



Improving Air Quality: A Key Component for Advancing Health Equity



Clean air is key to living the healthiest life possible, whether we're inside the places we call home or outside in the spaces where we engage with family, friends, and our community. But pollution and greenhouse gases that drive climate change are making our air less healthy to breathe. And the ways that climate change is showing up in our lives—including hotter days, wildfires, and droughts—make our air even unhealthier.

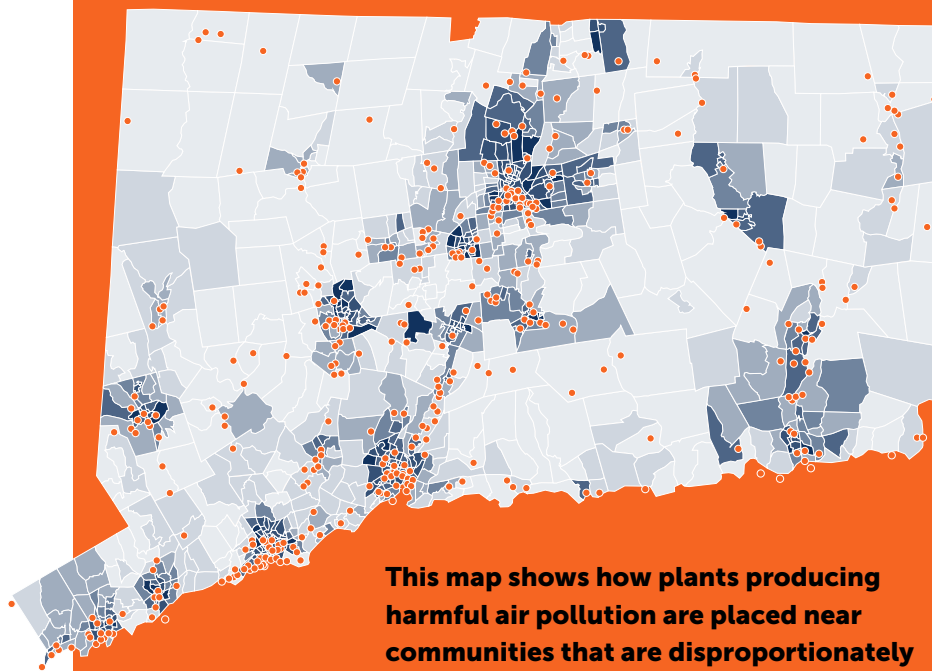
Conditions like these can [exacerbate conditions like asthma, lung, and heart disease](#); [contribute to premature birth](#); and [harm brain development in babies and children](#), and more.

The Unequal Burden of Air Pollution

But the burden of air pollution isn't shared evenly. Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities and people with low incomes are most likely to suffer from poor air quality

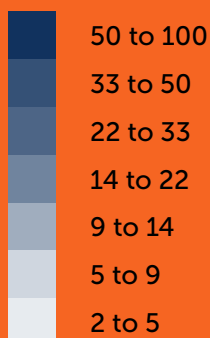
and pollution. These communities experience a greater burden in three ways:

- Sources of pollution and greenhouse gases—factories, power plants and highways, for example—are more likely to be placed near their homes and communities.
- As a result of disinvestment and past policies like redlining and ongoing policies like [exclusionary zoning](#), these neighborhoods have the fewest financial resources to adapt and respond to climate change.
- The needs and priorities of these communities are under-represented in local, state, and regional governing bodies [as a result of gerrymandering and other voter suppression measures](#).



This map shows how plants producing harmful air pollution are placed near communities that are disproportionately home to people of color in Connecticut.

Percent People of Color



Plants Emitting Criteria Air Pollutants



Source: Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice

Across the Country, People of Color and People with Low Incomes Are Exposed to Unhealthier Air from a Range of Sources

Fine particulate matter air pollution, known as PM 2.5, is responsible for 85,000 to 200,000 deaths per year in the United States. In addition, the quality of the air we breathe is strongly connected to our race or ethnicity. According to the American Lung Association, people of color in the U.S. are 1.5 times more likely to live in an area with poor air quality than White people.

[This pattern is even clearer](#) when we look more deeply into where air pollution comes from. People of color are exposed to more sources of PM 2.5 from construction, industry, homes, and vehicles than White people, and Black people are also exposed to significantly more air pollution from power plants than White people and other people of color.

Additionally, [a study of 13.2 million Medicare recipients nationwide](#) showed that low income consistently increased the risk of early death from PM 2.5.

Creating Opportunities for Healthier Lives, Achieving Health Equity, and Slowing Climate Change

Careful crafting of policies and programs to respond to climate change—like transitioning to clean, renewable energy sources like solar or wind, investing in electric school buses and local air quality monitors, and building green infrastructure like parks and green space—can be powerful levers to improve air quality in communities, starting in those that have experienced a history of environmental injustices from the placement of industry, power and highways, and disinvestments.

Approaching these challenges with a focus on environmental justice has resulted in laws like the Inflation Reduction Act, which includes many components related to climate change and equity. It has also led places like Washington state, which has extreme heat and poor air quality from wildfires, to cover the cost of air purifiers and air conditioning for people who receive Medicaid benefits.

We can work together so that everyone, regardless of race or class, has the chance to achieve their best health and wellbeing.



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