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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Warren County and the Birth of Environmental Justice: From Local Protest to a National Movement

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This paper examines the 1982 Warren County PCB protest in North Carolina, which began as a local "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBY) response to the state's plan to construct a hazardous waste landfill, and gradually developed into a broader critique of environmental racism. Although earlier research explains the impact of the Warren County protest, fewer studies have examined how the reframing changed over time and generated political opportunities that influenced subsequent federal investigations and policies. This article addresses this gap by asking: How did the Warren County protest transform a localized siting dispute into a national environmental justice agenda through framing strategies and agenda-setting dynamics? Drawing on archival sources and newspaper articles, this essay analyzes the evolution of the protest from local opposition to a critique of systemic environmental racism, investigates the key factors that amplified its influence, and evaluates its impact on subsequent policy developments and the rise of grassroots environmentalism. It argues that Warren County served as a catalytic event because it altered the national interpretive frame connecting race and environmental risk, producing political opportunities that directly enabled the GAO (1983) and UCC (1987) studies and the institutionalization of environmental justice.

Introduction

In 1982, residents of Warren County, supported by civil rights activists, organized a nonviolent protest against the construction of a hazardous waste landfill in their predominantly African American community. Although the protest ultimately failed to stop the landfill's construction, it marked a turning point in American history by bringing national attention to environmental inequality and raising awareness about the connection between environmental policy and social justice.

Scholars differ on the significance of the Warren County protest. Bullard (2001) argues it marked the birth of environmental justice and brought the concept of "environmental racism" into public view. Taylor (2000), however, contends that the term was applied retrospectively and that the movement

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had earlier roots. Other scholars point to the GAO and UCC reports as the true starting point of the environmental justice movement (Brulle & Pellow, 2006).

This article builds on these debates by advancing a focused research question: How did the Warren County protest transform a localized siting dispute into a national environmental justice agenda through framing strategies and political agenda-setting? Drawing on an analysis of coded newspaper articles and archival sources, this article argues that Warren County served as a catalytic event not because of its immediate policy outcome but because it altered the national interpretive frame connecting race and environmental risk, producing political opportunities that directly enabled the GAO (1983) and UCC (1987) studies and the institutionalization of environmental justice.

Methodology

This project uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, combining archival sources, demographic data, coded newspaper articles, and interpretive analysis to explore how the 1982 Warren County PCB protest helped reshape national conversations about environmental policy. Archival materials form the empirical foundation of the analysis and include state documents, Highway Patrol reports, EPA hearing transcripts, as well as protest ephemera, photographs, and symbolic imagery preserved in the UNC Libraries collection. To contextualize the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that shaped the protest's racialized framing, the study incorporates demographic data from the 1980 U.S. Census, focusing on racial composition and income levels in Warren County and neighboring counties. Comparative demographic profiles of the communities examined in the GAO's 1983 hazardous-waste siting study are also used to situate Warren County within broader national patterns.

This study draws on an original dataset of news coverage of the Warren County PCB landfill dispute, consisting of 77 articles published between 1978 and 1982 and retrieved from the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center. This dataset provides insight into contemporaneous framing, public reception, and the media's role in amplifying the protests. Each item was coded using a structured coding scheme. Variables include tone, four interpretive frames (technical, procedural, civil-rights/environmental justice, public-health), racialization indicators, and protest imagery. The coding identifies whether and how each frame appears in an article, allowing systematic comparison across phases of the protest cycle. This study combines basic quantitative analysis—like how often certain frames appear and how they change over time—with qualitative interpretation to trace how media narratives evolved as the protests intensified.

To capture the evolution of media framing over the course of the Warren County PCB controversy, the articles were grouped into three meaningful phases: (1) phase I (11/07/1978-9/14/1982), with 36 articles capturing pre-protest debates; (2) phase II (9/15/1982-10/27/1982), with 30 articles

documenting the peak protest period; and (3) phase III (10/28/1982-12/31/1982), with 11 articles, reflecting post-protest reinterpretation. This timeline allows systematic measurement of how racial-justice framing intensified as the protest escalated.

Analytically, the study also uses an agenda-setting perspective to examine how Warren County influenced federal institutional responses, including the commissioning of the GAO (1983) and UCC (1987) reports. And historical process tracing is used to link the protest actions to the political and policy changes that followed. Together, these methods show how the Warren County protests reshaped public understanding of the issue, influenced political and governmental responses, and created lasting impacts on environmental justice policy.

From Local Opposition to a Racial Justice Frame

The Warren County movement began as a conventional local "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBY) response. In the summer of 1978, a transformer company intentionally dumped 31,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated fluid along 240 miles of roadways in 14 North Carolina counties. That December, the state purchased a farmland in Warren County to bury the toxic soil. Local residents opposed the state's decision and organized as Warren County Citizens Concerned About PCBs (WCCC), challenging the siting through public hearings and lawsuits. When all these efforts failed, they turned to civil disobedience in September 1982 (North Carolina Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, 1983).

Initially, the opposition was framed largely as a technical problem, emphasizing engineering flaws and advocating for the waste to be relocated elsewhere. At an EPA-sponsored public hearing, WCCC leader Ken Ferruccio underscored this technocratic framing when he argued that "PCB on the shoulders and PCB in temporary storage [should] be sent to Alabama, one of the three legal national dumping sites where I understand every precaution has been taken, unlike the situation here in Warren County." (U.S. EPA, 1979) As late as 1982, the WCCC continued to emphasize in its brochure that "Soil scientist Dr. Charles Hulchi of the University of Maryland, and other experts, testify that the soil in Warren County cannot hold the PCBs." (Brochure, 1982a) All these illustrate the early emphasis on engineering deficiencies and the state's failure to meet established safety standards, rather than an explicit critique of discriminatory siting.

The NIMBY approach has clear limitations. Technical objections can often be addressed through design revisions. Consequently, when the court determined that the revised plan satisfied the necessary technical standards, the county no longer had a legal basis to oppose the project. In addition, while the group opposed the local siting of toxic waste, it discouraged active involvement from outsiders. In fact, despite growing national attention, there was little participation from beyond Warren County before the summer of 1982 (McGurty, 2009). This NIMBY argument ultimately led to the failure of the county's legal efforts.

The failure of earlier legal actions prompted local leaders to rethink their strategy and link the landfill decision to the county's demographics. Early WCCC leaders were primarily white, middle-class residents, focusing on a technocratic framing that emphasized engineering flaws, soil instability, and procedural deficits. Black activists and civil-rights leaders who joined the movement in 1982, however, reframed the landfill decision was driven by racial consideration.

The 1980 Census shows that Warren County had the highest proportion of Black residents in North Carolina—about 60 percent—and statewide was only 22 percent. The median house value was only 25,500 USD (North Carolina State Data Center, 1980; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). The selected disposal site in Shocco Township had an even higher Black population, roughly 66 percent and 32 percent of population lived under poverty line. It's also worth noting that three of the five areas that have borders within 4 miles to the landfill site also had a majority Black population (U.S. GAO, 1983). Census data indicates that Warren County was significantly poorer and more racially marginalized than most North Carolina counties.

These demographic characteristics supported activists' shift toward a civil-rights frame: the landfill was not simply a case of misplaced waste, but an example of racially targeted harm. The reframing was accompanied by a gradual transfer of leadership from white homeowners to Black residents and civil-rights leaders. A pivotal moment in the shift from a NIMBY framework to one centered on racial discrimination was the engagement of Black civil rights activists in the direct-action protests. Civil-rights veterans—including Rev. Leon White, Rev. Benjamin Chavis, and Congressman Walter Fauntroy—brought their organizing experience during the civil rights era to Warren County and helped lead the demonstrations. Their leadership shifted the interpretive frame from "technical hazard" to "racial injustice" and elevated national recognition of its racial dimensions. A rally flyer of September 1, 1982 claimed that "Warren County is poor (lowest per capita income in N.C.), mostly black (the highest percentage of black population in N.C.), and has very little political clou," indicating the focus had already changed from NIMBY to racial discrimination ("Flyer," 1982b).

Content analysis of news coverage across all three phases (1978–1982) demonstrates a clear transformation in how newspapers framed the Warren County PCB controversy. Early coverage in Phase I was dominated by technical (58.3%), procedure (72.2%) and public health (58.3%) frames, focusing on engineering safety, regulatory waivers, and questions of governmental transparency. Racial meanings were rare (18.0%). By the summer of 1982, however, references to the county's predominantly Black population and early NAACP involvement introduced a latent racialized context.

Table 1. Frame usage across three phases of the Warren County PCB news coverage (1978–1982)

Frame	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Technical	58.3%	46.7%	36.4%
Procedural	72.2%	63.3%	54.5%
Civil Rights / Environmental Justice	18.0%	56.7%	59.1%
Public Health	58.3%	36.7%	27.3%

Phase II coverage shifted sharply from technical debate to an environmental justice narrative (56.7%). Civil-rights leaders like Ben Chavis described the conflict as a human-rights issue, and demographic references to Warren County's predominantly Black population made racial inequality explicit. *The Carolina Times* played a decisive role in this shift: it consistently employed explicit racial language, and portrayed the protests as a struggle against racial injustice. In contrast, *The Warren Record* mostly focused on official viewpoints—like law enforcement, costs, and government statements—and only rarely mentioned issues of racial inequality. However, letters to the editor in *The Warren Record* show a different side of the story. Several community members clearly pointed out the racial issues behind the decision to put the landfill there, directly challenging what the news and editorials were saying. These letters make it clear that even though the media didn't quickly use civil-rights language, many people in the community already saw the situation as a racial injustice. By late September, the PCB dispute was widely understood as a civil-rights and environmental justice fight.

In phase III, media framing of the Warren County PCB protests shifted from early procedural and technical emphases toward increasingly explicit civil-rights and environmental-justice interpretations (59.1%). As the coverage continued, photos of arrests appeared less often, and the reporting shifted toward court decisions, organizing efforts, and national attention. Phase III shows a clear transition from event-focused reporting to broader structural critiques linking race, power, and environmental governance.

Across the three phases, technical and procedural frames decline steadily as the protests intensify, while civil-rights framing surges from marginal (18.0%) to dominant (59.1%). Public-health framing also fades in Phase III. Overall, the media moved from talking about the issue in technical or administrative terms to focusing more on racial justice. The coding analysis shows that civil-rights and environmental-justice framing became much more visible during the 1982 mass protests, marking a shift in the narrative from seeing the issue as an "engineering problem" to viewing it as a "racial injustice problem." This supports scholars' claims that Warren County helped create the modern environmental-justice vocabulary rather than inheriting it from earlier movements.

This reframing proved foundational. Social movement theory emphasizes the importance of collective action frames—the interpretive structures that assign meaning to events and mobilize participation (Snow & Benford, 1988).

The protest demonstrated this dynamic by redefining environmental harm as a form of racial injustice, which broadened the moral language of environmentalism. By placing the issue within the wider context of racial discrimination, the WCCC strengthened its connections with Warren County's predominantly African American community, encouraging greater participation and mobilization.

Factors That Amplified the Warren County Movement

Several factors amplified the impact of the Warren County protests and helped catalyze the environmental justice movement, including the resurgence of civil rights activism, extensive media coverage, and the formation of interracial coalitions.

Revival of the Civil Rights Movement

The direct-action protests in Warren County lasted six weeks between September 15 and October 27, 1982 when trucks transported toxic substances to the landfill site. The demonstrations functioned as an explicit extension of the civil rights movement: they applied its moral language, mobilizing tactics, and emphasis on racial equality to a new domain—environmental policy. For example, reflecting the legacy of 1960s civil rights activism, protestors in Warren County sang Christian hymns and adapted iconic protest songs such as *We Shall Overcome* and *We Shall Not Be Moved* during rallies (UNC Libraries, 2025). These songs uplifted morale, strengthened collective actions, and underscored the protest's continuity with earlier struggles for racial equality.

Throughout the protests, demonstrators consistently adhered to a nonviolent approach, which also reminded people of the civil rights movement. Although arrests were frequent, protesters returned day after day (Singletary, 1982). In total, 523 individuals were arrested during the Warren County protests—the largest mass arrest in the history of American environmental activism (Labalme, 2022).

The coding analysis of news coverage shows that racialization indicators rise sharply over time. Demographic references increase from 13.9% in Phase I to 66.7% in Phase II, race vocabulary from 16.7% to 63.3%, and collective Black depictions from 19.4% to 56.7%. Though slightly lower in Phase III, all remain elevated, marking a sustained shift toward explicitly racialized interpretation. Media coverage in Phase II and III dramatically elevated the presence of civil-rights leaders—rising from over 63.3% in Phase II to 81.8% in Phase III—making them key voices in the movement and clearly connecting the protests to the broader civil rights tradition.

Media Visibility and Symbolic Power

Although a significant number of local residents participated in the landfill protests, organizers recognized the crucial role of media visibility and symbolic messaging in amplifying their cause. To this end, they designed several impressive protest visuals to capture public and media attention. One

Table 2. Racialization Indicators across three phases of the Warren County PCB protest

Indicator	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Demographic reference	13.9%	66.7%	63.6%
Race vocabulary	16.7%	63.3%	45.5%
Collective Black depiction	19.4%	56.7%	45.5%
Civil-rights leaders	22.2%	63.3%	81.8%

of the most iconic symbols was an image of a red truck, representing the delivery of toxic waste, alongside a paper badge reading, "I'd Rather Be in Jail! (Than Dying of Cancer at Home)" (UNC Libraries, 2025). This slogan became a potent emblem of the movement, widely circulated in the media, and helped to frame the protesters as morally driven citizens rather than extremists.

The scale and persistence of the protest attracted wide media attention. The demonstrations also created opportunities for dramatic nonviolent action, especially during confrontations with Highway Patrol officers in full riot gear. On the first day of demonstration, 55 protestors were arrested ("55 arrested in protest," 1982). At times, as many as 500 demonstrators participated. Images of peaceful protestors being carried away by heavily armed officers circulated widely in newspapers and on television, greatly increasing the movement's visibility. Throughout the fall of 1982, headlines about the Warren County protests dominated North Carolina's front pages. *Time* magazine described the Warren County protest as "the most significant protest against a local government's selection of a toxic waste dump in recent memory" ("No Dumping," 1982). The strategic use of civil disobedience, combined with sustained media attention, amplified the movement's message and broadened public awareness.

The coding results show that news reporting gradually adopted a more sympathetic tone toward residents during phase I, depicting them as rational actors confronting state indifference, but tone becomes far more polarized in phase II, with explicit praise for the protest movement appearing alongside critiques portraying protests as disruptive. Imagery evolves in parallel with the protest cycle. Phase I has almost no visual protest content, reflecting a technocratic dispute. In Phase II, high-impact images—like mass arrests and clashes with police—shifted the narrative toward one of conflict between the state and the community. By Phase III, these images of direct confrontation appeared less often and were replaced by more moral and symbolic imagery, such as scenes of interracial solidarity.

The media comparison reveals a deep structural divergence in how newspapers interpreted the Warren County PCB protests. Black community newspapers (*Carolina Times* and *Winston-Salem Chronicle*) strongly adopted civil-rights and symbolic frames, creating supportive stories that emphasized racial injustice and collective action. By contrast, the editor of *The Warren Record* argued that "continued resistance to PCB is not only futile, but costly, disruptive and bringing to our county a great deal of unfavorable publicity"

(Jones, 1982). This tonal diversification shows how the issue shifted from a low-profile administrative dispute to a highly visible public conflict. The contrasting viewpoints also sparked more debate and drew broader public attention to the protests.

Building a Multiracial Coalition

One of the most distinctive features of the Warren County protests was the emergence of a multiracial coalition. As some scholars noted, toxic dumping tended to follow the "path of least resistance," disproportionately burdening Black and poor communities (Bullard, 2000). Yet prior to Warren County, African Americans were largely marginalized within the environmental movement (UCC, 1987)—a disparity also reflected in the protest's early stages, when the WCCC was led and largely staffed by white residents. By the fall of 1982, however, the movement began to shift as Black civil rights leaders joined the demonstrations, helping to bridge longstanding racial divides and build the coalition. As *Winston-Salem Chronicle* observed "Residents—and a number of supporters from throughout the state and the country —have even clasped hands, Black and white, to fight the move." (Egemonye et al., 1982) The key link enabling this unprecedented coalition was a shared grievance: the state's determination to proceed with the landfill project regardless of public sentiment. Moreover, the universal threat posed by toxic waste acted as a powerful equalizer.

The coding results of newspaper coverage shows that interracial coalition imagery grows markedly across phases, rising from 8.3% in Phase I to 30.0% in Phase II and stabilizing at 27.3% in Phase III. These depictions of Black and white residents acting together reframed the protests as a broader moral community, which strengthened their connection to environmental-justice themes.

Given the long-standing history of racial discrimination and tension in the South, it was particularly striking that White and African American demonstrators marched and rallied together during the protest. One farmer remarked, "If anybody had ever told me whites and blacks would get together in this county like this for anything, I wouldn't have believed it." (Burwell & Cole, 2007) The protest thus became not only a fight against toxic dumping but also a powerful expression of grassroots solidarity. This unprecedented unity amplified the visibility and impact of the protest far beyond Warren County.

Policy Impacts and Grassroots Environmentalism

Although the Warren County protest failed in its immediate objective of preventing the landfill, it had an important agenda-setting impact by turning race and pollution from separate issues into a single, connected policy concern. Social-movement theory emphasizes that political opportunities and resource mobilization are crucial to movement success (McAdam, 1982), and the early 1980s offered unusually favorable conditions: the moral capital of the civil rights generation, expanding media networks, and heightened

national sensitivity to environmental risks—especially after the Love Canal disaster in New York. The Warren County PCB movement exploited these openings by combining moral framing with tactical nonviolence.

The imagery of peaceful demonstrators opposing toxic waste became a powerful symbol of environmental racism, creating political urgency that catalyzed national investigations and federal policy responses. Among those arrested during the protests was Congressman Walter Fauntroy, who, upon returning to Washington, D.C., requested that the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) investigate the demographics of communities hosting hazardous waste sites in the South. Fauntroy specifically referred the Warren County PCB landfill in the request letter (U.S. GAO, 1983). The GAO's 1983 report revealed that African Americans constituted the majority population in three of the four landfill sites studied (U.S. GAO, 1983).

Right after Warren County protests, the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, where Rev. Benjamin Chavis served as the Southern Regional Program Director, explicitly launched its call for a national study, warning that toxic landfills decisions signaled a broader pattern of toxic dumping in minority neighborhoods ("Minority Neighborhoods Becoming Dumping Grounds?" Nov. 11, 1982). The study culminated in the landmark 1987 report *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. In the first chapter, it explained why the report was carried out: "The protests in Warren County raised the question of how many other racial and ethnic communities were similarly affected by hazardous wastes. This question was partially explored in a study conducted in 1983 by the U.S GAO...The GAO study, while important, was limited by its regional scope. It was not designed to examine the relationship between the location of hazardous waste facilities thought the United States and the racial and socio-economic characteristics of persons residing near them...This report attempts to fill that void." (UCC, 1987) It showed clearly that the Warren County protests lead to the UCC report. This was the first comprehensive national analysis of the relationship between hazardous waste facilities and racial and ethnic communities, concluding that "race proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities," highlighting "a consistent national pattern" (UCC, 1987).

The GAO and UCC reports shifted the debate from anecdotal claims to statistical evidence, establishing an intellectual foundation for the environmental justice movemen. It's worth noting that counterarguments regarding the siting of toxic facilities soon emerged. One perspective contended that polluting industries, despite their environmental harms, could bring economic benefits and jobs to disadvantaged areas and make the presence of such industries economically justifiable (Portney, 1985). Another notable counter-argument is the "minority move-in hypothesis," which

proposed the siting of hazardous facilities was not necessarily a targeted decision against minority communities but rather an economic dynamic driven by affordable housing (Been, 1994).

However, subsequent empirical research challenged these claims. Empirical evidence questioned the fairness of the presumed trade-off between economic benefits and environmental risks. Studies showed that minority communities living near polluting industries bear the environmental burdens while receiving few economic gains. For example, of the 1,878 permanent jobs generated by ten chemical plants in St. Gabriel, Iberville Parish, Louisiana, only 164 went to local residents—and just 20 to local African Americans (Teel, 2002).

These studies further legitimized the concept of environmental racism, leading to later policy developments such as President Clinton's 1994 Executive Order 12898, which required federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their decision-making processes. Contemporary federal policy tools such as EPA's environmental justice mapping and screening tool, EJSCREEN, and the Biden administration's *Justice40 Initiative* demonstrate the continued influence of Warren County on environmental governance. EJSCREEN maps pollution burdens alongside demographic and socioeconomic data, translating the protestors' core argument—that environmental risk is unevenly racialized—into a standardized federal assessment tool (U.S. EPA, 2021). Justice40, which directs at least 40 percent of federal climate and infrastructure benefits to disadvantaged communities, further institutionalizes this shift by incorporating equity considerations into federal investment decisions (White House, n.d.). Together, these initiatives show how the interpretive and political breakthroughs catalyzed in 1982 have become integrated into modern environmental justice policy. The trajectory from local protest to federal tools illustrates that by making unfair placement of toxic waste as a civil-rights issue, the Warren County protests generated political pressure that compelled federal investigation and eventually helped environmental justice become a national policy topic.

Warren County protests also catalyzed the rise of grassroots environmentalism. Prior to the Warren County, the environmental movement was often viewed as elitist, with early environmental organizations dominated by white, middle-class individuals, underscoring the limited inclusivity of early environmentalism (Bullard, 2000). In fact, significant tensions existed between advocates for environmental quality and proponents of social justice. For example, Carl Stokes, the first Black mayor of Cleveland, argued that providing adequate housing and food for the poor should take precedence over clean air and water ("The Rise of Anti-Ecology," 1970). Such views highlighted the disconnect between mainstream environmentalism and the concerns of marginalized communities. The Warren County protests broke the previously rigid boundaries between environmental advocacy and civil rights activism, introducing a significant justice-oriented dimension into

environmental discourse. Inspired by the events in Warren County, a wave of community-based environmental justice organizations emerged. This grassroots environmentalism diverged from the mainstream environmental organizations in several key respects: First, it was led primarily by working-class individuals responding to immediate threats of toxic contamination in their neighborhoods (Boyte et al., 1986); Second, it expressed deep mistrust toward government and corporate institutions, viewing them as complicit in prioritizing profit over public welfare (Cable & Benson, 1993). As Warren County residents questioned, "How could North Carolina place dollars above the lives and futures of its citizens?" ("Gov. Hunt Challenged by Warren County People," 1982).

Many grassroots campaigns achieved tangible victories following Warren County protests. For example, in 1989, residents of predominantly Black Richmond, California organized against emissions from a petrochemical refinery and secured significant concessions on emissions levels (Bullard, 1993). However, despite this growing visibility, research shows that environmental injustice persists. A 2008 follow-up study concluded that environmental inequality remained widespread (Bullard et al., 2008). A 2021 updated investigation, "Toxic waste and race in twenty-first century America", also determined that environmental racism in the United States continued to increase in spite of decades of environmental justice policy and a growing public awareness of the problem (Pellow, 2021). As for Shocco Township, the PCB landfill site, recent Survey shows that only 22 percent of residents are Whites, and 46.2 percent of population live below poverty line, more than double the rate in Warren County (22.2%), and even 14 percent higher than in 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Together, these findings highlight the enduring nature of environmental injustice and the continued need for systemic reform.窗体底端

Conclusion

The Warren County PCB protest bridged two previously separate strands of American activism—the environmental movement and the civil rights movement—by explicitly linking environmental degradation to racial injustice. This reframing not only gave voice to communities of color who had long been marginalized in environmental decision-making, but also compelled policymakers, journalists, and scholars to confront the disproportionate burden of toxic pollution borne by these communities. Several dynamics—the revival of civil rights activism, extensive media attention, and the emergence of interracial coalitions—further magnified the protest's impact well beyond North Carolina.

The significance of Warren County protests lies not in its immediate outcome but in its interpretive clarity and generation of political opportunity. Framing hazardous-waste siting as civil rights injustice created a durable narrative structure enabling federal investigation, institutional change, and the emergence of grassroots activism. Although later GAO and UCC reports directly shaped federal action, their influence was made possible by the

national visibility and political urgency the protest generated. This study suggests that protest-driven reframing can drive structural change even without immediate material victories. In this sense, Warren County set the stage for a justice-oriented movement that continues to shape policy and activism today.

Despite the progress it inspired, significant challenges to environmental equity persist. The gap between the principles of environmental justice and their practical implementation continues to impede substantive change. The legacy of Warren County, therefore, lies not only in its historic mobilization but also in its enduring call to action—reminding us that the pursuit of environmental equity is a continuous and unfinished struggle.

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