

# Air Pollution Is Yet Another Issue That Disproportionately Impacts Minority And Low-Income Communities

10/09/2016 12:45 pm ET

Georges C. Benjamin, MD Executive Director of the American Public Health Association



CHRIS MADDALONI VIA GETTY IMAGES

First responders are trained to give people immediate life-saving care and get people out of dangerous situations. When a patient is suffering an asthma attack that's caused by air pollution in their community, we can administer drugs to calm the attack, but we know it is only a temporary fix. To reduce the risk over the long term, we must improve the quality of the air in our communities.

This month the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit will begin to review the Clean Power Plan. The plan, created by President Obama to reduce carbon pollution from power plants, will decrease other harmful emissions as well. In communities already bearing the burden of pollution from nearby coal plants, we see many health impacts from the pollution ranging from increased rates of asthma and respiratory disease to lower life expectancy. These ailments are especially prevalent in the low-income and minority communities where coal plants are often sited.

Coal-fired power plants contribute to dangerous soot and smog, which compromises air quality for us all, but especially for anyone who lives nearby. In the U.S., these plants disproportionately harm African-American and Latino communities. A startling 71 percent of African-Americans live in counties that violate federal air pollution standards and 68 percent of African-Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant. Hispanics are also 165 percent more likely to live in counties with unhealthy levels of power plant pollution than non-Latino whites and nearly 2 in 5 Latinos live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant.

An estimated 24 million Americans suffer from asthma, and minority communities are particularly at risk. African-American children are 4 times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma, and 7.1 times more likely to die from asthma than white children. Hispanics are 60 percent more likely to visit the hospital for asthma compared to non-Hispanic whites.

Emissions from coal power plants are not only connected with near-term suffering and sickness, they also contribute to climate change. Coal-fired power plants are the largest source of climate-changing carbon emissions in the U.S. Physicians in vulnerable communities today are already seeing their patients' health worsened by climate change and the harmful emissions from coal power plants. For example, climate change increases the risk of extreme heat events and extreme heat stroke, among other health impacts. Many

cities, including St. Louis, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Cincinnati, have seen large increases in death rates during heat waves in recent years.

**African-American children are 4 times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma, and 7.1 times more likely to die from asthma than white children.**

Just as we use seat belts to reduce the risk of injury in a car crash, we can prevent or lessen health threats from climate change. By putting the U.S. on a new track to clean energy, the Clean Power Plan is expected to prevent 3,600 premature deaths, 90,000 asthma attacks in children, and 300,000 missed work and school days every year by 2030. It will also produce an estimated \$54 billion in public health and climate benefits per year by 2030 - benefits we will lose if the Clean Power Plan is not implemented. By 2030, the Clean Power Plan is projected to reduce carbon pollution by 870 million tons – an amount that will reduce health impacts and help uphold America's share of the Paris Agreement.

The health impacts of coal power plants are unequivocal and the Clean Power Plan presents an important path forward. As the debate unfolds in the courts, medical and public health practitioners will continue to assist vulnerable communities threatened by poor air quality and climate change.

We hope the courts uphold the Clean Power Plan. It's a smart intervention that will protect our communities and keep everyone healthy.

*Georges C. Benjamin, MD, is executive director of the American Public Health Association*