

Lung association says New York has shown tepid improvement in air quality

BY GARRETT DOWNS | 04/21/2021 01:40 PM EDT



Haze covers lower Manhattan skyline. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

The American Lung Association says in a new report that New York has made “mixed progress” in terms of air quality, with the state showing improvement in some areas while retaining failing scores in others.

The association’s State of the Air Report, which showed that all major metropolitan areas in the state maintained failing grades for ozone pollution, or smog, also found that that people of color and impoverished people were more likely to be at risk from polluted air.

It also directly linked poor air quality to increased mortality from Covid-19, as the New York City-Newark metro area rejoined the Top

25 list for most polluted cities in the nation. The culprit is emissions, according to the report, which recommends New York take immediate action to curb them in the state.

New York received a passing grade for particle pollution, also known as soot, in all counties; the Elmira-Corning metro area is only one of two cities listed as a "cleanest city" nationwide.

The breakdown:

Ozone: Despite metropolitan areas still failing in the ozone metric, no county received a worse grade than it did last year.

The Bronx, New York, Westchester, Queens, Richmond and Suffolk remain the most problematic counties, but they showed a slight improvement from last year as they had fewer unhealthy days. Suffolk County remained the worst, tallying 26 unhealthy days last year, according to the report.

Rockland and Putnam counties received a passing score this year, joining Albany, Saratoga, Erie, Niagara, Steuben, Tompkins, Dutchess, Wayne, Onondaga, Herkimer, Essex and Hamilton counties.

Particle pollution: All counties maintained an acceptable grade of A or B on particle pollution, despite some denser counties seeing their grades slip.

Rensselaer, Steuben, Rockland, Westchester, Jefferson, Otsego and Allegany counties all saw a worse grade this year than last year.

Albany, Fulton, Montgomery, Schoharie, Warren, Broome, Cattaraugus, Erie, Tomkins, Richmond, Ontario and Madison counties all saw their grade improve. Chemung County notched the same score as last year.

New York City metro: The metropolitan area that encompasses parts of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut saw a slight improvement in ozone but is still the 14th most polluted region in the country.

After a hiatus last year, the tri-state is back into the Top 25 list for worst particle pollution. This year the region sits at number 20.

Overall, the 22.5 million people that call the region home are still exposed to unhealthy air too frequently.

What it means: While New York has made progress, the Lung Association says the state still has gaping disparities in air quality based on location and race. Nationally, people of color are 61 percent more likely to live in a county with unhealthy air.

“Not only did this year’s report show worsened year-round particle pollution for several metro areas, but it reinforced what we already know: that people of color are significantly more likely to breathe polluted air,” Trevor Summerfield, the association’s director for advocacy in New York, said. “Our elected officials must take bold action now recognizing climate change, and its impact on worsened air pollution, as a serious public health concern.”

Dangerous levels of pollution are being fueled by factories, power plants and tailpipe emissions, which are driving up both ozone and particle pollution, according to the report. The same factors are also driving climate change, which the report says makes it harder to clean up the air.

The association recommends that New York follow up on the proposed Transportation and Climate Initiative, which it says would significantly reduce pollution and improve air quality in heavily-trafficked areas.

The state also has a new impetus to address air quality: the pandemic and its impact on patient's lungs.

“We know that during the COVID-19 pandemic, people across the country are facing multiple threats to their lung health at once, including from unhealthy air pollution. It’s critical to keep looking at the state of our air quality and the things that impact it — like climate change and emissions,” Summerfield said. “We simply must do more to protect and preserve everyone’s right to breathe clean, healthy air and protect themselves from harmful air pollution.”

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