

Environmental Justice FAQs

Source: FHWA website

In 1994, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. The Executive Order focused attention on Title VI by providing that "each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations." In support of Executive Order 12898, the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) issued an Order on Environmental Justice (DOT Order 5610.2) in 1997, followed by a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Order on Environmental Justice (FHWA Order 6640.23) in 1998.

1. What are the fundamental concepts of Environmental Justice?

There are three fundamental Environmental Justice principles:

1. To avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects, including social and economic effects, on minority populations and low-income populations.
2. To ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process.
3. To prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority populations and low-income populations.

2. Is Environmental Justice a new requirement?

No. The recipients of Federal-aid have been required to submit assurances of compliance with, and the U.S. DOT must ensure nondiscrimination under, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and many other laws, regulations, and policies. In 1997, the Department issued its U.S. DOT Order to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations to summarize and expand upon the requirements of Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice.

3. What is the legal basis for addressing the concerns of low-income populations?

The Department's planning regulations (23 C.F.R. 450) require metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) and States to "seek out and consider the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, including, but not limited to, low-income and minority households."

As required by NEPA and 23 U.S.C. 109(h), impacts on all communities including low-income communities must be routinely identified and addressed.

4. What is the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Title VI declares it to be the policy of the United States that discrimination on the ground of race, color, or national origin shall not occur in connection with programs and activities receiving Federal financial assistance, and authorizes and directs the involved Federal departments and agencies to take action to carry out this policy. Title VI prohibits discrimination: whether -- intentional or where the unintended effect is unduly burdensome.

5. What is the relationship between the U.S. DOT Order on Environmental Justice and Title VI?

The U.S. DOT Order clarifies and reinforces Title VI responsibilities as well as addresses effects on low-income populations. The goal of the U.S. DOT Order is to ensure that programs, policies, and other activities do not have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on minority or low-income populations. This goal is to be achieved, in part, by implementing both Title VI and NEPA during the development and implementation of transportation activities.

6. What types of activities require Title VI and Environmental Justice considerations?

Title VI and Environmental Justice apply to all U.S. DOT programs, policies, and activities, including, but not limited to: contracting, system planning, project development, implementation, operation, monitoring, and maintenance.

7. How early can issues which give rise to Title VI/ Environmental Justice concerns be addressed?

At the start of the planning process, planners must determine whether Environmental Justice issues exist and use data and other information to: (1) determine benefits to and potential negative impacts on minority populations and low-income populations from proposed investments or actions; (2) quantify expected effects (total, positive and negative) and disproportionately high and adverse effects on minority populations and low-income populations; and (3) determine the appropriate course of action, whether avoidance, minimization, or mitigation. If issues are not addressed at the planning stage, they may arise during project development, or later when they could be more difficult to mitigate and delay project decisions.

Environmental Justice is an important part of the planning process and must be considered in all phases of planning. This includes all public-involvement plans and activities, the development of Regional Transportation Plans (RTP's), Transportation Improvement Programs (TIP's), Statewide Transportation Improvement Programs (STIP's), and work programs (such as the Unified Planning Work Programs (UPWP's)). A truly integrated and effective planning process actively considers and promotes environmental justice within projects and groups of projects, across the total plan, and in policy decisions.

8. Must Title VI and Environmental Justice be considered ONLY on projects requiring an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)? No. Title VI and Environmental Justice applies to all planning and project development programs, policies and activities. In project development, environmental justice should be considered in all decisions whether they are processed with an Environmental Impact Statements (EIS's), Environmental Assessments (EA's), Categorical Exclusions (CE's), or Records of Decision (ROD's). Potential impacts to the human environment should drive the processing option decision as much as potential impacts to the natural environment. Impacts to both the natural and human environment are to be given comparable consideration throughout transportation decision making.

9. Do all impacts have to be evaluated for Title VI and Environmental Justice, or just health and environmental impacts?

All reasonably foreseeable adverse social, economic, and environmental effects on minority populations and low-income populations must be identified and addressed. As defined in the Appendix of the DOT Order, adverse effects include, but are not limited to:

- Bodily impairment, infirmity, illness, or death.
- Air, noise, and water pollution and soil contamination.

- Destruction or disruption of man-made or natural resources.
- Destruction or diminution of aesthetic values.
- Destruction or disruption of community cohesion or a community's economic vitality.
- Destruction or disruption of the availability of public and private facilities and services.
- Vibration.
- Adverse employment effects.
- Displacement of persons, businesses, farms, or nonprofit organizations.
- Increased traffic congestion, isolation, exclusion, or separation of minority or low-income individuals within a given community or from the broader community.
- The denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of, benefits of DOT programs, policies, or activities.

10. Who is considered to be a "Minority" for purposes of Title VI and Environmental Justice?

The U.S. DOT Order (5610.2) on Environmental Justice defines "Minority" in the Definitions section of the Appendix, and provides clear definitions of the five (5) minority groups addressed by the Executive Order. These groups are:

1. Black (a person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa).
2. Hispanic (a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race).
3. Asian American (a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands).
4. American Indian and Alaskan Native (a person having origins in any of the original people of North America and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition).
5. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander - a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands

(Note: OMB, in its Bulletin No. 00-02, "Guidance on Aggregation and Allocation of Data on Race for Use in Civil Rights Monitoring and Enforcement," issued March 9, 2000, provided guidance on the way Federal agencies collect and use aggregate data on race and added this category to the previous standard delineations of race/ethnicity.)

11. What is considered "Low-Income" for purposes of Environmental Justice?

The FHWA Order defines "low-income" as "a person whose household income is at or below the Department of Health and Human Services poverty guidelines." The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) poverty guidelines are used as eligibility criteria for the Community Services Block Grant Program and a number of other Federal programs. However, a State or locality may adopt a higher threshold for low-income as long as the higher threshold is not selectively implemented and is inclusive of all persons at or below the HHS poverty guidelines. The most current HHS poverty guidelines can be found at HHS's website:

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/index.shtml>.

12. How large must the minority or low-income population be to consider Environmental Justice?

Disproportionately high and adverse effects, not size, are the bases for Environmental Justice. A very small minority or low-income population in the project, study, or planning area does not eliminate the possibility of a disproportionately high and adverse effect on these populations. What is needed is to show the comparative effects on these populations in relation to either non-minority or higher income populations, as appropriate.

Some people wrongly suggest that if minority or low-income populations are small ("statistically insignificant"), this means there is no environmental justice consideration. While the minority or low-income population in an area may be small, this does not eliminate the possibility of a disproportionately high and adverse effect of a proposed action. Environmental Justice determinations are made based on **effects**, not population size. It is important to consider the **comparative impact** of an action among different population groups.

13. Must there be a neighborhood or community of minority, or low-income groups in order for there to be a Title VI and Environmental Justice effect?

No. The Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice and the DOT Order (5610.2) on Environmental Justice refer exclusively to "populations," while the White House distribution memo refers to both "communities" and "populations." The DOT Order defines each "population" as: (1) any readily identifiable group of minority persons or low-income persons who live in geographic proximity; or (2) geographically dispersed persons, such as migrant workers or Native Americans. Therefore, depending on the context and circumstances, a proposed action could cause a disproportionately high and adverse effect on a population even in cases where there are no clearly delineated neighborhoods or communities.

Neighborhood and community boundaries and impacts, however, should be considered in planning, programming, and project development activities, whether there are minority or low-income populations involved or not. Most importantly, the public should always be involved in defining "neighborhood" and "community" through the public-involvement process, since the identification or definition of neighborhood and community boundaries can be subjective.