

Almost 40% of Americans live with dirty air: Report

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Nearly 40% of Americans live where the air is polluted enough to harm them, a new report warns.

In the American Lung Association's "State of the Air" [report](#), released Wednesday, the number of people living with levels of air pollution that could jeopardize their health climbed from about 119 million in 2023 to 131 million now.

"We have seen impressive progress in cleaning up air pollution over the last 25 years, thanks in large part to the Clean Air Act. However, when we started this report, our team never imagined that 25 years in the future, more than 130 million people would still be breathing unhealthy air," Harold Wimmer, president and CEO of the American Lung Association (ALA), said in a [news release](#) announcing the findings.

"Climate change is causing more dangerous air pollution. Every day that there are unhealthy levels of ozone or [particle pollution](#) means that someone—a child, grandparent, uncle or mother—struggles to breathe," he said. "We must do more to ensure everyone has clean air."

Extreme heat, drought and wildfires have fueled recent rises in deadly air pollution, especially in the Western regions of the country, said report author Katherine Pruitt, senior director of the lung association's Nationwide Clean Air Policy.

"The air pollution produced by wildfire smoke is getting worse every year," Pruitt told CNN. "Climate change is contributing to that situation, and those wildfires are a very serious threat to our health."

While emissions of [outdoor air pollutants have dropped 78%](#) since the Clean Air Act was passed in 1970, "there still are way too many people breathing unhealthy air," Pruitt said.

In recent years, Pruitt noted she has seen a shift in air pollution becoming a growing problem in the West.

"Our cars are cleaner. Our fuels are cleaner. Most of the dirtiest coal-fired power plants have fortunately been shut down, and industry is cleaner. So that's cleaned up a lot of the traditional sources of pollution in the East, in the more industrial parts of the Upper Midwest and the Northeast," Pruitt said.

However, "the amount of oil and gas extraction that happens in the West has increased, which produces a lot of emissions," she said. "And they are suffering, first, from the impacts of [climate change](#) and wildfire. So a lot of that geographic shift you're seeing, particularly with particle pollution, is related to wildfire smoke."

According to the new report, the 10 cities most polluted by year-round particle pollution were:

- Bakersfield, Calif.
- Visalia, Calif.
- Fresno-Madera-Hanford, Calif.
- Eugene-Springfield, Ore.
- San Jose-San Francisco-Oakland, Calif.
- Los Angeles-Long Beach, Calif.
- Sacramento-Roseville, Calif.
- Medford-Grants Pass, Ore.
- Phoenix-Mesa, Ariz.
- Fairbanks, Alaska

[Particle pollution](#), a mix of solid and liquid droplets so tiny they can infiltrate your body's defenses, is associated with [an increased risk of death](#) from heart disease, respiratory disease and lung cancer.

"Particle pollution is really deadly," Pruitt said. "We also see not only more people in more places affected, but the level of particle pollution that they're breathing is worse than it's ever been."

The new report also highlights how air pollution strikes minority communities the hardest.

While minorities make up about 42% of the U.S. population, they represent 52% of people living in a county with at least one failing grade for air pollution, the report found. In the counties with the worst air quality, 63% of the nearly 44 million residents there are minorities.

The findings show the United States still has "a huge air pollution issue" to tackle, said Dr. Lina Mu, an epidemiologist and associate professor at the University at Buffalo School of Public Health and Health Professions.

"Breathing the [unhealthy air](#) will cause tremendous health consequences, in particular for vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, fetuses, children and people with asthma or heart diseases. The impact on the next generation can be very profound," Mu told CNN.

"It will certainly need policies from multiple levels to reduce the emission of pollutants, adopt stronger regulations and standards, and address climate changes to be effective in controlling [air pollution](#) levels," she added.

More information: The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has more on [air pollution](#).

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