

*Burning fossil fuels like coal, diesel, gasoline or natural gas creates air pollution that harms health.*



# Our Health at Risk

## *Why Are Millions of Americans Still Breathing Unhealthy Air?*

*Americans across the country continue to breathe unhealthy air, leading to increased risk of premature death, asthma attacks and other adverse health impacts. To protect public health, the nation needs to maintain and build upon gains made under the Clean Air Act and the Clean Cars Standards, strengthen the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, and pursue additional pollution cuts.*

## Air Pollution Damages Health

Burning fossil fuels like coal, diesel, gasoline or natural gas creates air pollution.

- Smog, or ground-level ozone, causes respiratory harm, including coughing, asthma, increased risk of infection, and permanent damage to lung tissue.
- Particulate matter can also cause lung damage and trigger cardiovascular problems, including heart attacks and strokes. Particulate pollution can cause mothers to give birth prematurely, raise the risk of autism in their children, and stunt lung development. Recent studies also implicate particulate matter in an increased risk of dementia.
- There is no safe level of exposure to smog or particulates.

## Smog Pollution

In 2015, communities in 49 states plus the District of Columbia experienced at least one day of elevated ozone smog pollution.

- Of the 10 cities with the most days of elevated smog pollution, seven were in California, along with the Denver, Phoenix and Las Vegas metropolitan areas.
- Residents of 34 metropolitan areas experienced more than 100 days in 2015 with elevated smog pollution. The Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque and Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan areas were among those that faced elevated levels of smog for more than three months of the year.



Air pollution over Los Angeles, 2014 (above). People living close to pollution sources, such as this road beneath an apartment building in New York City (below), are exposed to higher levels of air pollution.



# Smog Pollution in the Northeast

In densely populated Northeastern states, communities experienced frequent smog pollution in 2015, an indication that stronger measures are still needed to help curb air pollution in the region, despite recent progress.

- Residents of the Washington, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York City and Baltimore metropolitan areas all experienced 89 or more days in 2015 of elevated levels of smog.
- Residents of smaller communities, such as York, Pennsylvania, and the Berlin area of New Hampshire and Vermont, also experienced frequent elevated smog levels.

## Particulate Pollution

Elevated particulate pollution also affected hundreds of communities across the U.S. in 2015. The Riverside, Fresno, and Los Angeles, California, areas all faced more than 200 days of elevated particulate pollution in 2015, along with the Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and St. Louis metropolitan regions.

## Global Warming May Worsen Air Pollution

Air pollution may become a greater problem in the future, as climate change warms the planet, alters weather patterns, and triggers other shifts that will create more air pollution. For example:

- Temperatures will rise, speeding up the chemical reactions that create smog. In addition, with increased temperatures, communities may experience more spring and fall days with unhealthy levels of ozone, in addition to the summer ozone problems that are common today.
- Changed wind patterns may increase the number of days with stagnant air, keeping pollution from being diluted. Multiple days of stagnant air can lead to especially high levels of pollution.
- Wildfires, already increasing in intensity and frequency due to drought and higher temperatures, create particulate matter and other air pollution that can travel for hundreds of miles.

*For more information and the full report, please visit [www.EnvironmentAmericaCenter.org](http://www.EnvironmentAmericaCenter.org)*



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# Pollution Hotspots

Millions of Americans may be exposed to even more severe levels of air pollution because they live in local pollution “hotspots,” such as near freeways, airports and industrial facilities. Studies have shown that people living close to these sources of pollution face greater health impacts than do residents across the region as a whole.

- People who live near highly traveled roads are at increased risk of developing lung cancer, and at greater risk of death from stroke, lung disease and heart disease. More than 11 million Americans live within 500 feet of a major highway.
- People who spend time downwind of airports may experience more health problems than would be expected based on regional air pollution data. For example, on days with higher air pollution from major California airports, more people living nearby go to the hospital for care.

## Clean Air Solutions

To address the air pollution problems affecting people in communities across the country, and to avoid global warming-related increases in air pollution in the future, the nation should:

- **Defend and build upon improvements in air quality through the Clean Air Act.** Pollution reductions achieved under the Clean Air Act helped prevent more than 160,000 early deaths, 130,000 non-fatal heart attacks, and 41,000 hospital admissions in 2010 alone. Maintaining the gains already achieved under the Clean Air Act and seeking greater emission reductions are crucial for ensuring that Americans can breathe cleaner air.
- **Strengthen the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and other programs to reduce global warming pollution and improve air quality.** Participating states should double the strength of the program to achieve greater cuts in power plant pollution that would bring about short- and long-term improvements in air quality. New Jersey should rejoin the program.
- Pursue other measures to **transition to 100% clean, renewable energy** for electricity generation, transportation, and all other energy uses.