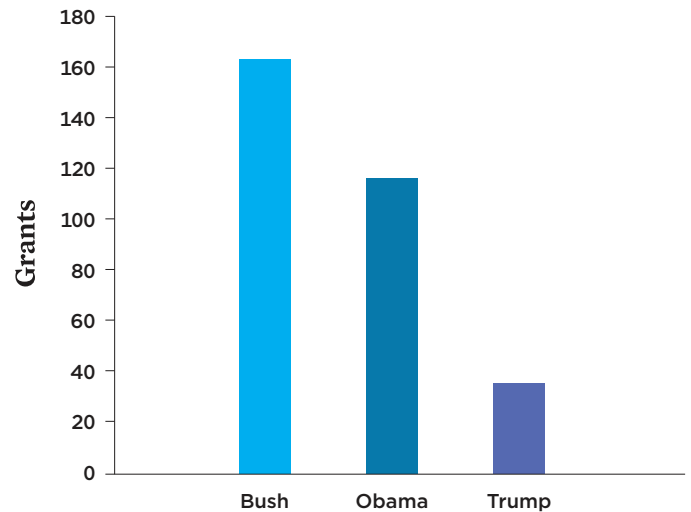
science-based policy decisions are being silenced by the administration, and communities' concerns are being cut out of decisions on federal research that forms the basis of many policies.

Halting or Burying Data, Which Harms the People Most at Risk

Across the government, federal agencies collect scientific data in order to anticipate and identify public health and safety risks, evaluate policy effectiveness, and identify inequities in public services. The Trump administration is halting this data collection in several areas.

Without data, we cannot enact evidence-based policies. The result is that our policy decisions are vulnerable to political influence and are less accountable to the public interest. The impact of the administration's attempt to sideline the collection of scientific data is particularly felt by low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color. Communities often rely on the use of federal-level datasets on environmental risks, industrial emissions, and climate

FIGURE 3. The Number of EPA Environmental Justice Small Grants Issued by Three Administrations in Their First Two Years



The EPA's Environmental Justice Small Grants Program supports communities facing environmental justice concerns. Community-based organizations are awarded up to \$30,000 to work on solutions to local environmental and public health issues. However, this grant program is being severely compromised under the Trump administration as compared with past administrations.

SOURCE: EPA 2019c.



In Houston, low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately affected by air pollution from petrochemical plants, a problem that was exacerbated during Hurricane Harvey. The hurricane damaged places like the Arkema chemical plant (pictured above), leading to an explosion of toxic fumes into the air. The EPA and Texas authorities refused to allow NASA to use sophisticated technology to measure the air pollution and help impacted communities.

issues to examine racial and economic inequalities throughout the United States.

In addition to stopping data collection, the Trump administration is suppressing, halting, or burying studies intended to inform policies that safeguard the public from health, safety, and environmental threats. For instance, the administration halted a study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to investigate health risks for people living in proximity to mountaintop-removal mining sites in the Appalachian Mountains. Studies conducted by the

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine are considered robust and comprehensive, and their findings are often integral to the establishment of evidence-based policies by the federal government. The suppression of research severely limits the ability of decisionmakers to address inequities and improve the welfare of communities.

Conclusion: Monitor Government Actions and Push Back

The Trump administration has attacked long-standing processes that ensure policies are informed by the best-available science at a breadth, level, and frequency that far outpaces previous administrations. Scientific experts have been censored, publications and reports have been suppressed, and the communication of scientific information to the public has been restricted. As a result, public health, public safety, and the environment have suffered. These attacks on science disproportionately harm the most underserved communities in our country, exacerbating existing inequities in public health and safety outcomes.

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As the Trump administration increasingly abdicates its duties to use science to inform critical public policy decisions, it is more important than ever to monitor government actions and push back against these efforts. We must insist that our decision-makers serve the public interest and address the inequities in public health, safety, and environmental outcomes for communities, and we must hold them accountable when they don't.

Codifying environmental justice policies and strengthening scientific integrity and science-based policies can help alleviate the harms experienced by low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color. Several proposed policy solutions can help ensure that federal policy draws on the best-available scientific information—free from political interference—and that policy decisions address public health and safety inequities faced by low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color. The Environmental Justice Act of 2019 would require the consideration of scientific evidence showing the link between pollution sources and the cumulative impacts they have on marginalized communities. And

the Scientific Integrity Act of 2019 would codify and bolster scientific integrity policies already in place at science-based federal agencies.

We have the information, the data, and the research expertise to help decisionmakers prioritize policies that safeguard disenfranchised and vulnerable communities. But we are hindered by an administration that is hostile to science, one that refuses to give impacted communities a seat at the decisionmaking table. It is time to recognize the disproportionate harms this administration has had on low-income communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color by sidelining science, and act to bring science-based decisionmaking back to center stage.

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