



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

Air Pollution Is a Public Health Crisis That Contributes to Health Disparities

Lisa Shelby Hayward Watts, University of Washington

Air pollution is a major threat to public health worldwide, linked to almost seven million deaths per year, according to the World Health Organization. In Washington State, community members in vulnerable populations considered to be “overburdened” by air pollution live an average of 2.4 years less than people across the rest of Washington, according to a recent report by the Washington Department of Ecology.

Most of the overburdened communities identified by the Department of Ecology are found along major transportation corridors, near industry, and in agricultural areas—locations where economic activities occur that benefit many, but also unduly burden the relatively few who live in their proximity. Moreover, in many cases, these few are more likely to live in poverty, be foreign-born, have no health insurance, and be sicker.