

Sharp spike seen in air pollution levels in recent years

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After 23 years of decreases in overall air pollution levels, a new report

shows that the United States recorded the highest ever number of "very unhealthy" and "hazardous" air quality days between 2018 and 2020.

In its State of the Air 2022 report, the American Lung Association said more than 137 million Americans reside in counties with [unhealthy air](#), and the number of people who faced increases in daily spikes of deadly [particulate air pollution](#) was nearly 9 million higher than in last year's report. People of color were disproportionately affected by polluted air, the association added in a [statement](#) on the key findings of its report.

Compared to white people, people of color were 61% more likely to live in a county with a failing grade for at least one of three types of air pollution, and 3.6 times more likely to live in a county with failing grades for all three types: year-round particle pollution; short-term particle pollution; and ozone.

"That's certainly a disturbing trend and one of the challenges that we have to address to promote health equity and [environmental justice](#)," Paul Billings, a [senior vice president](#) with the American Lung Association, told *CNN*. "We see the impacts of systemic racism on those who bear the greater burden of pollution."

About 1.5 million pregnant people lived in counties with a failing grade for at least one pollutant, according to the report. Research shows that exposure to air pollution during pregnancy poses a number of risks, including higher infant mortality, lower birth weight, impaired lung development and early changes in immune development, *CNN* reported.

A [climate change](#)-driven increase in [wildfires](#)—especially in the West—may be one of the reasons for the worsening air pollution nationwide, since smoke from western [wildfires](#) can drift as far as New York City. Wildfire season now lasts all year due to the climate crisis.

"We've seen some really bad air pollution events really driven by wildfire events in the West, and I think that's a real change," Billings told *CNN*. "We're really seeing the impact of climate change on our air quality, leading to really significant adverse health outcomes for the American people."

More information: Visit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for more on [air pollution](#).

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