

Environment

More Americans are exposed to polluted air in the United States. See where.

An estimated 33.5 million children in the United States — or nearly half of people under 18 — live in an area that received a failing grade for at least one measure of air pollution.

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By [Brady Dennis](#) and [Ben Noll](#)

More than 150 million people across the United States, including nearly half the nation's children, live in areas affected by harmful levels of air pollution, according to a new report published Wednesday.

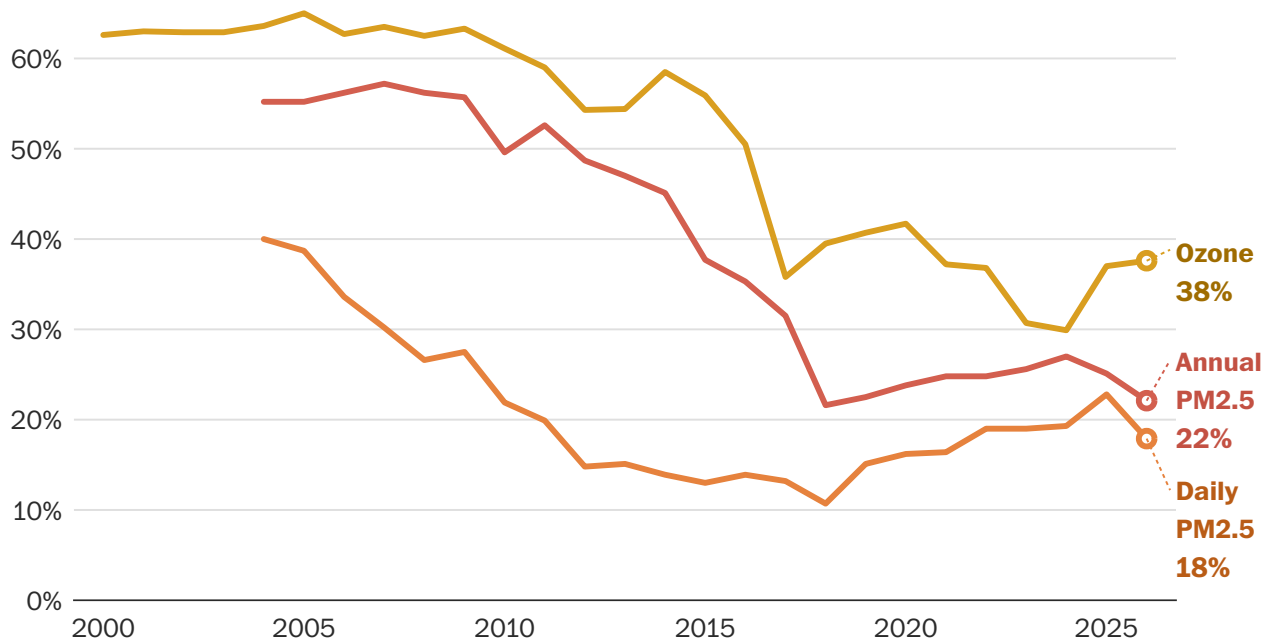
The American Lung Association's annual "state of the air report" warns that despite remarkable progress in the decades since Congress mandated national air quality standards, the combination of a warming atmosphere and the Trump administration's aggressive regulatory rollbacks are posing new threats to communities.

But in many places, from Bakersfield, California, to Brownsville, Texas, exposure to hazardous air pollution already is a regular reality, according to the report.

"Clean air is not something we can take for granted. It takes work," Harold Wimmer, the association's president, said in announcing the latest findings. "For decades, people in the U.S. have breathed cleaner air thanks to the Clean Air Act. Unfortunately, that progress is now at risk due to extreme heat and wildfires, fueled by climate change, and policy changes that are making the problem worse."

The report grades air quality in counties around the country based on two of the most widespread and dangerous pollutants: ground-level ozone, or smog, and fine particulate-matter air pollution, also known as soot.

Percentage of U.S. population affected by bad air quality with F grades



Percentages determined according to current standards

Source: American Lung Association State of the Air 2026

Pollution at the ground level is a result of emissions from cars, refineries, power plants and other sources, and can reach unhealthy levels particularly on hot sunny days in urban environments. Such pollution can cause difficulty breathing, coughing and can trigger and aggravate asthma. Fine particulate-matter pollution is typically caused by factories and refineries, wildfires, coal-fired power plants, diesel engines and other emissions. Exposure can trigger minor effects such as irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, and more severe consequences such as heart attacks and lung problems, as well as premature death.

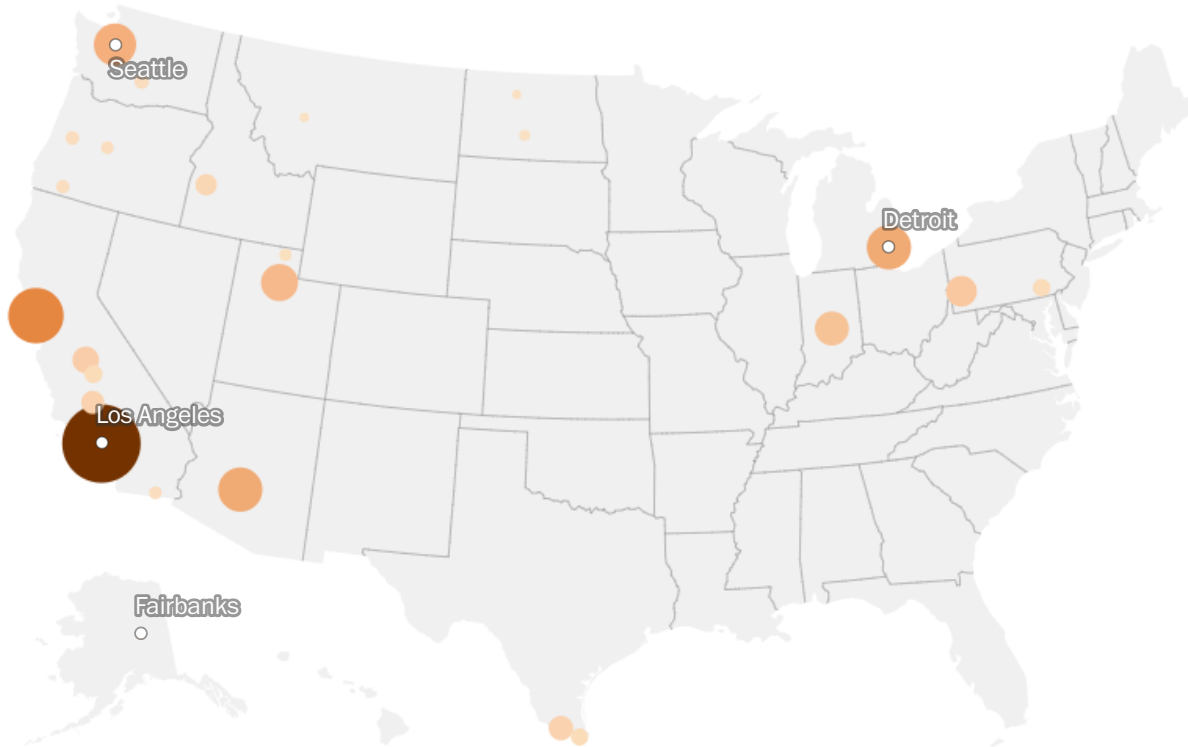
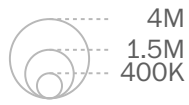
The impact on younger populations

Strikingly, researchers found the pollution hazards pose a tangible risk for the air that tens of millions of children are breathing.

An estimated 33.5 million children in the United States — or nearly half of people under 18 — live in an area that received a failing grade for at least one measure of air pollution. More than 7 million children, or about 10 percent of all kids, live in a community that failed every air quality measure, the report found.

“That’s especially concerning, because kids are more vulnerable to air pollution than adults,” said Mary Rice, a pulmonologist and director at Harvard University’s Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment, who was not involved in Wednesday’s report.

Number of children at risk in cities most polluted by short-term particle pollution



Source: American Lung Association State of the Air 2026

For starters, Rice said, children’s lungs are still developing, and young people breathe in more air for their body size compared to adults. Kids also tend to spend more time outdoors playing sports and other activities. Research has shown that exposure to poor air can result in asthma attacks, raise the risk of developing asthma and even lead to reduced lung function that lasts into adulthood.

She added that the lung association report, which relied on regional data from EPA monitoring, “likely understates the true burden” of pollution in many places.

Such monitoring does not necessarily reflect localized hot spots, meaning people living close to highways or industrial plants “can often be exposed to much higher level of pollution than a report like this captures,” Rice said.

The cities most affected by air pollution

This much is also clear: The burden of polluted air is not evenly distributed around the country.

According to the findings, four of the five cities most polluted by ground-level ozone are all in California, with the Los Angeles and Long Beach area topping the list. Many of the metro areas dealing with the highest levels of fine-particle pollution also are in the West, as well as in states such as Texas and Alaska. Only one city — Bangor, Maine — notched high marks in all of the pollution measures in the report.

The authors underscored that minorities face elevated exposure to air pollution. The report found that a person of color in the United States “is more than twice as likely” than their White counterpart to live in a community dealing with dirty air. Hispanic residents are more than three times as likely to live in communities with failing air quality grades, researchers found.

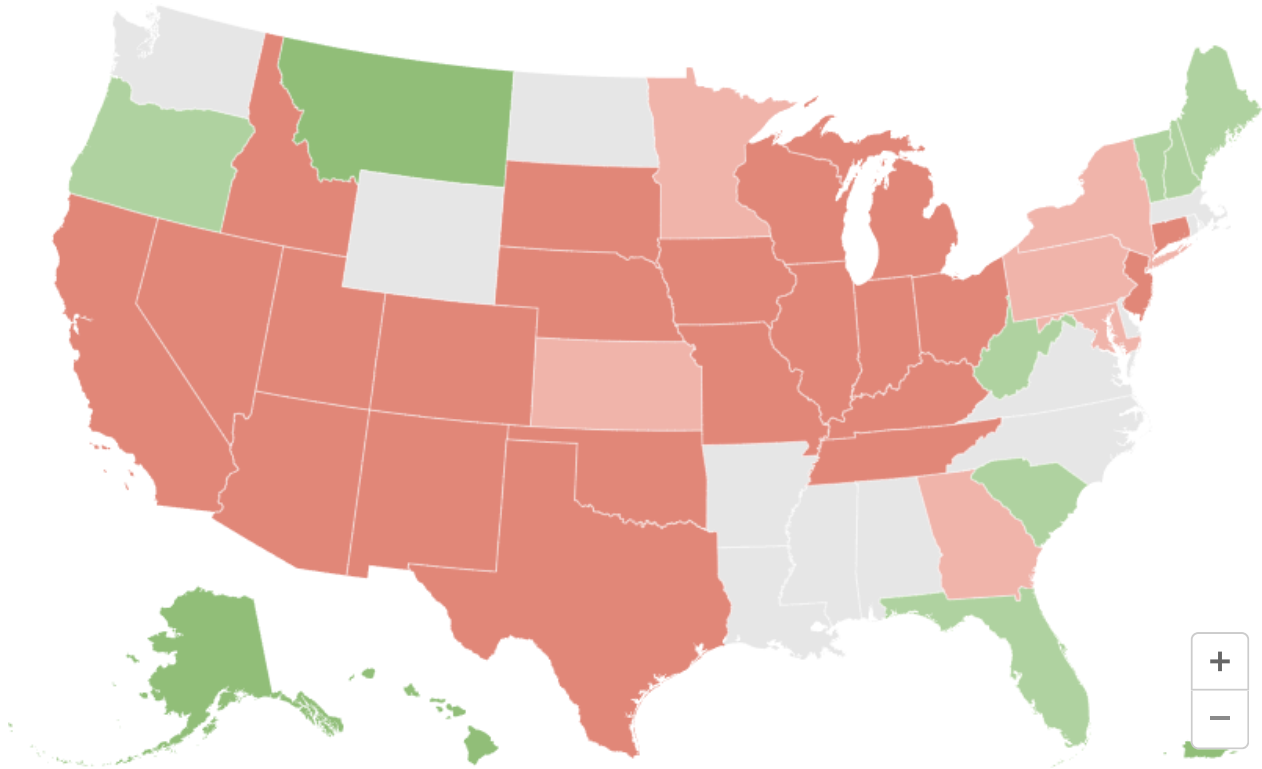
Despite the decades-long trajectory the country has made toward cleaner air, experts say those gains are facing significant challenges in the years ahead.

A growing body of research has documented how extreme heat, prolonged drought and wildfires — all of which are expected to become more frequent as the planet heats — are fueling the pollution and making it more difficult to safeguard public health. One recent study in the journal Nature, for instance, found that cumulative excess deaths from the pollution related to wildfire smoke “could reach 1.9 million between 2026 and 2055.”

“Our research suggests that the health impacts of climate-driven wildfire smoke could be among the most important and costly consequences of a warming climate,” the authors of that study wrote.

Grades based on the number of bad ozone days per year

Grade A B C D F



Annual average days of poor air quality from ozone, weighted by county populations and severity from 2022 to 2024

Source: American Lung Association State of the Air 2026

Will Barrett, the American Lung Association’s assistant vice president for nationwide clean air policy and a contributor to the report, said the changing climate is making it more difficult to control pollution in many places. Not only from wildfires, but also during periods of drought, which can prevent pollution from dissipating, and during extreme heat waves, which he called “a perfect playground” for ozone to form in the atmosphere.

Massive wildfires such as the 2023 blazes that burned huge swaths in Canada and blanketed New York City and other areas with smoke, demonstrate that “there’s no community immune” from the reach of such events, he said.

“The job of keeping our air clean and healthy is more difficult because of our changing climate,” Barrett said.

At the same time, researchers cautioned that because the data underlying Wednesday’s report only goes through 2024, it has yet to reflect any changes that might happen as a result of the ongoing deregulatory push by Trump administration.

Since President Donald Trump took office again in early 2025, the EPA has lifted emissions standards on the nation's cars and trucks, vacated a regulation that sought to impose stricter standards on fine particulate matter, weakened air pollution standards for new power plants, rescinded a landmark legal opinion underpinning federal climate policies and said it would no longer consider the health impacts and resulting economic costs of some of the deadliest pollutants.

The administration has said those moves are part of a broader goal of slashing all sorts of regulations, in an effort to unleash economic growth and promote domestic "energy dominance." But critics argue that not considering the health effects when setting pollution standards will result in worsening air quality and cost thousands of lives over time.

"The impacts of these actions is not yet shown in our data. ... [But] this is going to undermine the hard work that's been taken on the state, local and federal levels for decades," Barrett said. "All of it really points to how fragile the progress is we have made in cleaning up the air."

What readers are saying

The comments express strong criticism of the Trump administration's environmental policies, particularly the perceived dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the impact on air quality. Commenters express frustration with the current political situation,... [Show more](#)

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