

# Air

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fossil fuels in power plants and vehicles, as well as from some chemical emissions.

Measures for both pollutants worsened from the association’s previous report. Canadian wildfires, which in 2023 blanketed the eastern U.S. in a smoky haze, were one contributing factor to the uptick in pollution.

Particle and ozone pollution are both widespread in much of the U.S. and around the world. The report found 125 million people, more than one-third of Americans, “were exposed to levels of ozone that put their health at risk.”

The findings come as the Trump administration has moved to ease regulations on polluters and slash funding for environmental programs and research on climate change — which contributes to unhealthy air quality in the form of extreme heat, drought and wildfires.

“The air pollutants covered in this report are widespread and can impact anyone’s health,” Shannon Baker, advocacy director for the American Lung Association in Kentucky, said in a statement. “Both ozone and particle pollution can cause premature death and other serious health effects such as asthma attacks, heart attacks and strokes, pre-term births and impaired cognitive functioning later in life. Particle pollution can also cause lung cancer.”

### Louisville’s lasting struggle with air quality

Out of more than 200 metropolitan areas, Louisville ranked as the 29th worst for high-ozone days, and the 32nd worst for annual particle pollution.

“Unfortunately, too many people in Louisville are living with unhealthy levels of ozone pollution,” Baker said. “This air pollution is causing kids to have asthma attacks, making people who work outdoors sick and unable to work, and leading to low birth weight in babies. We urge Kentucky policymakers to take action to improve our air quality.”

The American Lung Association estimates tens of thousands of Jefferson County residents suffer from respiratory diseases, from asthma to COPD.

Louisville’s air quality woes are longstanding, and efforts to rein in pollution date back decades. Local and federal



Louisville's abundance of highways contributes to poor local air quality. Interstates cut through many of the city's neighborhoods, bringing vehicle emissions and particle pollution closer to homes. MICHAEL CLEVENGER/COURIER JOURNAL

regulations have resulted in improvements, but the city has still struggled to meet healthy standards.

The Louisville Air Pollution Control District is the agency overseeing these issues locally. Its annual report for 2024 found improvements in long-term air quality, including local emission reductions, but also noted how climate change could hamper progress.

The agency’s 2024 data “largely fits into the ongoing long-term trends of air quality improvement and emissions reductions over the last 20 years, but both 2023 and 2024 have begun to show potential impacts from climate change — like increases in hot, dry weather and events like wildfires — counteracting air quality progress made through local emissions reductions over the last few decades,” according to APCD.

### How air pollution affects health

A wealth of research has linked air pollution to cardiovascular and respiratory disease, shortened life expectancy, fetal and infant mortality, and a wide range of other consequences. Kentucky faces some of the highest rates in the country for some of these conditions, including COPD and lung cancer.

In the U.S., an estimated 100,000 deaths each year are associated with air pollution, including ozone and particle

pollution.

These amount to “substantially more deaths than from murders and car crashes combined,” researchers found, even after substantial improvements in air quality over the last half-century resulting from new regulations under the Clean Air Act.

“Decades of research have firmly established that breathing particle pollution day in and day out can also be deadly,” according to the American Lung Association. “Across numerous seminal studies that looked at different groups of people living in different parts of the country, the results consistently showed a clear relationship between long-term exposure to particulate matter and mortality.”

### ‘Support and defend EPA,’ air quality advocates say

As a large portion of Americans continue to breathe unhealthy air, the American Lung Association called on the federal government to “support and defend” the EPA, which it described as “first and foremost, a public health agency.”

“EPA staff are vital to ensuring that unhealthy levels of air pollution are not just monitored but also cleaned up,” according to the report. “Sweeping staff cuts and reduction of federal funding

are stymying the agency’s ability to ensure that people have clean air to breathe.”

The Trump administration has indicated plans to slash the EPA by 65%, including major reductions in staff, and most recently has targeted environmental justice programs. The administration has also reportedly weighed the firing of more than 1,000 scientists in the agency’s Office of Research and Development, which would likely hamper the EPA’s air monitoring work and the science underpinning air quality standards.

EPA staff working on environmental justice programs — such as aiding communities facing disparate impacts from air pollution — have been fired or reassigned by the Trump administration, which cited the programs as wasteful spending used “to advance ideological priorities, distributing billions of dollars to organizations in the name of climate equity.”

In a textbook example of an environmental justice issue, the American Lung Association report points to inequity in who is affected by unhealthy air: “Although people of color make up 41.2% of the overall population of the U.S., they are 50.2% of the people living in a county with at least one failing grade.”

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