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COVID-19 Shows how No One is Immune from Converging Health Crises

Latest Lancet data finds that millions of lives can be saved with climate action

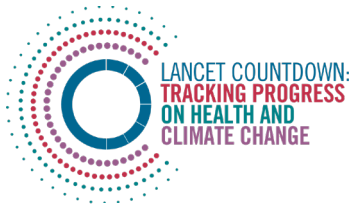
Each year, the Lancet Countdown tracks more than 43 indicators on links between health and climate change and this year presents the most worrying outlook to date as key trends worsen. However, the latest report finds that with climate action, the lives of millions can be improved and saved.

Examining how climate change, air quality, and COVID-19 worsen Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) racial health inequities, the U.S. Brief makes clear that these challenges can't be treated in isolation. Report authors advocate for a holistic response to these converging crises, stressing that integrated solutions can deliver better public health, a sustainable economy, environmental protection and a more equitable society.

No country remains immune from the health impacts of worsening climate change today, according to the global 2020 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate, published in *The Lancet*. The project is a collaboration of more than 100 experts from 35 global institutions including the World Health Organization, World Bank, University College London, and Tsinghua University.

Top findings on the converging crises from this year's [U.S. Policy Brief](#) include:

- **Air pollution is killing Americans.** More than 68,000 people died prematurely in the U.S. from air pollution in 2018. Nearly 25,000 of those deaths are from particulate (PM 2.5) pollution generated by agriculture and transportation.
- **Your zip code determines your health.** The Brief examines how climate change further exacerbates existing racial health inequalities that exist because of ongoing discriminatory practices. Early research suggests that exposure to air pollution may make people more susceptible to severe cases of COVID-19, and thus could be part of the reason more BIPOC people are dying from the virus than white people.
- **In addition to air pollution, heat also creates deadly conditions:** In 2019, the U.S. experienced over 102 million more days of heatwave exposure (compared with a 1986-



2005 baseline) affecting older persons (adults over 65). In the past two decades, heat has killed twice as many older people, reaching a record high 19,000 deaths in 2018. The U.S. saw 2 billion potential hours of labor lost due to extreme heat across the service, manufacturing, agricultural, and construction sectors in 2019.

- **Wildfire risk is increasing.** Individuals in the U.S. experienced 1.85 billion more person-days (one person experiencing one day) of exposure to high wildfire risk in 2016-2019 compared to 2001-2004.
- **Life-threatening bacteria is increasing in coastal waters.** The suitability of coastal waters for growth of *Vibrio* bacteria has increased by as much as 99% in the Northeast over the past five years.

Unless we take urgent action to tackle climate change, the Global Report's 120 world-leading health and climate academics and clinicians, and the 70 U.S. institutions, organizations and centers supporting the U.S. Brief, warn that an ever-hotter world will likely produce shocks which threaten global health, disrupt lives and livelihoods and overwhelm healthcare systems. This is especially dangerous when healthcare crises like COVID converge with climate change.

The 2020 Lancet Countdown U.S. Policy Brief & Appendix can be found here:

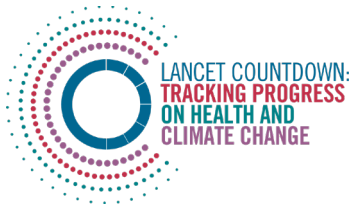
<https://www.lancetcountdownus.org/2020-lancet-countdown-u-s-brief/>

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ABOUT THE LANCET COUNTDOWN

The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change is a comprehensive yearly global analysis tracking the impact of climate change on human health across 41 key indicators. The report also projects the health benefits that would come from meeting the Paris Agreement targets, and the health harms of business as usual. The project is a collaboration of more than 100 experts from 35 global institutions including the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, University College London, and Tsinghua University.

The 43 indicators are organized across five categories: 1) climate change impacts, exposures and vulnerabilities; 2) adaptation planning and resilience for health; 3) mitigation actions and health co-benefits; 4) economics and finance; and 5) public and political engagement.



AUTHOR QUOTES

Renee Salas, **lead author of the U.S. Lancet Countdown Policy Brief and practicing emergency medicine doctor:**

“This past year, we have seen the harms of our converging crises - COVID-19, climate disasters, and systemic racism; it's been a preview of what lies ahead if we fail to urgently make the necessary investments to protect health.”

“Just like in my emergency department, I can’t take one health problem and place it in isolation because one insult on the body creates new problems and worsens old ones. We must take an integrated approach when tackling these challenges. Climate action is the prescription we need for better health and equity as we emerge from this pandemic.”

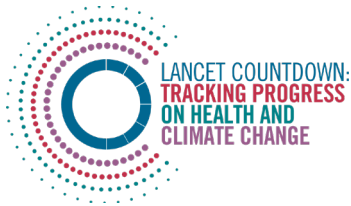
Dr. Jeremy Hess, **author on both the global report and US Brief:**

“We are seeing climate change impacts on health and productivity from heat, wildfires, flooding, and other hazards, and our health systems are not well prepared. In the US, we see clear evidence of how certain communities are more burdened by pre-existing inequities. We have a great opportunity in the recovery from the pandemic to address our vulnerabilities and increase our resilience to the stresses that climate is sure to continue to bring.”

Additional Quotes from U.S. Working Group Members and Supporters

“The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change has proven to be the single most useful resource to engage our students and faculty around the need to integrate climate change and health in our medical school curriculum” - **J. Harry Isaacson, MD; Executive Dean of Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine**

“The findings of the 2020 Lancet Countdown US Brief provide even more evidence that the climate crisis threatens public health in the US. The many especially vulnerable groups include pregnant people. The US government should increase funding for efforts addressing the impact of climate change on human health and cities, states, and Indigenous tribes



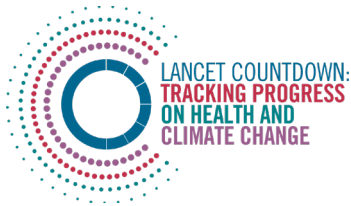
should also ensure that their programming to prepare for climate impacts on human health includes pregnancy health and addresses reproductive injustice because of racism and poverty.” **Skye Wheeler, Senior Researcher, women’s rights division, Human Rights Watch.**

“This report shows that climate impacts are no longer future projections; we are seeing how they harm the health of Americans today. Despite widespread calls for a green recovery, the US government has so far directed the majority of its energy-related recovery funds toward supporting fossil fuels, on top of existing subsidies. These trends must be reversed to protect the public from the health-damaging effects of air pollution and climate change caused by fossil fuel production and use.” **Dr. Ploy Achakulwisut, Scientist, Stockholm Environment Institute, U.S. Center.**

The Biden Transition Team needs these Lancet Countdown results ASAP as a roadmap to, not only build back better in the U.S., but to do so using human health as the clear rationale for a clean energy economy,” **says Jonathan Patz, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor.** “A rapid departure from fossil fuels offers enormous health and economic benefits, especially from widespread chronic diseases, ” **Patz adds.**

“The air we breathe today is much cleaner than it was 50 years ago, and our lungs are healthier as a result. But climate change is threatening this progress, and many communities – particularly communities of color – are still living with unhealthy air. The Lancet Countdown shows that climate change is an immediate danger to health and underscores the urgency of policies that reduce both air and climate pollution at the same time for all communities.” **Harold Wimmer, President and CEO, American Lung Association**

“Environmental justice communities experience a range of adverse environmental conditions, which are influenced by the injustice of living in contaminated areas and are exacerbated by worsening climate change. We know all too well that these communities are affected first and worst, and this includes being ravaged—more than the general population—by extreme weather due to climate change. Scientific research shows the novel coronavirus disproportionately affects Black, Latinx and Indigenous people. The disproportionate exposure of these populations to environmental pollutants may further increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes—including death—should people from environmental justice communities test positive for COVID-19. The underlying root of these issues is systemic racism. Together, racism, climate change and COVID-19 have come together to underscore how fragile and dangerous conditions are for communities of color. This ‘syndemic’—the culmination of systemic racism, climate change and COVID-19—requires a swift, all-encompassing response. As public health professionals, policy makers, scientists and community leaders, we must urgently act



to protect these populations that have historically been harmed, let down or ignored in this country.” **Adrienne L. Hollis, PhD, JD - Senior Climate Justice and Health Scientist, The Union of Concerned Scientists**

“This year’s Lancet Countdown is the latest warning that the U.S. is going in the wrong direction on climate change and health. But it’s not too late to change course. The Biden/Harris administration should seize this opportunity to embrace the knowledge, expertise, and passion of the American public health and healthcare community. Together, we can build back a healthier, more equitable, and climate-resilient nation.” **Dr. Kim Knowlton, Senior Scientist, Natural Resources Defense Council**

“Whether it’s the spread of viruses and infectious diseases, heat exposure, or wildfires, the 2020 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change U.S. Policy Brief shows how climate change makes communities and health care systems more vulnerable. The Brief lays out how climate action across sectors will lead to major environmental and public health gains.” - **Brittany Shea, Project Director, Global Consortium on Climate & Health Education, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health**