



## The Quest for Environmental Improvement in Poor Oklahoma Communities

**Michael Givel**, University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus

Bokoshe is a small rural town in eastern Oklahoma where one of every four residents lives in poverty. But economic privation is not the only threat the people of Bokoshe face. For many years, they have also been subjected to plumes of continual flow of fly ash coming from a nearby dumpsite operated by a big corporation. The very air they breathe is fouled and unhealthy.

Fly ash consists of fine particles spewed off by burning coal. All fly ash contains silicon dioxide and calcium oxide, and may also contain various other toxic compounds such as arsenic, chromium, hexavalent chromium, strontium, dioxins, mercury, lead, and boron. These compounds are known to cause cancers and respiratory ailments. Worried about the health threats, residents of Bokoshe lodged repeated grievances over many years with public agencies – but to no avail. The corporations responsible for the production and dumping of the fly ash also ignored the complaints of local residents in this small rural community.

But an important new step was taken in 2010, when a lawsuit was filed by the Bokoshe Environmental Cause Group. The lawyer who filed the case had glaring facts to work with. As the brief alleged, more than half of the thirty households near the dumpsite included people who were diagnosed with cancer. Equally appalling was the incidence of asthma at the Bokoshe Elementary School, where children were diagnosed with this serious condition at five times the national average. The Bokoshe effort shows how fighting poverty and improving the environment can be linked. An imbalance of economic and political resources allowed corporations to pollute this very poor rural Oklahoma city with no political consequences or redress, until the lawsuit was filed.

### Poverty and Environmental Degradation in Oklahoma

The town of Bokoshe is hardly unusual in Oklahoma, a state where poverty and environmental degradation are both widespread, and often occur in the same places and afflict the same people.

Consider what data from the Oklahoma Policy Institute tell us about economic privation in the state as of 2011:

- One-sixth, or 17.2%, of all Oklahomans were living in poverty.
- “Extreme poverty” is defined as a standard of living at less than half the federal government’s poverty level – and 7.4% met that definition.
- Nearly a quarter of all Oklahoma children, 23%, lived in poor households.

- Some 18.3% of Oklahoma women were poor, and families headed by single mothers were four and a half times more likely to be in poverty than other families.
- Poor Oklahomans, not surprisingly, often have low levels of educational attainment, and two-thirds of poor adults were also out of work in 2010.

Yet there are also very rich people in Oklahoma – who have gotten much richer since 1979. In fact, economic inequalities have sharply widened. The income of the top one percent of Oklahoma households grew by 7.7% from 1998 to 2007, while the income of the middle fifth stagnated and the income of the lowest fifth dropped by 7.5%.

Along with deep poverty and glaring inequalities, Oklahoma experiences widespread environmental problems – including water shortages and declining water quality and increases in serious air pollution. Not enough is being done to counter the threat of global warming by encouraging new, clean sources of energy such as wind and solar power. And public health problems such as cancer and respiratory disease occur at high rates. As in Bokoshe, poor people often suffer the most.

### **What is Government Doing?**

Oklahoma government and politics are, so far, doing little to correct for poverty, environmental ills, or their combined adverse effects. In 2012, Oklahomans paid \$992 per person less in total taxes than other Americans, and low taxes translate into low public spending. At the state level spending per person for public services (including education, health, welfare, public safety and law enforcement, and utilities) was well below the national average in 2007 and 2008. Resources devoted to public schools for kindergartners through twelfth-graders leave Oklahoma ranked 47th out of fifty U.S. states as of 2013.

Corporations play a commanding role in state politics, and labor unions are weak. Unions can fight to raise the standard of living of average citizens, but union enrollment in Oklahoma stands at just 7.5% of the labor force in 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many other public advocacy groups and citizens groups are also outmatched.

### **Steps Forward – And the Role Engaged Scholars Can Play**

The harsh realities I have tallied are too often swept under the rug. An important step toward better public solutions lies in efforts to document and publicize the facts about poverty and environmental threats. Academic scholars and public interest organizations like the Oklahoma Policy Institute and the Oklahoma Sierra Club have important roles to play in doing such research and making the case for improvements. Fair and equitable environmental clean-up efforts are among the most important measures the state needs to take to help poor communities.

Scholars and advocates must speak up, because poor people facing environmental threats have little voice in the halls of power or local media. But purely scholarly reports are not enough. It is important to show not only with numbers but also with stories what is happening to residents in places like Bokoshe, drawing sharp contrasts between their situation and the comforts enjoyed by the very rich and powerful. Civically engaged experts can dramatize the links between winners and losers in existing power arrangements, and thus lay the basis for many groups to fight for policies that can better address the needs of all Oklahomans.

