



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Office of Domestic Social Development

**CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT**  
February 2012

*The environmental crisis of our own day constitutes an exceptional call to conversion. As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to save the planet for our children and generations yet unborn.*

--Renewing the Earth, USCCB statement, 1991

## **ISSUE**

Children are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and exposures to toxic chemicals in the environment. Their bodies, behaviors and size leave them more exposed than adults to such health hazards. Because children are exposed to environmental hazards at an early age, including in the womb, they have more extended time to develop slowly-progressing environmentally triggered illnesses such as asthma, certain cancers, learning disabilities and other illnesses that adversely affect childhood development. Exposure to air pollutants and toxins is significantly more harmful to children, born and unborn. Children in poverty and children of color are at a disproportionate risk, with routinely higher rates of lead poisoning and asthma-related deaths and hospitalization.

## **WHY SHOULD CATHOLICS CARE?**

As Catholics, we are called to care for God's gift of creation and to protect the most vulnerable among us. Caught in a spiral of poverty and environmental degradation, the poor and the powerless bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of environmental problems, as their lands and neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted, to be near toxic waste dumps, or to suffer from water contamination.

In the face of these challenges, the Catholic community is called to learn more, care more, and do more about the environmental threats to our children. As the United States bishops articulated in *Putting Children and Families First*: "For generations, the Catholic community has reached out to children... We have defended their right to life itself and their right to live with dignity, to realize the bright promise and opportunity of childhood. Now we renew this commitment and build on it. We seek to bring new hope and concrete help to a generation of children at risk."

## **BACKGROUND**

In an effort to help address environmental hazards affecting children's health, a coalition of major Catholic organizations formed the *Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment (CASE)*.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, CASE members hosted a major conference on the effects of environmental toxins on unborn children, "Protecting Human Life and Caring for Creation," held at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This unprecedented and groundbreaking event brought together prominent leaders from the Catholic community, government, and the public health sector to learn more about how unborn children are exposed to environmental harm, how this exposure affects them later in life, and what can be done to better protect them. Building on this collaboration, in July 2008 a convocation on "Life, Justice & Family: Partners in the New Evangelization" included a session on "Toxins, the Environment and the Child in the Womb."

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<sup>1</sup> CASE is made up of: Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA); Catholic Health Association (CHA); Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI); Conference for Catholic Facility Management (CCFM); Knights of Peter Claver, Inc. and Ladies Auxiliary (KPC); National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW); National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA); National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD); National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC); and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Office for Domestic Social Development and Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

The USCCB and other Catholic partners continue to support research efforts that will provide information about environmental threats that may affect children's health, such as the National Children's Study. This longitudinal study of 100,000 pregnant women, whose children will be followed from before birth until age 21, will help provide important information about how exposure to environmental toxins may affect children's physical, mental, emotional, and developmental health.

### **USCCB POSITION**

The Bishops' Conference and other Catholic partners are identifying opportunities to strengthen policies that protect children, born and unborn, from exposure to harmful toxins in the environment.

During 2011, USCCB, CHA and other Catholic and Evangelical partners worked together to raise awareness about the need for a national standard to significantly reduce mercury and other toxic air pollution from power plants and to protect unborn babies and young children.

In 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed the first national standard to reduce toxic air pollution including mercury from power plants. These harmful air pollutants have a clear adverse impact on the health of children, born and unborn. Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) have been the subject of a public comment period and public hearings. USCCB has expressed support for such a national standard to significantly reduce this hazardous air pollution. In December 2011, these long-awaited standards were finalized. This represents a major victory for public health and children's health. Our efforts were critical to obtaining this victory and will be essential in preventing likely efforts in Congress to overturn or delay such standards.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- Urge your Members of Congress to not delay recently finalized Mercury and Air Toxics Standards that will reduce hazardous air pollution from power plants and protect children's health.
- Call on your Senators and Representatives to continue to support funding for the implementation of the National Children's Study, to protect children and our communities from environmental harm.
- Urge your local and state authorities to fund initiatives intended to assist public and private schools in providing an environment free of health hazards.

### **RESOURCES**

A DVD and a companion study guide from the conference are now available. The DVD includes presentations by Catholic leaders, government officials, and public health experts. The accompanying study guide, *Protecting Human Life and Caring for Creation: Why Protecting Unborn Children in their First Environment Matters*, is intended to clarify the information provided in the presentations, encourage further dialogue and study, and lead participants to faith-inspired action.

To learn more, download the study guide from the USCCB website at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org) by searching for environmental study guide. To request a copy of the DVD, please send an e-mail to [ejpfeedback@usccb.org](mailto:ejpfeedback@usccb.org).

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