

Even With Pandemic Shutdowns, Air Pollution Remains High in Minority Neighborhoods

While majority-white communities saw cleaner air throughout much of 2020 and 2021, Black and brown populations have not been so fortunate.

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Early in the spring of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, news outlets reported a rare silver lining amid the global health crisis: With fewer cars on the streets, many neighborhoods in the country seemed to be experiencing less smog and less overall [pollution](#).

However, a new study looking beyond anecdotal evidence suggests the phenomenon might have benefited only white, affluent communities, while poorer Black and brown neighborhoods continue to face major [environmental health burdens](#) despite global shutdowns, [ABC News reports](#).

Led by researchers at George Washington University, the study analyzed pollution levels faced by various demographics in 15 cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Detroit throughout 2020 and 2021. In particular, scientists were interested in local levels of nitrogen dioxide, a traffic-related air pollutant that research has linked to [community-wide health impacts](#) such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease and preterm births.

What they found was that although pollution levels decreased overall throughout urban areas during the pandemic's peak, nitrogen dioxide levels remained elevated in primarily Black and brown communities, compared with levels in predominantly white neighborhoods. This held true when comparing income and education levels across various communities; however, the study's authors noted that the divide was steepest when the data were broken down by race and ethnicity.

"When we look at the history of the U.S. in the 20th century, going all the way back to the days of redlining, a lot of the ways that our urban areas were constructed, where highway interstates are, which neighborhoods are located by certain industries, that is [years and years of racism](#) that's again woven into the fabric of cities," said Gaige Kerr, Phd, lead author of the study and a scientist in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health at George Washington University.

To remedy the disparity, researchers are calling for broad policy changes to help address

environmental risks and curb pollution in places at high risk. Kerr, for example, suggests rerouting heavy trucks out of Black and brown neighborhoods and supporting greener public transportation options in cities.

To learn more about how air pollution disproportionately impacts people of color in the United States, read "[Dirty Air.](#)"

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