West Louisville Deserves Clean Air—and a Longer Life

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West Louisville's 60,000 residents deserve the same opportunity for a long, healthy life as their neighbors across town. Yet industrial pollution continues to threaten the community's health, housing, and economic future. Our elected leaders have the tools to change that. What they need is the determination to act.

Our research finds that West Louisville bears roughly six times the industrial pollution burden of East Louisville—about 75,000 pounds of reported releases compared with 12,000. CDC neighborhood estimates reveal equally troubling health disparities. High blood pressure is about twice as prevalent in some western neighborhoods; diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and other serious conditions are substantially more common. In some comparisons, rates are several times higher. Children face challenges, too: nearly half of third-graders in West Louisville fall below proficiency standards on academic tests. Perhaps most disturbing, life expectancy in some western neighborhoods is as much as 16 years shorter than in more prosperous eastern ones.

These disparities cannot all be attributed to pollution alone. Poverty, unequal access to health care, housing conditions, and other disadvantages matter. But hazardous emissions are a preventable burden, and reducing them should be a public-health priority. Planting trees and opening a hospital may provide real benefits; neither substitutes for preventing harmful exposures at their source.

Our research team is also examining whether neighborhoods with heavier pollution experience higher rates of birth defects, autism, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, and miscarriages. Those questions require careful investigation, not premature conclusions. Meanwhile, industrial emissions contribute to a larger crisis: climate change. Environmental journalists James Bruggers and Phil McKenna reported that one Louisville chemical plant's greenhouse-gas emissions were equivalent to those of approximately 671,000 automobiles. That comparison alone should command public attention.

The former Kentucky Institute for the Environment and Sustainable Development (KIESD) and Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods (SUN) investigated the intertwined challenges of pollution, climate change, and community well-being. Their work reminds us that environmental damage can intensify the dangers posed by heat waves, fires, floods, and severe storms. Globally, pollution is associated with eight million premature deaths annually. These are not abstract statistics; they represent families and neighborhoods paying a human price.

There is reason for hope—and a Louisville example worth repeating. In a partnership involving KIESD and a local chemical company, a roughly $3 million pollution-control demonstration reportedly reduced targeted cancer-causing emissions by 90 percent through improved filtration equipment. The company funded the project. University researchers, government representatives, and business leaders worked together to solve a problem rather than merely debate it. That is the kind of practical, measurable achievement West Louisville needs more of.

Instead, public discussion too often treats tree planting and health-care construction as sufficient responses. A reported $67 million investment in trees and a $90 million hospital may have merits of their own. But trees cannot switch off an industrial smokestack, and a hospital cannot undo every

exposure that makes patients sick. Prevention must stand alongside treatment and neighborhood investment, not behind them.

We also need public access to environmental research. The University of Louisville's former award-winning centers are closed, and much of their research is no longer available on university websites. Restoring access would help residents, journalists, policymakers, and independent scientists evaluate the evidence and demand accountability.

West Louisville does not have to accept shorter lives as the price of doing business. We call on government and industry to measure emissions transparently, enforce meaningful pollution controls, invest in proven prevention, and give residents a voice in decisions affecting their health. The question is not whether Louisville knows how to reduce pollution. We have already shown that it can. The question is whether we will make the health of 60,000 people the priority it deserves.

About the authors

Learn more at sunlouisville.org. A forthcoming docudrama inspired by John Hans Gilderbloom's book, Climate Chaos: Killing People, Places, and the Planet, is planned for release in 2027; see climateofhopefilm.org and is Senior Fellow of Global Urban Development in Berkeley, California. The authors contributed to the book. Stephen A. Roosa is editor-in-chief of the International Journal of Strategic Energy and Environmental Planning and author of "Tracking the Transition From Fossil Fuels to Clean Energy." Snyder is executive producer of Climate of Hope and head up 90,000 Feet in Phoenix, Marc Weiss, President and CEO of Global Urban Development in Berek. Cary Lowe is a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Chad Frederick is a professor of urban geography and sustainable planning at Grand Valley State University. Jeffrey Wigand, a former tobacco executive whose story was portrayed in the movie, "The Insider" and in "60 Minutes" The books are available through Amazon and at Carmichael's.