Billions of People Could Live Years Longer If Policymakers Reduce Air Pollution: Study

A child wears a face mask in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia due to air pollution from peat fires. (Photo: CIFOR/Flickr/cc)

By Julia Conley | Common Dreams

A new study released Wednesday by researchers at the University of Chicago showed that air pollution is cutting short the average global citizen’s life by more than two years, with people in parts of the world dying as many as eight years earlier than they would without exposure to pollution.

The burning of coal is the biggest driver of deadly air pollution, according to the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI), and
people in countries around the world could live longer lives if policymakers drastically reduced fossil fuel emissions and ensured exposure to pollution was kept below the amount deemed acceptable by the World Health Organization.

“The combustion of the same fossil fuels that release life-threatening air pollution also involves the release of greenhouse gases that increase the odds of disruptive climate change.” —AQLI

In India, the average person could live six years longer if pollution from some of the smallest particulate matter (PM 2.5) was reduced to acceptable levels. In the northern part of the country—home to 248 million people—life expectancy would increase by eight years.

More than 500 million people in places including Nepal, Peru, and Indonesia would live an average of five years longer if their governments were to comply with the guidelines, and more than one billion people would live at least three years longer on average.

“There is no greater current risk to human health” than air pollution, said Prof. Michael Greenstone of the university’s Energy Policy Institute, who led the study.

The research revealed “very worrying data,” Kwame McKenzie of the health policy charity Wellesley Institute said.

This is very worrying data. We need to move quicker on greening our cities to decrease air pollution and save lives. Air pollution has a bigger impact on life expectancy than smoking ... https://t.co/H1oUZZMrrU

— Kwame McKenzie (@kwame_mckenzie) September 1, 2021

PM 2.5 pollution shortens more lives around the globe than smoking, unsafe water, and poor sanitation, car accidents, and
HIV/AIDS, according to the research. The WHO recommends that atmospheric levels of PM 2.5—a fine matter which can travel down the respiratory tracts and into the lungs and even the bloodstream if a person is exposed—are limited to 10 micrograms per cubic meter. The researchers found that the average global citizen is exposed to concentrations of 32 micrograms per cubic meter. The researchers noted that relatively little attention has been paid to the public health threat posed by air pollution around the world, particularly in parts of the Global South where policymakers and NGOs are focused on other public health crises:

The health discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa has centered on infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. About 10% of health expenditures in the region go towards combating HIV/AIDS or malaria. However, a comparison shows that particulate pollution’s impact on life expectancy is no less serious. In Nigeria, air pollution is second only to HIV/AIDS in terms of its impact on life expectancy—shaving off more years than malaria and water and sanitation concerns. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is second only to malaria. In Ghana, it ranks as the deadliest of these threats, while in Cote d’Ivoire it shortens life by about the same amount as those communicable diseases.

The researchers emphasized that it’s within policymakers’ control to improve pollution levels and life expectancy, as China has in recent years. The country has reduced pollution levels by nearly 30% since 2013 and has added 1.5 years to the average life expectancy.

In the U.S., the study says, air pollution was reduced by about 66% since the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970, and Americans’ life expectancy has gone up since then by 1.6 years.

“The improvements that China was able to bring about in such a short period of time: six or seven years or so,” Kenneth Lee, director of the AQLI, told The Hill. “Whereas, it took decades for the U.S. to make those changes.”

In the U.S., the researchers noted, a feedback loop has emerged in recent years as wildfires fueled by the climate crisis have grown larger and more common.

“In the U.S., millions have been adversely affected by
hazardous wildfire smoke during the severe western wildfire seasons of the past few years,” Axios reported. “On Tuesday, as a veil of smoke could be seen on satellite imagery enshrouding areas from Nevada to Nebraska, for example.” “The combustion of the same fossil fuels that release life-threatening air pollution also involves the release of greenhouse gases that increase the odds of disruptive climate change,” according to the report.

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