A quarter of Americans breathe 'unhealthy air,' report shows

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Few can forget the haunting images of New York City bathed in a thick orange smog after smoke from Canadian wildfires swept southward last summer.

Now, a new report from the First Street Foundation suggests these alarming effects of climate change are becoming far more common, with 1 in 4 Americans—83 million people in all—now exposed to "unhealthy air."

"Understanding the likelihood and persistence of poor air quality exposure is important due to the well-documented impacts on health, outdoor labor productivity, and the nuisance of smoke impacting daily routines," Jeremy Porter, head of climate implications research at First Street, said in a news release announcing the report. "We are just starting to see the beginnings of the impact this hazard will have on our daily lives and the larger economy moving forward."

Within decades, the number of Americans exposed to polluted air could grow to 125 million, according to First Street, which analyzes climate risks.

The latest news is especially worrisome given that the federal government has spent decades tightening rules on pollutants emitted by factories and automobiles.

"The statistical signals are clear. We are seeing rapid increases in air pollutants after decades of legislation to reduce pollution," Matthew Eby, founder and CEO of First Street, said in the foundation's news release. "The major concern moving forward is that climate is much harder to regulate than industry."

Even now, there's evidence that Americans are leaving parts of the country where the air quality can be low.

"We've seen very early statistical signals in our own analysis that people are moving away from the smoke that comes from wildfire," Porter told CBS News.

Folks living in California, Oregon, and Washington are seeing the greatest declines in air quality, at least partly due to continuing wildfires in those states.

Still, the East Coast hasn't been spared, First Street found.

"It's become something that is impacting people's daily lives east of the Mississippi River," Porter noted.

In 2022, fires in the Florida panhandle were "so bad that people were asked to evacuate from their neighborhoods, which is kind of unheard of," he said.

Poor air quality is linked to increases in levels of both [particulate matter](#) and ozone, which are rising because of [extreme heat](#), drought, and wildfires. Particulate matter (PM2.5) is particularly dangerous because the tiny particles can penetrate the lungs and trigger a host of health problems.

While reversing climate change is difficult, if not impossible, knowing how to navigate air pollution safely can help, Porter said.

On days when air quality is poor, "being able to keep smoke out of your house is really important," Porter said. "Things like making sure your windows are sealed, and something as simple as changing the filter on your HVAC can make a big, big impact on how clean the air is inside your house."

 More information: Visit the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences for more on [air pollution and your health](#).