

Nine out of 10 children worldwide live with dangerously high air pollution

By Damian Carrington, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.02.16

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Schoolchildren rally in support of the odd-even formula introduced by the Delhi government for controlling pollution in Janakpuri in New Delhi, India, December 30, 2015. S Burmaula/Hindustan Times via Getty Images

Three hundred million children live in places where the air is dangerously polluted, a new study found. The air they breathe is more than six times as dirty as what is considered safe. Such children face serious health risks.

The new study was carried out by the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF). It shows that 2 billion children live in places with dangerously high air-pollution levels. Altogether, that is 9 out of every 10 children in the world.

UNICEF said air pollution kills 600,000 children a year.

Children are far more likely to be harmed by air pollution than grownups are, UNICEF said. Air pollution can permanently damage children's health. It can also keep their brains from developing properly.

Air Pollution Deaths May Double By 2050

UNICEF said nations must quickly lower their use of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels such as coal and gas are used to power factories and cars. The smoke they give off when burned is the main cause of air pollution.

Air pollution is enormously dangerous, said Anthony Lake, UNICEF's leader. "No society can afford to ignore air pollution. We protect our children when we protect the quality of our air. Both are central to our future."

More than 3 million people a year die because of outdoor air pollution. Such deaths may double by 2050, because of the fast growth of cities. Indoor air pollution causes another 3 million deaths a year. It is mainly caused by stoves that give off smoke.

Children In Poor Countries Are Especially At Risk

Children are especially at risk, UNICEF said. They breathe faster than grownups and their lungs take in more pollution. Air pollution is not only bad for their lungs. It can also affect how their brains develop.

Children in poor countries are doubly at risk, scientist Jos Lelieveld said. Often, their bodies are already weakened by not getting enough to eat. In addition, it can be hard for them to see a doctor.

Worldwide, 300 million children live with levels of pollution six times above what is safe. Of those, 220 million live in South Asia. India in particular has many of the world's most polluted cities.

Another 70 million children living with very polluted air are in East Asia. Most are in China.

However, the problem is also very bad in Africa. In fact, more children there live in areas with high pollution levels, even if the levels are not as high as in Asia. Altogether, 520 million African children are at risk.

New Clean Air Laws Are Needed

Air pollution is worse in the world's poorer nations. In these countries, almost no cities have clean air.

However, over half the cities in rich countries also have air pollution problems. In Europe, 120 million children live in areas with unsafe levels of air pollution. Twenty million European children live in areas where air pollution is two times above safe levels.

Dr. Penny Woods runs the British Lung Foundation. In the United Kingdom, "children's health is being put at risk every day," she said. Many cities and towns have "unsafe levels of pollution." At least 3,000 British schools are in areas with dangerously high levels of pollution.

Britain needs new clean air laws to "protect all our health," Woods said.

UNICEF said countries must quickly cut down on fossil fuel burning. It also said schools and playgrounds should not be located near busy roads or factories.