

CHAPTER 6

It Isn't Fair: Environmental Pollution Disasters and Community Relocations

We all contribute to pollution. Pollution would be equitably distributed if, whenever you purchased an item or turned on the lights, you also received a packet of wastes that you had to keep, the by-products of whatever you consumed. But it is not that way. Instead, the waste products pile up in certain places closer to some people than to others. At the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster, the people who lived nearby suffered varying degrees of exposure to radioactivity so that a large region of the former Soviet Union could be supplied with electricity. People close to the Nevada Test Site received more than their share of fallout so that the United States could develop the most destructive nuclear arsenal on the planet. People at Love Canal in New York were subjected to toxic chemicals in their basements and schoolyard so that others could use herbicides, insecticides, and marvels of the modern chemical industry.

In this chapter I describe the psychological aftermaths of going through a pollution disaster. In each of the pollution crises, people were uncertain about how much pollution exposure there was. But they ended up having to evacuate their homes temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or by force.

Policy decisions in pollution crises are always controversial. There is a pollutant present, but its exact nature, the extent of human exposure, and the severity of the hazard it poses are not well understood in the heat of the crisis. In the disasters I describe, the extent of the threat was initially uncertain. It became evident only over time. Because of the many uncertainties, government agencies and communities can easily become entangled in a web of conflict and mistrust. Government officials face a dilemma. A pollution crisis seems to pit the inequity of risk to one group against the rest of the society. Should the government spend tax money or require a corporation to pay to relocate a polluted neighborhood? Should a community have the right to

refuse to accept a hazard such as a chemical disposal facility, a nuclear power plant, or a bomb test site? How much compensation do people deserve if they are irreparably harmed by such a facility?

Communities in the midst of a pollution crisis are often fractured along lines corresponding to perceptions of the risk. People within the community have different opinions about the severity of the situation. Opinions differ about what ought to be done. People living through a pollution crisis face double jeopardy. The pollution itself can affect their psychological functioning, physical health, or both. And stress comes from the knowledge that the pollution exists, the uncertainty about exposure and the effects of the pollution, when or whether the government will act to help, and the evacuation or lack of an evacuation.

Government agencies often cannot answer questions about the severity of the hazard. Exposures usually have to be reconstructed retrospectively. These estimated dosages can be helpful, but they are not direct measures of internal exposure. The exposure estimates themselves sometimes lead to disputes. This happened at Love Canal and also at the nuclear accident and bomb test sites.

I examine two facets of pollution crises and disasters. The pollutants themselves can directly affect the health and psychological well-being of children and their families. But the indirect effects of the psychological stress are equally important. Keep in mind that the environmental crises in this chapter concern unjust suffering. The people at Love Canal, Chernobyl, and Three Mile Island were not at fault for their pollution crises. It could just as easily happen to you or me. The unfairness of pollution crises can add to the psychological stress.

Some pollution disasters have led to greater knowledge and a better world for the rest of us. The mercury poisonings in Minamata and Iraq and the PCB poisonings in Japan and Taiwan are examples that led to knowledge that helped the rest of us. The benefit of the knowledge from these disasters does not heal the individuals who suffered. I have written most of this book with a focus on hard-nosed empirical science. However, science cannot give us a heartfelt appreciation of the agonies, anger, and moral outrage experienced by those who are victims of pollution crises.

Part I: Radioactivity: Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Legacy of Nuclear Bomb Testing

I don't think they knew what they were doing.—a U.S. veteran describing his experience in military maneuvers during a nuclear bomb test (quoted in Garcia, 1994, p. 654)