

# Dirty Air

Latinos are risking their health with every breath they take, disproportionately shouldering the burden of a worldwide problem—air pollution.

October 4, 2011 By Cristina Gonzalez

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It's a natural, subconscious act: breathing—a sign of life, a cleansing moment, a healthy pause. But not every breath you take is restorative. In fact, for many Latinos, every breath puts them at a higher risk of asthma, bronchitis, cardiovascular disease—even death. The invisible culprit? Air pollution.

Currently, one out of two Latinos in the United States live in a county that frequently violates air quality standards, and more than 23 million Latinos face higher health risks because of it, according to “U.S. Latinos and Air Pollution: A Call to Action,” a report written by members of the National Resources Defense Council, the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change, the Center for American Progress, and the National Wildlife Federation.

The report outlines how Latinos, the fastest growing minority group in the nation, are also the largest population living in the 191 metropolitan districts that have the highest concentration of pollutants. Coupled with disparities in health (such as culturally irrelevant health information and a lack of health insurance), socioeconomic status and community culture, Latinos are disproportionately feeling the ill effects of dirty air. Here, we present a breakdown of the report.

## The Pollutants

Every person is exposed to carbon, lead, nitrogen oxide, soot and countless other pollutants on a daily basis. However, as the report highlights, three pollutants—smog, mercury pollution and particulate matter—most seriously affect the Latino community.

### Smog

Ozone is a naturally occurring colorless gas. It is an important and helpful component of the upper atmosphere, but at ground level, it can combine with emissions from gasoline, industrial chemicals, dry cleaning solvents and other hazardous products to form smog. In urban areas, at least half of smog makeup comes from cars, buses and trucks.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 48 percent of all Latinos live in

counties that frequently violate ground level ozone standards, standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to maintain healthy air. In fact, the largest Latino communities are found in Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, Nevada and Texas—states with the country’s worst ozone pollution. That means that nearly one out of every two Latinos live in the most ozone polluted cities in the nation.

This translates to 23 million Latinos at higher risk for asthma, bronchitis, respiratory diseases and even death. The risks increase when people spend time outdoors, working or playing. And since many Latinos work in trades that require them to be outside, such as construction or agriculture, they are at even higher risk.

## **Mercury Pollution**

Mercury is a neurotoxin found in air, waterways and food, and it has the potential to damage the brain, heart, kidneys, lungs and immune system. Most of the man-made mercury in the United States comes from power plants that convert coal into electricity. Once in the air, mercury hangs in the atmosphere until it’s transported back to the ground and water through rain.

Again, studies have shown that Latinos suffer from mercury pollution more than other groups. A 2000 CDC study found that on average, Latino children have higher levels of mercury in their bodies compared with white children. Why? A Sierra Club poll found that one third of Latinos in the United States fish in freshwater lakes where mercury pollution levels are higher than in the ocean, and that 76 percent of people who fish also share their catch with friends and family.

In addition, a 2004 study by the League of United Latin American Citizens found that 39 percent of Latinos live within 30 miles of a power plant. Latinos living in these communities directly feel the impact of the pollution.

## **Particulate Matter**

Particulate matter, or particle pollution, comes from a few different sources including smoke from factories, burning fossil fuels (like coal, oil, diesel and gasoline), dirt and dust from roads, toxic compounds, and metals. Studies have shown a link between particle pollution and increased risk or frequency of cardiovascular disease, emergency room visits, birth defects and rates of death.

Particle pollution is thicker in industrial areas and near major highways. And since neighborhoods in these areas are predominately Latino, Latinos bear the brunt of particle pollution.

## **Taking Action**

For personal and public health, for the environment and for the future, it is imperative to help clean up the dirty air that surrounds us and to move away from a pollution-based economy. It is also imperative for Latinos to understand their risks and to get involved in establishing health as a priority.

The report's authors outline specific steps they'd like to see taken. First, they call on the U.S. government, especially the EPA and the Office of Minority Health, to fund studies of respiratory illness in Latino and minority communities. Next, they call on state health departments and environmental agencies to establish programs that will inform Latinos about the dangers of air pollution and the ways they can reduce their risks. Finally, they call on the government to enact statutes or pass laws that minimize environmental damage—for example, maintaining mercury and air pollutions standards and ensuring that factories use the latest technologies to capture toxic emissions.

The report also encourages Latinos to get involved. In 2008, a Sierra Club poll showed that 51 percent of Latinos stated air and water pollution was the most important environmental problem they faced. And according to a 2010 poll by the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change, a majority of Latinos believe that switching to clean energy goes hand in hand with a good economy.

While it is impossible to wash away the pollutants in the air overnight, it is possible to be aware of your risks and be proactive about your health—for yourself and for your family. For more information, check out the [full report here](#).

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