

# The Intersection of Racism and Poverty in the Environment: A Systematic Review for Social Work



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*Social workers are tasked with the responsibility of pursuing environmental justice to diminish environmental risks for impoverished, minority, and disadvantaged communities that have been disproportionately impacted. While social work literature addresses the topic of environmental justice, few articles discuss its root issues of poverty and racism in the environment. Through a systematic review of peer-reviewed journals from 2015 through 2021, this study identified 27 articles that focus on the intersection of social work, environmental justice, poverty, and racism. Findings reveal three common categories of articles, their themes, and publication trends. Social work education was the most common category (40.7 percent), followed by review articles and case studies (37.0 percent), and community-based research (22.2 percent). The results of this study indicate that more research is needed in all areas related to poverty and racism in environmental justice social work.*

**Keywords:** *environmental justice, poverty, racism, social work, systematic review*

Environmental justice can be identified “when all people equally experience high levels of environmental protection and no group or community is excluded from the environmental policy decision-making process, nor is affected by a disproportionate impact from environmental hazards” (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, p. 20). Alternatively, environmental injustice occurs when environmental degradation, such as air pollution, water contamination, and climate change, is not experienced by all populations equally, or at least proportionate to the benefits received. While environmental issues impact all people, they

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disproportionately affect people with low incomes, as well as Black, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous people and communities and such injustice typically exacerbates pre-existing socioeconomic, political, and cultural inequalities, such as poverty and racism (Bullard, 1990; Dominelli, 2012; United Church of Christ [UCC], 1987). Historical background further justifies poverty and racism as causes of environmental injustice. For example, historical discrimination has resulted in marginalized communities that are clustered around polluting industrial sites, highways, or toxic waste sites (Bhatt, 2016; Bullard, 1990). These communities may also experience environmental hazards found in contaminated housing, polluted air, and unsafe water, among other things (McCarthy, 2016). To exacerbate this issue, these groups may also lack access to information about environmental hazard safety (e.g., safe disposal practices) and the resources to implement it and may have limited access to environmental hazard exposure monitoring and protective measures (Chandran & Cataldo, 2010). Additionally, stress from social and economic conditions, such as poverty, violence, unemployment or underemployment, and limited education access and quality may worsen the effects of environmental hazards resulting in disproportionate impacts (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017). Areas with increased environmental injustice have also been found to have escalating food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and lower school attendance rates (Harris, 2019; Leichenko & Silva, 2014), contributing to “significant disparities in health and education outcomes, physical and financial healthcare resources, and overall well-being” (Harris, 2019, p. 91), as well as lost jobs and wages from debilitating and chronic health conditions (Harris, 2019).

The culmination of multiple environmental risks appears to be pathogenic of poverty and racism, contributing to further environmental and health inequities (Evans, 2004). Poverty is often defined in terms of income. However, definitions of poverty in research are highly variable and, in some cases, unstated or non-existent. Poverty definitions may also include the lack of material possessions and resources such as health care, nutritious foods, education, as well as social capital, social networks, housing, and safe neighborhood conditions (Hornberg & Pauli, 2007). Regardless of the origin, poverty is often concentrated in areas experiencing environmental degradation (United Nations, 2018). While it is argued that poverty is the cause of environmental degradation, it is also a consequence of it (Alpizar & Ferraro, 2020; Way, 2016). Whichever, people living in poverty are more likely to suffer the consequences of environmental injustice with few resources to adapt and respond. This environmental injustice contributes to the depletion of essential resources and further impoverishes people (United Nations, 2018).

To provide further context on racism and the environment, Benjamin Chavis is thought to have coined the term environmental racism in 1982 as he worked as the head of the United Church of Christ’s Commission on Racial Justice (Mushak, 1993). Through a systematic study, the Commission found that “race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of

hazardous waste facilities” (UCC, 1987, p. 13), contributing to disproportionate impacts on vulnerable communities. As a widely publicized recent example, the 2014 water crisis in Flint, Michigan also highlights the intersection of poverty and racism in environmental justice. After the city government pumped water from the polluted Flint River to the city, the river’s water corroded the city’s age-old pipes which leached lead into residents’ homes. After the city added too much chlorine to treat the tainted water and failed immediately to resolve the concerns (Hanna-Attisha, LaChance, Sadler, & Champney Schnepf, 2016; Masten, Davies, & Mcelmurry, 2016), residents experienced dramatic increases in elevated blood-lead levels and outbreaks of Legionnaires’ disease, among other serious health problems. With over half of Flint’s population identifying as African-American and living below the federal poverty level (United States Census, 2019), the greatest impacts of this crisis were found in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods (Hanna-Attisha et al., 2016).

### **Purpose and Rationale**

Social workers promote social justice by “enhancing human wellbeing” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017, p. 1) and help to “meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2017, p. 1), as they “view the client’s problems within the environmental context in which they occur” (Rogers, 2022, p. 22). Within that framework, their professional *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2017) obligates social workers to attend to “the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living” (NASW, 2017, para. 1). “Despite causing the least damage themselves (Raworth, 2012)” (Bexell, Sparks, Tejada, & Rechkemmer, 2019, p. 869), environmental degradation most significantly affects people experiencing poverty and other vulnerabilities, including race (Bexell et al., 2019; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). And it is in these “communities most affected by environmental injustice...where social workers are entrenched in service provision” (Teixeira & Krings, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, social workers are tasked with pursuing environmental justice to “reduce environmental risks to poor, minority and disadvantaged communities who have been disproportionately affected” (NASW, 2009, p. 124).

To further recognize and support this professional responsibility, the CSWE’s 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) were the first time the accreditor of social work education programs in the United States and its territories formally recognized the connection between social and environmental justice issues and required social work education programs to implement environmental justice content in the curriculum. While poverty and racism in environmental justice are not novel issues in and of themselves, the novelty lies within social work education’s recognition and implementation of this issue within the last decade as “the majority of social work faculty did not infuse environmental justice in their teaching” (Strayer, Joseph, & Stoeffler, 2022, p. 12).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a review based on the introduction of the 2015 CSWE standards to explore the extent to which scholars carried that mandate regarding environmental justice and its root causes of poverty and racism (Bexell et al., 2019; NASW, 2009; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Offering “a leading role through an understanding of the interrelationship that exists between people and the environment, the integration of environmental issues into their practice, and advocating for vulnerable populations” (Shaw, 2013, p. 3), the social work profession is positioned to contribute to and benefit from research focused on environmental justice, poverty, and racism. Therefore, social workers cannot ignore environmental injustice or its intersection with poverty and racism, along with their professional responsibility to respond. Only by enhancing what we know of the relationship between the environment, poverty, and racism, can social workers better advocate and serve people at risk (Hutchinson, 2011).

## **Methods**

A systematic review was conducted on empirical articles published in peer-reviewed social work journals from 2015 through 2021. This timeframe begins in 2015 to align with the implementation of the CSWE's 2015 EPAS, which is the first time that environmental justice content has been required across social work education programs. This timeframe continues through 2021 as CSWE introduced a newly revised version of the EPAS in 2022. While these new CSWE (2022) EPAS continue to include environmental justice, they add an explicit focus on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in social work education which may have shifted attention from environmental justice to these new educational requirements. Nested within an environmental justice framework, this review only seeks articles that focus on poverty and racism, which are noted as two key elements of environmental justice (Bexell et al., 2019; NASW, 2009; Teixeira & Krings, 2015).

The inclusion criterion was established to ensure the articles were published between 2015 and 2021 in peer-reviewed social work journals focused on the topics of environmental justice, poverty, and racism. Editorials and other publications were excluded because they were not peer-reviewed. The articles also need to be written in the English language. To identify articles based on the inclusion criterion, search terms included environmental racism, environmental justice, environmental injustice, poverty, low-income, low socioeconomic, disadvantaged, social work, social workers, social work practice, social services, social work education, racism, discrimination, prejudice, and racial bias. Using these search terms, 1,643 articles were identified from databases, including Complementary Index, Academic Search Ultimate, SocINDEX, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, APA PsycInfo, Sociological Collection, Social Sciences Citation Index, and APA PsycArticles.

Before screening the articles for eligibility, 743 duplicate records were removed and 812 records were excluded by library automation tools based on the inclusion

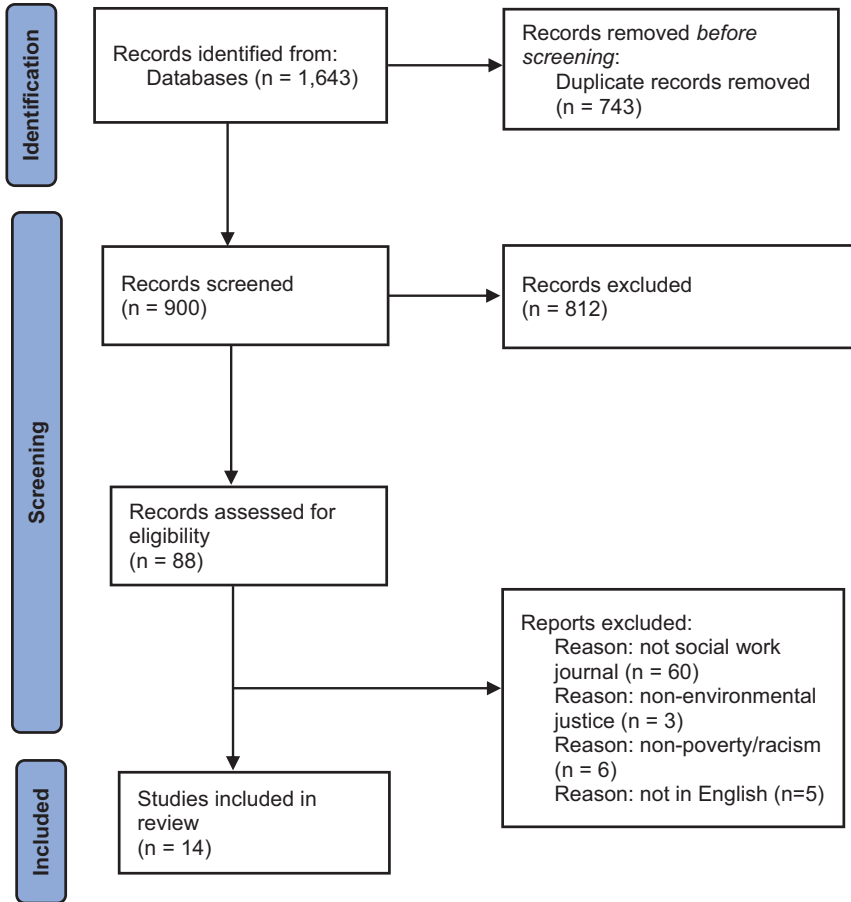


Figure 1 Flow chart of the study screening process.

criteria, resulting in 88 records being assessed for eligibility. We manually reviewed the titles, abstracts, and full text of the 88 records and further excluded articles for not being published in a social work journal ( $n = 60$ ), being non-environmental justice focused ( $n = 3$ ), being non-poverty and racism-focused ( $n = 6$ ), and not being written in the English language ( $n = 5$ ). This process resulted in 14 studies to be included in the review.

The reference lists of the 14 identified articles were manually searched using the inclusion criterion, which resulted in identifying 10 more eligible articles. The reference lists of those 10 articles were also manually searched using the inclusion criterion, which produced three more eligible articles. In total, 27 articles were identified to be included in the review.

## Results

Twenty-seven journal articles were identified through the search process, all of which discuss poverty, racism, and the environment through the lens of social work. Eleven articles discuss the intersection of racism, poverty, and environmental justice in social work curricula, which was the most addressed topic ( $N = 11$ ; 40.7 percent). Ten articles review literature and case studies to examine racism, poverty, and environmental justice, which was the second most prevalent topic accounting for 37.0 percent ( $N = 10$ ). Six articles are rooted in community-based research which was the least common topic ( $N = 6$ ; 22.2 percent). It is also noted that all six research articles utilize qualitative methods. The prevalence of the three topic categories is listed in Table 1.

This study also documents the publication trends of environmental justice social work articles that discuss racism and poverty, since the introduction of CSWE's 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. Figure 2 presents the annual number of poverty and racism-focused environmental justice social work articles published from 2015 to 2021, which identify the lowest number of articles published in 2021 ( $N = 1$ ) and the highest number in 2015 ( $N = 11$ ).

To further break down the publication trends, each theme and its publication years have been identified. Out of the 11 articles related to social work education, the majority ( $N = 8$ ; 72.7 percent) were published in 2015 with one article published in 2018 and two published in 2019. Out of the 10 literature review and case study articles, one was published each year in 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2021, and two articles were published each year in 2016, 2017, and 2019. The six research-based articles had two publications each year in 2015 and 2020, and one publication each year in 2017 and 2019.

### Article Categories

This section describes the included articles categorized by their common characteristics, including social work education, literature reviews and case studies, and community-based research. Themes are identified under each category to further thread the articles together and highlight key topic areas. Themes under the category of social work education highlight the need to integrate environmental justice content throughout social work curricula, impediments to this integration, and methods of teaching. The category of review articles and case studies

**Table 1** Environmental justice social work topics by prevalence

	Topic Articles addressing topic <i>N</i> (%)
Social work education	11 (40.7)
Literature reviews and case studies	10 (37.0)
Community-based research	6 (22.2)

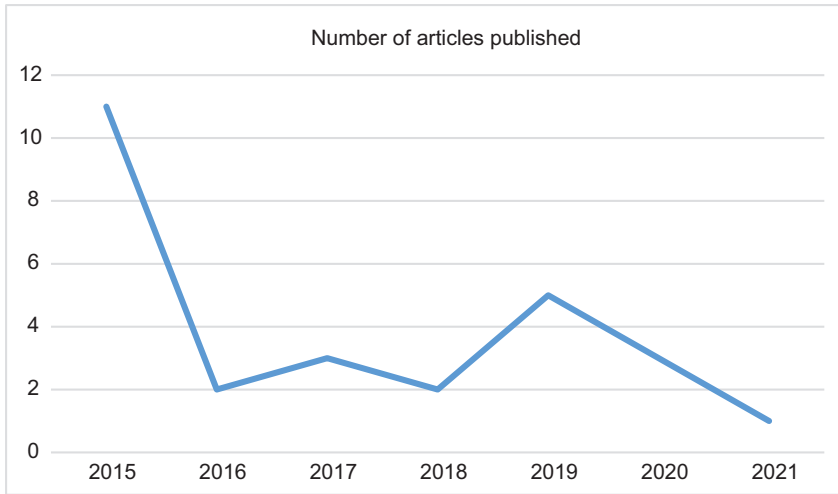


Figure 2 Annual article counts for poverty and racism-focused environmental justice social work.

suggests neoliberalism as a key variable in perpetuating environmental injustice, social work's prioritization of environmental research, and social work involvement with environmental racism. The category of community-based research discusses residents' lived experiences and perceptions of issues and the need for collaboration and community mobilization.

### Social Work Education

#### *Need to integrate throughout curriculum*

A significant emphasis within the articles related to social work education was the need to integrate environmental justice content throughout the entire social work curriculum (Boetto & Bell, 2015; Holbrook, Akbar, & Eastwood, 2019; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Integration is seen to promote transformative learning (Boetto & Bell, 2015) and develop students' ability to address environmental justice in the areas of theory (Gray & Coates, 2015), policy, and practice (Drolet, Wu, Taylor, & Dennehy, 2015; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). Most of the articles making a case for integration in the curriculum come from the *Social Work Education: The International Journal's* 2015 special issue entitled: *Environmental Justice, Green Social Work or Eco Justice*, which coincided with CSWE including environmental justice in its educational policy standards.

#### *Impediments to integration*

Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) described the conflict between environmental justice and environmentalism, noting "proponents of environmental justice have

criticized the mainstream environmental movement for engaging in racism and elitism, and valuing wilderness over people” (p. 575). Indeed, Gray and Coates (2015) suggested environmental social work has been “a tough sell” (p. 506) because it differs from Western beliefs and practices rooted in individualism rather than understanding problems in “the larger social context of inter alia poverty, inequality, patriarchy, classism, racism, heterosexism, privilege and ableism” (p. 506). Boetto and Bell (2015) explored the impact of an online environmental program in Australia and found social work students struggled to relate concepts of privilege, colonialism, capitalism, and other structural issues with the environment, demonstrating a lack of knowledge regarding environmental justice.

### *Methods of teaching*

Numerous articles emphasized the teaching methods of integrating environmental justice that focus on poverty and racism. Attention is paid to promoting advocacy for marginalized populations and addressing the root causes of environmental degradation through a social work lens (Androff, Fike, & Rorke, 2017; Hudson, 2019; Kaiser, Himmelheber, Miller, & Haywood, 2015; Moxley, 2018; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Hudson (2019) interviewed 16 educators from Bachelor and Master of Social Work programs in 14 states to explore how they introduce “issues of the natural environment (e.g., ideas of habitat destruction, chemical contamination, environmental racism, environmental justice, and sustainability) in their teaching” (p. 491). The results indicate the majority of participants believe “an ecological justice approach to social work education and practice is appropriate” (p. 498). Teixeira and Krings (2015) suggested that educators teach social work students to use existing skills and interventions to address “the underlying social, political, and economic systems that produce environmental degradation” (p. 517), which includes an examination of “the role that power and privilege play in both poverty and health disparities” (p. 517). With this framework, social work educators should teach students to empower and support “marginalized populations to organize and advocate for safe conditions in their neighborhoods and communities” (Teixeira & Krings, 2015, p. 517), as well as “hold corporations accountable for the ways that they impact the health and well-being” (Teixeira & Krings, 2015, p. 517) of these groups.

Androff et al. (2017), Kaiser et al., (2015), and Moxley (2018) emphasized the use of service-learning activities and community-based research to develop students’ understanding of oppression, discrimination, and the contextual factors, including the natural environment, that shape social work practice. Moxley (2018) used visual methods, such as photovoice, photographic essays, and conceptual portraits, to “make ecological challenges and their social consequences more salient and real for social work students” (p. 198). As part of the coursework, social work students support the creative work and amplify the voices of “people and groups that face marginalization” (Moxley, 2018, p. 198) to document and bring awareness to their daily experiences of environmental degradation that encompass “societal, institutional, racial, cultural, and personal factors”



(Moxley, 2018, p. 201). Of note, Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) highlighted the need for institutional support and commitment to advance environmental justice in social work education.

## Review Articles and Case Studies

### *Neoliberalism as a key variable perpetuating environmental injustice*

Authors of review articles noted that neoliberal economic systems, out of which social welfare societies and services emerge, cause environmental degradation and increase social inequality (Krings & Shusler, 2020; Mason, Shires, Arwood, & Borst, 2017; Närhi & Matthies, 2018; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Krings and Shusler (2020) held that because gentrification is rooted in neoliberalism that reinforces racial and economic inequities, social workers should engage in a practice that supports social, economic, and environmental justice and analyzes politics and power dynamics in environmental topics and community planning efforts. Upon review of 117 articles focused on environmental social work, Ramsay and Boddy (2017) posited that a change in orientation away from neo-liberalism to an anti-oppressive practice would facilitate environmental justice goals. Närhi and Matthies (2018) reflected that environmental issues are intrinsically connected “to the core issues of social work concerning equality, justice and the coping of the most disadvantaged members of society” (p. 499).

### *Social work’s prioritization of environmental research*

Beltrán, Hacker, and Begun (2016) conducted a literature review focused on journals associated with social work, dated 1990–2016, to explore environmental “impacts on marginalized communities, presence of environmental justice in social work literature, and opportunities for integrating environmental justice into social works’ mandated disciplinary competencies” (p. 493) and found race and class are primary factors associated with environmental inequities. Bexell et al. (2019) conducted a review to explore environmental degradation and sustainability themes in social work literature from 2010 to 2015. They discovered that these topics account for less than 1 percent of all social work research, which suggests the profession is not prioritizing these issues and is “failing to make a substantial contribution to mitigating environmental degradation’s growing threat to human health, well-being and survival” (Bexell et al, 2019, p. 869).

### *Social work involvement with environmental racism*

Teixeira, Mathias, and Krings (2019) focus on two case studies examining community engagement in environmental justice, highlighting disparities in environmental protection based on race and socio-economic status. They discussed historical events in Warren County, North Carolina, where a predominantly low-income, Black community successfully mobilized against the construction of a hazardous waste site. The authors also explored the Flint, Michigan case, where economic considerations led to a switch in the city’s water source, resulting in

lead contamination and health crises. The study underscores the significance of community organization in influencing policy changes and emphasizes the role of community practitioners in empowering residents against classist and racial biases in expertise and authority (Teixeira et al., 2019).

Thurber, Krings, Martinez, & Ohmer (2021) share case studies to explore gentrification and its risk to racial and economic inequities, noting social work's absence in literature related to this topic despite its roots in community practice. The authors highlight displacement and lack of affordable housing as consequences of gentrification, along with racialized policies that perpetuate disproportionate harm to communities of color. The authors use case studies to further describe social workers' role in supporting and engaging gentrifying communities while amplifying community members' lived experiences, efforts, and insights on resisting racism (Thurber et al., 2021).

Pfeifer (2016) highlights environmental concerns from pesticide use, such as soil erosion, water contamination, and harm to wildlife, among others. In addition, pesticides' impact on human health can include acute illness, cancer, neurological deficiencies, endocrine diseases, reproductive issues, birth defects, and more. Migrant farm workers are at risk for these concerns due to the large amounts of pesticides they may be exposed to and the exploitation they may experience in terms of occupational health and safety issues, as well as racism, fear of deportation, very low wages, and access to services. Social work is offered as a solution to these issues, noting congruence between the natural environment and the profession's focus on social justice and human dignity and worth.

Philip and Reisch (2015) reviewed the environmental justice movement and environmental racism in the United States to frame the relationship between social work and the environment. They present a case study on how social workers can play an important role in environmental justice. The case study walks through social workers' ambivalence towards the natural world, identifying it as unacceptable and unethical and suggests that social work education prepares students "to address these crises" (Philip & Reisch, 2015, p. 472) and contributes to environmental justice and sustainability (Philip & Reisch, 2015).

### Community-based Research

#### *Resident's lived experiences and perceptions of issues*

Within environmental justice literature, studies have explored the perceptions of residents from socioeconomically challenged communities (Kang, Fabbre, & Ekenga, 2019; Mason, Ellis, & Hathaway, 2017; Willet, 2015a; Willet, Tamayo, & Kern, 2020). In a North St. Louis study, Kang et al. (2019) found that residents, "particularly African Americans, perceived and identified violence and racism as far more immediate concerns than environmental issues" (p. 322), highlighting the participants' lived experiences. However, residents did recognize racial injustice related to environmental issues, such as access to healthy food, housing

conditions, and water contamination. In Mason, Ellis, et al.'s (2107) study, residents related the social and economic effects of weather extremes to poverty and racism, such as high utility bills, difficulty accessing public transportation, and difficulty affording weatherization. The results also highlighted concerns from low-income community members regarding air pollution from nearby industries, in addition to limited access to green spaces due to parks being too far from their neighborhood or unsafe due to gun violence and drug-related activity. Willett (2015a) used an international lens to explore the topic of environmental justice using semi-structured interviews with participants in Kenya. The findings of the study signal that the principles of environmental justice, including “disproportionate environmental burdens in marginalized communities, lack of participation from these communities in decisions that affect their environments, and unequal access to the benefits from the environmental hazard,” were applicable in Nairobi, Kenya (Willet, 2015a, p. 567). Willet et al. (2020) utilized qualitative research to explore how 59 people across 14 communities, representing diverse races and socioeconomic status, were affected by environmental injustice in Nevada. Many participants discussed the lack of power and its connection to environmental justice, highlighting disproportionate impacts on communities that do not have political influence and representation, as well as increased vulnerability due to immigration status, community demographics, and structural and oppressive conditions.

#### *Need for collaboration and community mobilization*

Krings and Copic (2020) explored how an environmental justice organization in Chicago, Illinois, navigated challenges related to representation and inclusion in their neighborhood undergoing gentrification. The findings indicate that organizations must “prioritize the recruitment of, and accountability to, members of historically marginalized groups” (Krings & Copic, 2020, p. 3) to advance environmental justice in their community or risk improving livability while perpetuating the very injustices they seek to remedy (Krings & Copic, 2020). Other studies echoed this recommendation to have social work involvement at the community level (Mason, Ellis, et al., 2017; Willet, 2015b; Willet et al., 2020). Mason, Ellis, et al. (2017) recommended that social workers work across disciplines and with community residents to ensure “social, economic, and environmental equity for all” (p. 64). Studying a community in Kenya, Willet (2015b) describes residents’ experiences and adaptive skills to survive climate change and suggests social workers address the injustice of climate change through advocacy, research, education, and political engagement. Participants in Willet and colleagues’ (2020) study reported that they were engaged in responses or actions to resolve environmental problems, such as working with organizations, publicizing their situation to speak out, working with the hazard, such as local mining companies to find compromises, and fighting back through lawsuits. These actions and responses highlight the need for collaboration and solidarity among participants with similar environmental problems.

## **Discussion**

There is scant social work research focused on poverty and racism in environmental justice. Even with the introduction of the CSWE (2015) Environmental Justice EPAS, there have only been 27 articles published across a 7-year span with the majority of articles ( $N = 11$ ; 40.7 percent) published in 2015. From this majority, eight of the articles focus on social work education suggesting social work education faculty were preparing for the implementation of the 2015 CSWE Environmental Justice EPAS through the development of curricula and dissemination of their educational innovations.

While 2015 produced the most social work research focused on poverty and racism in environmental justice, the results indicate a significant decline in publications since that time with one to four articles published in each subsequent year. It is also important to note that there were no community-based research articles published in 2016, 2018, and 2021, and no social work education articles published in 2016, 2017, 2020, and 2021. While more information is needed to understand the decline and lack of publications, the COVID-19 pandemic may account for gaps in research during the years 2020 and 2021 as governments and organizations closed or limited interpersonal contact, which may have inhibited the ability to conduct research. In addition, many social work education programs and researchers may have been focused on student and faculty safety and well-being, in addition to making the transition to online learning during this time. These factors may have helped to shift attention away from research and publication as people grappled with this public health crisis.

An additional factor to consider regarding publication trends includes CSWE's introduction of their 2022 EPAS. While these new CSWE (2022) EPAS continue to include environmental justice, they add an explicit focus on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in social work education. Although environmental justice is rooted in issues of power, privilege, and oppression, some scholars may have shifted their focus from environmental justice to understanding and implementing these new educational standards.

It is also important to highlight the lack of community-based research. Out of the 27 included articles, only six were focused on community-based research and all of which utilized qualitative methods. This lack of research and diverse research techniques severely limits the identification and development of evidence-based policy and practice to further support populations and communities impacted by environmental justice.

## **Implications**

The results of this study indicate that more research is needed in all areas related to poverty and racism in environmental justice social work, particularly utilizing community-based research methods. While there are many articles published on the topic of environmental justice and social work, very few explicitly discuss the

root issues of poverty and racism in the environment. However, social workers are trained to conduct root cause analyses to uncover “the underlying social, political, and economic systems that create environmental degradation” (Teixeira & Krings, 2015, p. 5), so understanding the ubiquitous nature of the relationship between environmental issues, poverty, and racism is essential. This lack of discussion may be related to racist white supremacy orientations which the social work profession has historically upheld (NASW, 2021; Wright, Carr, & Akin, 2021). This orientation may encourage social workers to focus on concepts related to nature, sustainability, or environmentalism and generalized concepts of disadvantaged or marginalized groups, rather than identifying and analyzing the systems and powers creating and perpetuating disparities and harm and specifically naming communities of color and impoverishment who suffer yet are a force of systemic change and should be positioned as knowledgeable, resourceful experts.

To dismantle environmental injustice, more emphasis is needed on the deconstruction of racism’s and poverty’s roots in “dominant, oppressive, and patriarchal” (Boetto & Bell, 2015, p. 458) systems. For example, social workers must reflect on “the context of industrial capitalism” (Boetto & Bell, 2015, p. 458) and how it is “contributing to global and environmental problems for the world’s least-advantaged citizens” (Boetto & Bell, 2015, p. 458), as we consider the larger industries who consume most of the world’s resources and are “predominately concerned with capitalist notions of profit and economic growth” (Boetto & Bell, 2015, p. 458). Närhi and Matthies (2018) suggested, “practical conclusions from the global perspective of the ecosocial agenda demand that social work defend the most disadvantaged groups and most vulnerable areas against social and environmental exploitation both locally and globally” (p. 498). “If social work aims to fight poverty, it must also be able to attack global economic structures and provide the necessary prerequisites for an economically sustainable living to those who are lacking them” (Närhi & Matthies, 2018, p. 493). Social workers advocate for the rights of all people and have a professional responsibility to ensure environmental justice by improving “conditions that disempower and marginalize” (Teixeira & Krings, 2015, p. 8).

## **Limitations**

Several limitations were identified in this study. The search process excluded non-English articles, based on the authors’ native language. However, articles related to this topic may exist in other languages. Similarly, the search process excluded non-social work journals, whereas many other disciplines may have studied and made contributions to the topic. In addition, the inclusion criterion focused on peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2021, but relevant publications may exist outside of this timeframe. Non-peer-reviewed or gray literature may further contribute to the topic. It should also be noted that some articles discuss poverty but not racism and vice versa, but due to the context of this study, only articles focused on the topics of environmental justice, poverty, and racism were included.

While the authors utilized specific search terms to identify articles, they may have used biased language to create the search terms based on their perspectives, cultures, and experiences. Some of these search terms do not recognize the oppressive forces that create harm and exploitation. For example, the authors used the term *disadvantaged* which does not accurately acknowledge or describe active and historical exclusion and marginalization (Imani, 2021). In addition, the search terms may not have fully encompassed concepts related to the topics of environmental justice, poverty, racism, and social work, further limiting the authors' abilities to identify relevant articles. This study also excludes factors and identities, such as gender, gender identity, ability, age, sexual orientation, mental health, and education, among others, which may contribute to vulnerability in environmental justice, racism, and poverty. The databases utilized may have also limited the ability to identify articles that may contribute to the topic, excluding articles available in other locations. Human error is also noted as a limitation, as the authors manually screened articles using the search criteria, potentially missing the inclusion of eligible articles.

### **Recommendations**

The social work profession has an onus to respond to environmental injustices that create unjust barriers and prevent social, political, and economic equality (Beltrán et al., 2016; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). This responsibility is based on social workers' social justice principles and their person-in-environment perspective that "have formed the foundation of the profession for over a century" (Phillip & Reish, 2015, p. 472). While social workers have contributed to literature on environmental issues, there is still a limited amount of research that focuses on poverty, racism, and the environment through the lens of social work. Bexell et al. (2019) echo this idea, stating:

Without using research to explore the intricate links between environmental degradation and social justice, the social work profession will fail to build an evidence base grounded in the profession's values or to inform practice with the marginalized and vulnerable communities social workers serve, who will be impacted most severely by environmental change. These literature gaps will also continue to perpetuate knowledge gaps in social work curricula and practice, creating a reliance on other disciplines to create the knowledge base that will be needed for future social work practitioners. (p. 870)

More research is needed on poverty, racism, and the environment through the lens of social work. Social work scholars should be encouraged to explicitly examine environmental justice, poverty, and racism through the use of diverse and community-based research methods. While all the identified research studies utilized a qualitative approach, scholars should aim to use additional methods, such as

longitudinal, random sampling, or experimental designs. While these research methods may not be appropriate for all studies related to the topic, rigorous and diverse research methods may help to improve the quality of new knowledge and its applications. As Mason, Shires, et al. (2017) suggested, future research should “investigate the underlying causes of vulnerability and coping capacity to identify potential intervention strategies” (p. 660). Any additional research can help to inform all areas of policy, practice, and education.

## Conclusions

This study used a systematic review to assess the extent to which social work literature focuses on the topics of environmental justice, poverty, and racism, based on the implementation of the 2015 CSWE standards. Despite the understanding that environmental justice, poverty, and racism are interrelated and essential elements to address in social work research, practice, policy, and education, the past decade of social work literature provides limited recognition of how environmental issues are related to two issues the profession already attempts to address, poverty and racism. Only 27 articles relevant to the topic were published during the identified timeframe, with the majority published in 2015 focusing on social work education which may be related to the CSWE 2015 EPAS and faculty’s focus on it.

Identifying the proportion of social work literature that integrates the intersection of environmental justice, poverty, and racism reveals important findings that call for the inclusion of these topics as a vital foundation for all areas of social work and emphasize the need to increase related social work scholarship and the use of community-based research methods to examine how these issues impact the people whom the profession serves. For social workers to be able to tackle environmental justice issues effectively, they must not only acknowledge the primary sources of the problem but also move beyond recognition into action. Thus, social work scholars must build upon the existing body of literature to include a critical examination of the intersection of environmental justice, poverty, and racism and how the profession can broaden and strengthen its role in responding to environmental injustice, and further aligning social work with its professional responsibility and preparing practitioners to address this challenge.

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