

NEWS: HEALTH & WELLNESS

Researchers Arm Santa Ana Residents With Data to Fight Pollution

BY BRANDON PHO Published May 15, 2023 Updated May 16, 2023 Why you can trust Voice of OC



A pedestrian walks through a crosswalk in Santa Ana during a 2020 summer heatwave. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

There are at least 75 state-listed polluter sites within a mile of every Santa Ana school.

Separately, a state environmental map shows residents around Madison Park live in more toxic emissions than 98% of all census tracts in California.

This is the type of information that UC Irvine researchers found often in fragments across different public databases – spreadsheets and maps that each hold a piece of a polluted community's picture.

Taken together, this is the type of information that could spur neighborhoods into action, like setting up community air monitoring networks and a push for regulations to limit the pollution.

And in Santa Ana, the UCI team of social and environmental governance researchers and students is trying to pull it all together into a central cache of accessible community knowledge.

One that comes into play when asking local leaders to act as well.

"Part of what we're doing is, we're working to build an environmental justice archive, one that helps communities document the history of harms that they're facing," said Dr. Kim Fortun, a university professor of anthropology who studies environmental health risks and disaster.

Fortun leads the UCI team known as EcoGovLab, whose work has focused on documenting the cumulative burden of different pollution sources on the residents of Santa Ana – be it from neighboring industrial emissions or lead contamination.

The work also involves hosting public forums to explore actual solutions to these issues, like one in January attended by the city's planning and building director, an Assistant U.S. Attorney, and South Coast Air Quality Management District officials, who took questions.

The Jan. 31 forum missed all but one member of the elected City Council, David Penalzo.

Though City Council members' next chance at getting a deeper look at pollution is around the corner, on May 18, when the group plans to host another forum at Davis Elementary School from 6:00-8:00 p.m.

The group works closely with – and its work is largely driven by – Santa Ana residents, namely members of a Madison Park neighborhood community group, which has in recent years started to grasp the air quality impacts of its adjacent industrial corridor of plastics, metal plating and other manufacturing facilities.

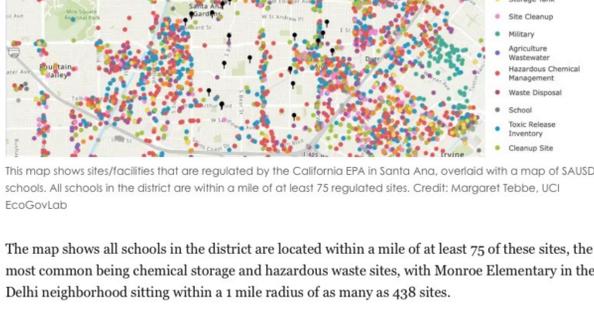
"One of the things that stood out from interviews with people in the neighborhood is that they're very pessimistic of what's going on with local government," said Leonel Flores, the Environmental Justice Programs Manager for the neighborhood group GREEN-MPNA.

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In a mostly Spanish speaking neighborhood with some of the worst toxic emissions in the state, according to CalEnviroScreen, Flores said there was pessimism around "trying to get our local government to respond to our needs."

Margaret Tebbe, one EcoGovLab researcher, created a map of facilities that are regulated by the California EPA in Santa Ana, overlaid with a map of Santa Ana Unified School District schools.



This map shows sites/facilities that are regulated by the California EPA in Santa Ana, overlaid with a map of SAUSD schools. All schools in the district are within a mile of at least 75 regulated sites. Credit: Margaret Tebbe, UCI EcoGovLab

The map shows all schools in the district are located within a mile of at least 75 of these sites, the most common being chemical storage and hazardous waste sites, with Monroe Elementary in the Delhi neighborhood sitting within a 1 mile radius of as many as 438 sites.

Last year, the City Council updated its cornerstone document of city planning goals for the first time in decades – and this time with a special new component:

Environmental justice.

In doing so, City Council members pledged to form what City Hall's calling an Environmental Justice Action Committee, which will impanel representatives from five area clusters the city's identified as having significant pollution and environmental concern.

The committee would then make recommendations on future environmental justice-related policies.

"Plus two additional representatives (one from the City and another from the County)," wrote City Hall spokesperson Paul Eakins in a Thursday emailed response to questions. "With City Council's direction in March, staff are now creating an engagement and community education plan to begin the recruitment process that will shape the initial Action Committee."

On the committee, Flores expressed skepticism: "We've seen how committees can be powerless in Santa Ana."

As part of their General Plan update in April 2022, City Council members also pledged to hire an environmental justice staff member to collaborate with neighborhoods on pollution solutions, as well as pursuing health studies and grants.

As a response, the city's Office of Neighborhood Initiatives "was expanded to include environmental services and environmental justice," wrote Eakins, who added that, in October, City Hall hired a full time "Principal Community Planner," Margarita Macedonio, to oversee the environmental justice initiative.

"I think it's a huge win for the neighborhood associations," said Fortun, who added that the office has begun producing maps and compiling resources for neighborhoods about environmental issues. "It's playing a coordinating role, which is just critical."

"We're starting to see some progress," said Flores. "But at the same time, it's been a very slow pace."

And there are other agencies at play.

Years of UCI research has studied the relationship between lead contamination and low-income areas in town, as well as its ties to historic car pollution.

"We've initiated a dialogue with the county (Health Care Agency) about a blood screening clinic," Fortun said. "They want people to go to a primary health provider to get it on grounds that they'll get wraparound care, not recognizing that many people in this community don't have that and aren't going to get it in any kind of timely way."

Reached for comment on Friday, OC Health Officer and Chief of Public Health Services Dr. Regina Chinsio-Kwong issued a written statement, saying "our Child Health Clinic and local community clinic providers have been aware of screening recommendations and offer screening to high-risk individuals."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention generally define "high-risk" people as children from low-income households who live in housing built before 1978, before the use of lead in paint was banned.

Chinsio-Kwong said blood testing is part of child care visits through national and local providers, and is even required for kids "in public assistance or those with primary insurance and risk factors," to get tested at 12 months and 24 months.

She added that the Health Care Agency has a health referral line [(800) 564-8448] for children who are uninsured.

In their effort to equip the community with information, researchers say there remain gaps.

For instance:

One undergraduate researcher on Fortun's team, Aiden Browne, tried to find emissions data for buildings in the industrial corridor near Madison Park, using a database of facilities regulated by the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

Browne said in many cases, no emissions data was available for an area with some of the most toxic releases in the entire state.

"It's assumed that they (these facilities) haven't gone over their (permitted levels), because it's all self reported," Browne said. "They are trusting whatever gets uploaded."

A spokesperson for the air quality district, Connie Mejia, responded to questions in a written statement on Friday:

"While it is true that resource limitations impact the number of facilities we're able to visit each year, whether emissions data can be found using the F.I.N.D. tool on our website has no bearing on our inspection and enforcement practices."

The UCI researchers' goal is to get as clear a picture as possible about what role, exactly, the industrial facilities are playing in polluting the air and soil around Santaneros.

"But also, how do we understand the cumulative burden?" Fortun said.

"We're partnering (with the community) really closely, in a way that's both documenting the problem, but also trying to figure out how to push on state agencies that are just stubbornly indifferent to the kind of help they need," Fortun said.

It's also about helping to connect different stakeholder and activist groups that are "working from different places," Fortun said.

Flores said he comes across many community members who still don't know about the pollution above, beside and beneath them, "even though we've been doing this work for four years now."

"A large part of the community still doesn't know," said Flores, who recalled community forums with great turnout – but from "the people we already work with."

"We're really trying to get the message out to people that don't even know what's going on."

Update: A previous version of this article stated HCA operates a lead screening hotline. HCA says it's general Health Referral Line.

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