



## **Robert D. Bullard (1946-Present)**

**Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland  
School of Public Affairs  
Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas**

**Former Professor, Founder and Director  
Clark-Atlanta University, Environmental Justice  
Resource Center**

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### **Overview**

Robert D. Bullard is the Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. He is often described as the father of environmental justice. Professor Bullard received his Ph.D. degree from Iowa State University. He is the author of seventeen books that address sustainable development, environmental racism, urban land use, industrial facility siting, community reinvestment, housing, transportation, climate justice, emergency response, smart growth, and regional equity. Professor Bullard was featured in the July 2007 CNN People You Should Know, Bullard: Green Issue is Black and White. In 2008, Newsweek named him one of 13 Environmental Leaders of the Century. And that same year, Co-op America honored him with its Building Economic Alternatives Award (BEA). This interview was conducted in 2010.

### **Early Life and Education**

Robert D. Bullard was born to Myrtle and Nehemiah Bullard in Elba, Alabama, the fourth of five children. He began his academic career at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, where he majored in history and government with a minor in sociology. He studied sociology at the graduate level, receiving his master's from Atlanta University (now Clark-Atlanta University) and his Ph.D. from Iowa State University.

Though Bullard is one of the pioneers of environmental justice research, scholarship and activism, his environmental career began somewhat unexpectedly. His first environmental job was as an urban planner in Des Moines while he was still graduate school. The job, which involved working on community development, transportation and housing issues, provided the early foundation for some of the environmental justice work he did later on. When Bullard began his urban planning work, the memories of growing up in segregated Alabama during the 1950s and 1960s, were still fresh in his mind. His childhood experiences made him aware of how communities developed and grew, how residential patterns were created and perpetuated, and how benefits and sanctions were distributed along racial lines. Those experiences provided an important lens through which he would view and analyze urban and rural dynamics in other parts of the country.

## **Career**

After Bullard graduated from Iowa State, he moved to Houston to teach at Texas Southern University (TSU). Bullard continues to aspire to the model he finds in the career of W. E. B. Du Bois. To this end he has molded his career to combine teaching, research, and activism. The job at TSU allowed him to devote half his time to being the research director of an urban research center and the other half to teaching. The activism component of his work came through his research. Bullard collaborated with Linda McKeever Bullard, an attorney representing an African American community in a lawsuit (*Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc.*) where she employed civil rights law to protest environmental discrimination. Bullard collected data for the lawsuit from 1978-1979 and published an article about the case. This set the tone for doing sociological research by applying social inquiry to questions and events related to law, civil rights, environment, and policy. When asked how he became interested in a career in the environmental field, Bullard laughingly replies, "I was backed into it!"

He further elaborates on his philosophical approach to his work, stating "From my earliest moments in academia, I wanted to make sure I kept my feet grounded in the community while publishing in mainstream journals and cutting-edge publications that were left of center that looked at racism and African Americans. I wanted to make sure my research was used, like Du Bois', and that it pushed the envelope, whether it was smart growth, transportation, or housing."

Bullard formerly directed the Environmental Justice Research Center (EJRC) at his alma mater, Clark-Atlanta University, where he also held the Ware professorship – an endowed chair in the Department of Sociology. The EJRC sits at the intersection of research, teaching, policy, and technical assistance to communities. Because of the institutional support the university provides, the center is able to provide broad-based assistance to many people.

## **Mentoring Others**

Throughout his career, Bullard has mentored many students from a wide variety of backgrounds. For instance, the majority of his students in Texas were black, but in Tennessee they were mostly white. He spent his time at more than one campus in the University of California system – there, the students were from an array of ethnic backgrounds. Bullard feels that mentoring students is very important, and he has been surprised over the years how many students have kept in touch with him who are successful in a

variety of fields. “Education is about training and learning and teaching and sharing,” he says. “I am surprised...how many lives I have touched.”

Because of the pervasiveness of environmental racism and great interest in the topic, many students seek him out as a thesis advisor. One of Bullard’s former protégés, Glenn Johnson, who moved from University of Tennessee to Atlanta, worked with and co-authored several publications with him. Johnson is now one of Bullard’s colleagues in Sociology Department at Clark-Atlanta University. Bullard sees a need for diversifying the scientific field as well as creating venues for publication for young scientists of color. He tries to facilitate this process offering them publication opportunities in books and journals. He also tries to help young scholars advance in their careers environmental organizations, government and academia in any way he can.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Perhaps Bullard’s emphasis on mentoring comes from the experiences he had with his own mentors. Bullard’s uncle was an educator and influenced him a great deal. He explained, “Educators, scholars, and activists have always been a big hit with me!” He recalls that his grandmother “was a strong advocate of education, of standing on your own two feet and not letting anybody ride your back. She instilled that in me, in my father, and my parents [also] instilled it in me.” Bullard explains that there are others he admires who have influenced also. “There are lots of heroes and heroes in my life, but the people who came before me—Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Fannie Lou Hamer; Frederick Douglass—who really combined telling the truth and not letting things come back and get you—repercussions—just because you’re standing for social justice” are the ones who stand out the most.

## **Highlights**

Bullard has written several influential books including: *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*; *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*; and *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity*. Bullard says, “My upbringings did not shelter me from the fact that all societies are not created equal, (including) access to paved roads, sewer, and water. Nobody had to get me a movie ticket to see this. I saw it with my own eyes. And some of this exists today, the residual of Jim Crow in southern rural communities” is still alive and well.

Bullard has served on a number of prominent committees and boards. He was a member of President Clinton’s Transition Team in 1990, where he served in the Natural Resources Cluster. He also served as Chair of the Health and Research Subcommittee of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, which was formed to advise the EPA Administrator. He and other environmental justice advocates collaborated with the National Institute of Health Sciences to organize the “Symposium on Health and Research Needs to Ensure Environmental Justice,” Bullard was also one of the witnesses to President Clinton’s signing of the Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898.

The evolution of the way “environment” has come to be defined is what keeps Bullard in the environmental field. According to him, “Environment is everything: where we work, play and live, and if we continue to keep that definition, we can advance the movement for justice in almost every field, from housing to employment....” Today environmental justice “is a household concept,” says Bullard. He

considers his most significant achievement to have been the publication of *Dumping in Dixie* in 1990. When Bullard first tried to get it published, he had great difficulty convincing the publishers that books using “environment and race in the same sentence” would sell. Today the book is in its third printing and there are hundreds of environmental justice books and articles in circulation.

To have watched the “environmental justice movement break out of the closet” has been the highlight of Bullard’s career. In the 1970s and early 1980s, “hardly anyone acknowledged environmental justice or environmental racism. To see it blossom and grow and to have had some small part in it—and to see lawyers and doctors and students and toxicologists deal with it—and to see it as a field that can expand with any other field” is what amazes Bullard the most. As for current activity in the environmental justice movement, Bullard looks forward to increasing interest and activity among diverse populations, particularly as the linkages between environmental justice and health increases.

Bullard finds the recent political “rollbacks” to be the most disappointing moments of his career. “The gains made over the past twenty years are being dismantled, whether it is the EPA and environmental justice or trying to increase the numbers of people of color scientists through affirmative action. Even to see conservative people of color attacking Title VI of the Civil Rights Act—people who are part of our constituency—it’s a low point not only in my career but in advancing a movement.” Bullard’s disappointment with the current state of affairs has not discouraged him. He believes that “We have to work even harder to hold the ground and for the notion that equal justice is for all communities and that we’re all created equal.”

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

Bullard’s message to people of color who are considering a career in the environmental field is: “It’s a great field. The opportunities are unlimited. The fact is that we’re still under-represented in almost every [component of the environmental field], so it’s an area where you can have not only a great career, but great impact. The latter is where a legacy can be left. The field is growing and advancing. It’s important that minority students have a significant stake in what happens in communities of color—not to say that every black student lives in a black neighborhood—but you can have an impact, whether on a reservation, a barrio or an ethnic enclave. The issue of environmental health is not a sexy topic or a sexy career, but a matter of life and death. We have to be researchers and advance the field, but if you can get elected to office or direct an environmental office—government or organization—you can contribute beyond the individual level and have a huge impact.” Bullard’s advice comes from a lifetime of research, teaching and activism.

## **For More Information**

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*This interview was conducted in 2015*