

How a tool that tracks California's 'disadvantaged communities' is costing S.F. millions in state funding

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The 10-by-10-foot room on Stockton Street felt small even in 2008 when Emma Yip moved in with her husband and 5-year-old daughter. Still, its location in Chinatown offered a ready-made community for the Yips, who had immigrated from China.

The room would grow smaller as the family grew. But it wasn't until the novel coronavirus forced a citywide lockdown that it felt the smallest.

The family spent entire days sitting in the room, where the youngest daughters, 8 and 11, would watch TV on the family iPad. There was no room to exercise inside. Yip would shop two or three times a week, and cook on a hot plate in their room — too afraid to use the communal kitchen — filling the small room with smoke and spice.

On hot summer days, the heat was inescapable, with only one window and an open door offering ventilation, but never at night when somebody might try to break in, she said. And when wildfires turned Bay Area skies orange, they shut everything to keep the smoke out.

The tight space exacerbated their exposure to the hazardous environmental conditions that are endemic to living in such close quarters. Local activists, representing San Francisco's Chinatown, Tenderloin, Mission District and SoMa and beyond, say the effects of such conditions are often disregarded even as billions of dollars are directed toward California's most "disadvantaged communities" for job programs, housing development opportunities and environmental cleanup efforts.

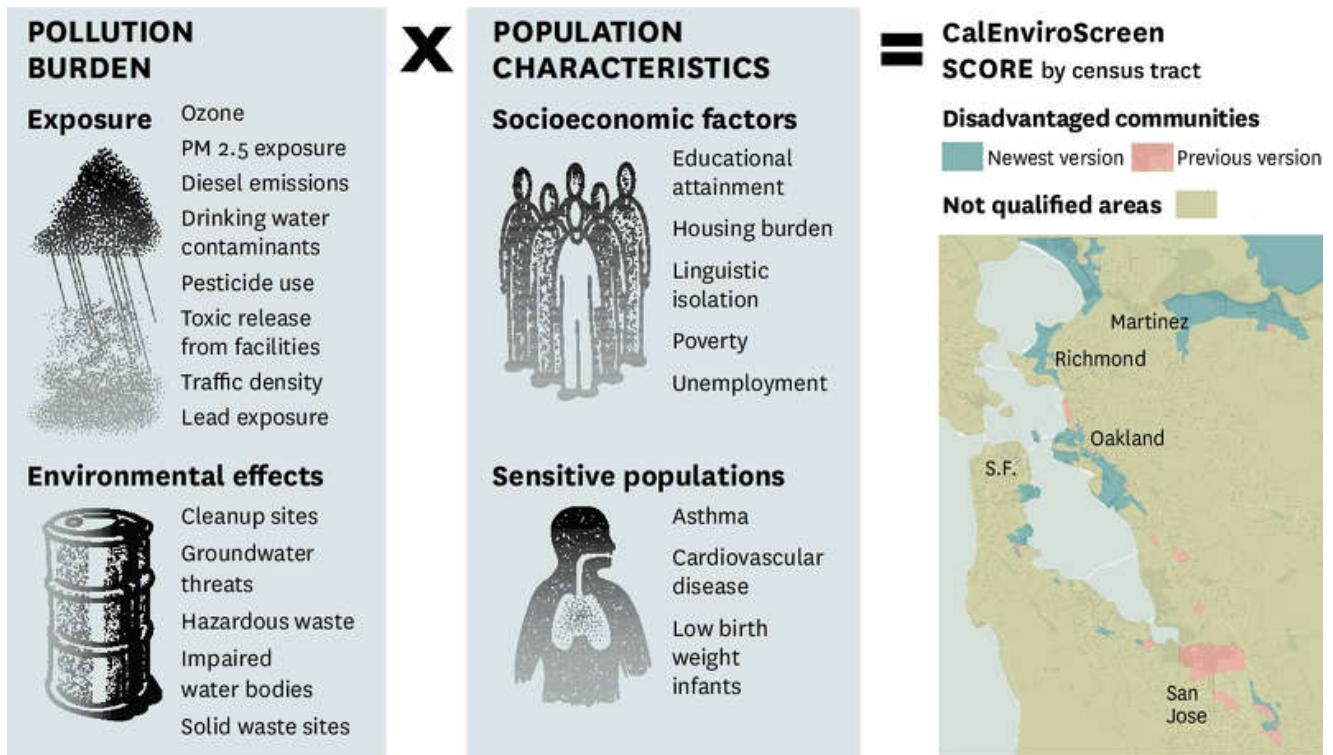
For the past decade, some of the city's poorest neighborhoods have been ineligible for significant investments as a result of a complex California Environmental Protection Agency tool called the CalEnviroScreen, which maps "disadvantaged communities" by census tract — geographic areas of about 1,000 to 8,000 people designated by the U.S. Census Bureau.

That tool balances dozens of factors to determine the state's most vulnerable communities, everything from hazardous waste and average birth weight to linguistic isolation and housing burden. Once the data is aggregated, the top 25% — or worst off — census tracts, are given the "disadvantaged" distinction. In October, CalEPA finalized the fourth version of the screen, but the agency doesn't expect to officially designate the state's disadvantaged communities (a separate process) until early next year.

Community advocates and local officials have long argued that the tool does not accurately reflect some of the most pressing environmental issues, some of which can be region-specific. Its makers, however, say CalEnviroScreen is designed to provide a broad view of the overall environmental burden across California's communities, and the composite score is meant to balance different issues.

Calculating the CalEnviroScreen score

CalEnviroScreen is a formula that balances dozens of factors, listed below, to determine the state's most at-risk communities, labeling some census tracts as "disadvantaged." The label can prioritize communities for billions of dollars in government and private funding. Critics say the tool does not accurately reflect some of the most pressing region-specific environmental issues.



All indicators in the subcategories hold the same weight, except for those in the environmental effects category, which count for half as much.

Source: Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

"The vision has always been to be as comprehensive as we can about pollution in the ways that communities and people may be vulnerable to exposures and environmental conditions," said John Faust, manager of the CalEnviroScreen program and chief of the Community and Environmental Epidemiology Research Branch of the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, or OEHHA.

As it stands, CalEnviroScreen's "disadvantaged community" label is a decisive factor in which communities receive billions of dollars in funding — both government and private. Just this year, the state's California Climate Investments program has disbursed \$731 million in cap-and-trade dollars, 25% of which was earmarked for these "disadvantaged" communities. About \$192 million of that money went to housing projects; an additional \$4 million went to workforce development.

Over the years, these communities have also been granted priority access to job opportunities and training, housing development and research initiatives, through both the state and nonprofits.

“It would be one thing if this was a theoretical exercise,” said Eddie Ahn, executive director of Brightline Defense, a Bay Area-based environmental justice advocacy organization that’s been lobbying for changes to the screen. “But there’s actually real resources in play and policies at the state level defining need.”

The CalEnviroScreen was the product of state legislation (and a decade-long process) passed in 2000 that instructed CalEPA to create a tool that would, essentially, “identify places that bear high and disproportionate burdens of multiple sources of pollution with populations that may be vulnerable,” said Faust.

Since its launch in 2013, the applications have extended beyond the original vision, with lawmakers using CalEnviroScreen as a way to direct state funds to their constituents. Private organizations and agencies other than CalEPA followed suit, using the “disadvantaged communities” designation to guide dollars and other aid to inform not only explicitly environmental policies, programming and funding, but also job programs and housing development opportunities.

A year before the tool went public, the California Legislature passed SB535, ensuring that 15% of the state’s carbon cap-and-trade income would go to these communities by way of its California Climate Investments program. (Every year, the state generates hundreds of millions of dollars through a program that limits greenhouse gas emissions and then allows businesses to buy and sell credits on a state-sponsored marketplace.) Four years later, that was increased to a quarter of the cap-and-trade income. (That bill also increased the amount of money going to low-income households and those adjacent to official “disadvantaged” tracts.)

The “disadvantaged community” definition “has directly influenced more than \$12.7 billion in funding, 20 state agencies, and 68 environmental programs,” according to a letter signed by 20 Bay Area community organizations earlier this spring.

Sixteen out of nearly 200 of San Francisco’s census tracts, or about 8%, fall under this designation, compared with more than 1,100 in Los Angeles County, or 49% of that county’s total tracts. Many of the tracts with the designation are concentrated in the Central Valley and in Southern California.

Few of the designated tracts are in Northern California counties.

Most of San Francisco’s “disadvantaged” communities, as determined by the CalEnviroScreen, are in the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood, where toxic contamination from the Naval Shipyard Superfund site has long been among the most pressing environmental issues.

Other dense areas — like the Tenderloin, Chinatown and Mission District — score poorly in areas like linguistic isolation, housing burden and underemployment, but those shortcomings are offset by relatively good scores among several other indicators, including ozone, pesticide use and the quality of drinking water. As a result, advocates say, the vulnerable residents in these areas are not adequately reflected in the CalEnviroScreen.

“It was shocking that much of the (Tenderloin) neighborhood didn’t reach the cutoff,” said Pratibha Tekkey, a community organizer in the Tenderloin and the director of community organizing for the Central City SRO Collaborative. “I felt that the map should have reflected the Tenderloin because we are one of the densest, we are one of the most urban — we have everybody under the sun living in this small 14-block radius.”

Mission District advocates were similarly dismayed to find their neighborhood entirely left out in the latest revision. “You don’t have to look, sadly, much further than the recent COVID epidemic to see how those kinds of vulnerabilities can play out,” said Peter Papadopoulos, a land-use-policy analyst with the Mission Economic Development Agency.

As an example, he points to the fact that the city’s Latino community accounts for about 15% of the city’s population, but early in the pandemic, it accounted for 40% to 50% of the city’s coronavirus infections. This was in part, advocates believe, a result of the Mission’s dense, multigenerational living conditions.

The Yips live in one of the estimated 19,000 single-room-occupancy units in the city, in a 30-unit building. These small units provide affordable housing in the country’s second-most-expensive rental market. Still, the pandemic, smoke-filled skies and warm summers have only underscored how the units can worsen certain environmental factors. One survey of 255 SRO residents, conducted by Brightline Defense, found 57% of respondents had had chronic health problems that can be exacerbated by poor air quality.

In another Chinatown SRO near the Yips, a fall storm has punched leaks throughout the building. Bowls to catch the water and “Caution Wet Floor” signs are on nearly every floor. Junchang Tan, Qianyan Li and their two children live in a tiny space where there’s nowhere to quarantine should one of them contract COVID-19.

Tan points out the mold in one corner. It grew from another rough storm years ago, when he had to close all the windows and the moisture built up. During the beginning of the pandemic, they’d all find a corner, farthest as they could away from one another. Li would cook in the room and his son would cough.

“He would sneeze the whole time,” Li said through a translator. “The ventilation was so bad.”



Qianyah Li and her husband, Junchang Tan, in the kitchen space of their room in Chinatown.
Brontë Wittpenn/The Chronicle

They can smell spices and weed and tobacco and bleach through the walls, Tan said. When they're home together, he opens the windows, but the heat and smoke from the California summer builds up. He's thought about getting an air cooler, but it's against the rules.

Updating these SROs is critical, advocates say. And yet, all of Chinatown and the Mission District, along with parts of the Tenderloin and South of Market neighborhoods, some of the poorest places in the city, do not make the "disadvantaged community" cutoff. U.S. Census data from 2020 shows those areas represent some of the most densely populated tracts in the entire state.

This has frustrated neighborhood organizers for years. Tan Chow, an organizer with the Chinatown Community Development Commission, has met whole families with respiratory issues. "The air you breathe in (at an SRO), is actually the air you breathe out," he said.

The ventilation issue is a growing problem as air quality has worsened in San Francisco. Not only does CalEnviroScreen's tool not take into account crowding, but even the data employed for basic air quality is outdated — the numbers used for the 4.0 version of the tool are based on 2015-to-2017 data.

Faust of CalEnviroScreen said researchers are using the best possible data on air quality given the limitations of what is available for the scale they need for comparisons across the state. “The data are not always immediately available to us, like off the shelf, but there are ways to move towards understanding what these concerns are,” he said.

San Francisco’s Department of the Environment has also appealed to the state’s toolmakers, asking that the state give more weight to social and economic factors, including urban pesticide use alongside agricultural pesticide use and refining their air pollution indicator, among several other requests.

The department has been working with CalEPA over the years to make sure the city is better represented, said Cyndy Comerford, the department’s climate program manager. But the tool “still falls short in San Francisco.”

It’s not just state cap-and-trade dollars that the department worries about, she said. “There’s just a lot of other organizations that use this designation. Even the Biden administration is looking at (CalEnviroScreen) as a model. When we feel like it’s not accurately representing our populations and our needs, we miss out on funding that is needed for these areas.”

As Comerford sees it, the biggest lost opportunity is money for affordable housing. In theory the designation could help neighborhoods improve existing housing and also draw new development. In turn, she said, “Affordable infill housing is one of our biggest tools for fighting climate change.”

Faust of CalEnviroScreen said he is aware of these issues in the Bay Area and others that may apply elsewhere, such as pesticide use in counties with robust agricultural industries. He and others involved in the program say they have always been open to input, adding and subtracting indicators over the years and refining their methodology. But CalEnviroScreen’s initial goal to provide a comprehensive picture of the state’s environmental risks has not changed.

“We have been true to our mission of trying to understand a coalition of sources and the cumulative impacts in communities,” Faust said.

As for the screen’s expanded use and consequences, he and other CalEnviroScreen officials said the team makes an effort to provide guidance on how it can best be used and are transparent about its limitations.

“Lots of people have different uses for it, and there’s expectation that you know that it could be used to identify low-income communities,” said Allan Hirsch, spokesman for OEHHA.

“That’s where it’s incumbent upon us to really communicate what the tool is really for.”

Assembly Member Phil Ting, chair of the Bay Area legislative caucus, said he and others have raised similar concerns with CalEPA. They're worried that the region's leadership on environmental issues has inadvertently cut at-risk communities from needed funds and opportunities.

"I don't think there's any problem with the screen," Ting said. "I think that you have to be very careful what the screen is applied to. If this is really about environmental damage and trying to mitigate environmental damage, then let's make sure that we are using this tool for programs that are very focused on that particular issue. Let's not misuse this screen for affordable housing or for access to park space."



Emma Yip cleans the floor of the room where her family of five lives in San Francisco's Chinatown.
Brontë Wittpenn/The Chronicle

These days, Emma Yip's room feels a little bit bigger than it had during the height of the pandemic. Her eldest daughter is studying nursing in San Jose. Yip still won't use the communal kitchen; she realizes the pandemic isn't over just yet, but she and her two youngest take frequent trips to a park in North Beach where they can run and stretch their legs.

Money from any program for disadvantaged communities won't make the Yips' room any bigger. But advocates, like Eddie Ahn, say an expanded definition could lead to more positive changes.

Funds could be used to help families buy their own air filtration systems; grants could improve building-wide energy efficiency, meaning extra savings for those living on the margins; the designation could draw state support for life-changing job training opportunities.

These might seem small but, advocates say, they have the potential to improve the lives of thousands.

Emma Yip knows something about small things. Sometimes, when the kids are at school and her husband is at work and the cleaning and shopping are done, she'll sit alone in the room, scan her phone, snack on a mango and peanut mochi — and take a small, quiet moment for herself.

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