

ABSTRACT

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Dilemmas of Community Health: Medical Care and Environmental Health in Postwar America

Dilemmas of Community Health examines the development of the post-WWII public health enterprise via a study of two enduring components, medical care and environmental health, in four regions (New York City, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Central Appalachia) where they have been particularly pronounced issues. It tells a national story via regional on-the-ground detail. The juxtaposition of these two domains is intentional and historicizes an excessive policy focus on medical care provision, even alongside the existence of severe environmental risks to population health.

Within medical care, I identify three intertwined crisis that policymakers periodically confronted: sustainability (how to pay for and staff a system); maldistribution (who gets care, who does not); and governance (who calls the administrative shots). Within environmental health, I analyze two dimensions of “environmental”: a narrower one chiefly concerned with natural resources control and a broader one that considers health influences beyond that domain (such as housing quality). For the former natural resources dimension, I examine mid-century air pollution control in Los Angeles and the advent of surface mining in Central Appalachia. For the latter broader dimension, I examine “environmental” influences on health in all four settings.

A final contribution is an intellectual-historical exploration of communitarianism’s influence on public health. Post-war public health was infused with invocations of “community,” and almost all the subjects I studied here, whether they used the term directly or not, saw themselves as acting to better something called “community health.” But the concrete definition of this term remained strikingly elusive, notwithstanding its pervasiveness, and *Dilemmas* examines the consequences and functions of this Rorschach quality.

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