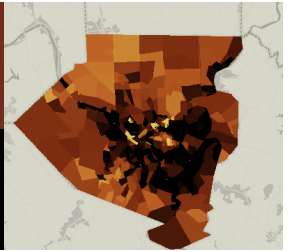


Industrial Equity Mapper: Stories of Industrial Pollution in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania



Industry and Community Background

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, nestled in the Appalachian region, boasts a storied industrial heritage. Historically, Allegheny County saw waves of immigration during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe and Black Americans from the rural South. This influx of diverse populations shaped neighborhoods and cultural enclaves across Pittsburgh and its surrounding areas.

Earning it the nickname “Steel City,” Allegheny County was home to some of the nation’s largest steel mills, including the iconic U.S. Steel’s Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock and the Homestead Steel Works in Munhall. These facilities were instrumental in meeting the country’s burgeoning demand for steel and defined the region’s economic and social fabric.

Coal mining operations, concentrated in areas like the Monongahela Valley and along the Ohio River, provided essential raw materials for steel production and fueled the region’s industrial growth. However, the decline of heavy industry in the latter half of the 20th century brought significant challenges. Automation, overseas competition, and shifting economic priorities led to many steel mills and associated industries closing. Many Black American communities, drawn initially to Allegheny County by industrial jobs, faced disproportionate impacts from deindustrialization, including job losses and economic disinvestment in their neighborhoods.

While the towering structures of Edgar Thompson Steel Works once symbolized economic vitality, they present a stark contrast today. The loss of

Industrial Impacts: Allegheny County

Count of Facilities

11

Tons CO₂e

4M

Tons Carcinogenic Chemicals

41K

Residents

1.2M

PM_{2.5}

9.9

▲ National Average: 12

Ozone

45

▲ National Average: 43

Cancer Risk from Stationary Facilities

3,213

▲ National Average: 36

houses and businesses represents a dramatic decline.

Today, youth in the community face systemic barriers, including limited safe spaces and heightened policing, which perpetuate cycles of violence and disempowerment. The youth often have nothing to do and lack safe spaces to go to, highlighting the struggles young people face in seeking opportunities for growth and development.

The community's efforts to maintain itself face disproportionate challenges, exacerbated by stagnant wages and strained local budgets, impacting the ability to maintain and build critical infrastructure and programs, further hindering community development.

Impacts on Health and Environment



Health Impacts: Exposure to industrial pollutants has been associated with respiratory diseases, cardiovascular ailments, and higher incidences of

certain cancers among residents living in proximity to industrial sites. Community members have expressed concerns about the health impacts, highlighting asthma rates among children as a significant concern. Despite its limited resources, the Allegheny County Health Department is responsible for addressing health impacts from industrial pollution. However, more health inspectors are needed to manage the scale of the problem.



Environmental Impacts: Allegheny County's industrial footprint, particularly during the peak of steel production, had significant environmental

consequences.¹ The once-thriving steel mills and associated industrial sites emitted particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, and heavy metals. These emissions not only degraded air quality but also contaminated soil and water sources, posing long-term risks to public health and ecosystem integrity.



Community Impacts: Community members interviewed vividly described the environmental changes they've witnessed over generations. Residents

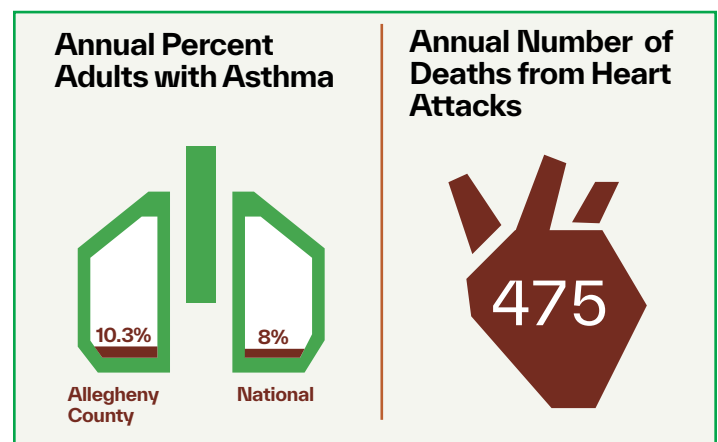
recall how the closure of nearby steel mills led to visible improvements in air quality but left behind contaminated sites.

Industrial facilities are often run into the ground to increase profits, racking up constant violations. Industries build the payment of fines into their budgets, treating these penalties as a cost of doing business while continuing practices of total extraction of the local economy. They use outdated technologies, perpetuating environmental degradation and public health risks. Residents say this exploitation is linked to the legacy of colonization and racism.

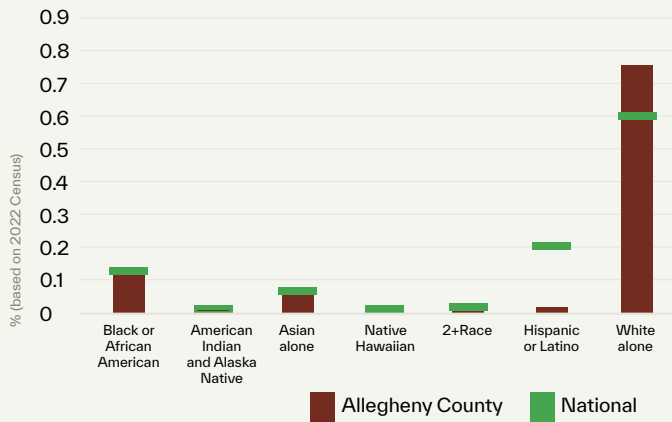
Advocacy, Community Organizations and Vision

The vision for Allegheny County's future is rooted in transforming the community into a vibrant, healthy, and equitable place to live. Residents envision neighborhoods reminiscent of places like Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh—lively and welcoming, where families can enjoy the natural landscape without the shadow of industrial pollution. They desire an environment where health concerns about the mills are a thing of the past and the air is clean and safe for everyone.

Community members believe the current political leadership needs to have the necessary vision and ambition. Instead of focusing on superficial efforts like cleanup days, they need leaders who think outside the box, proactively seek available funding, and drive comprehensive and transformative change.



Racial Breakdown – U.S. Census 2022



Of nearly 1.2 million residents living in Allegheny County, **23%** identify as Black, indigenous, and other people of color

Women for a Healthy Environment (WHE)² plays a crucial role by conducting healthy home assessments to identify and mitigate environmental exposures, particularly in older homes in areas like McKeesport. WHE focuses on reducing indoor environmental hazards, such as lead.

Valley Clean Air Now (VCAN)³ is another key player in distributing air filters and raising awareness about the community benefits trust fund. VCAN seeks greater community involvement, encouraging more people to join committees focused on air filters, health studies, and fundraising. There is also a push for more conversations about green spaces, urban agriculture, and the healing power of growing food and herbs.

Several other organizations, including [GASP](#) and the [BREATHE Project](#), continue to contribute to these efforts. Residents believe in the power of collective action—whether through signing petitions, attending events, or writing letters—stressing that the more voices join the movement, the greater the potential for meaningful change.

Looking ahead, community members are actively working on projects that align with their long-term vision. One such initiative is renovating the General Sisters building into an air and food hub for the neighborhood. This space will include garden areas, reading rooms, community meeting spaces, and facilities for monitoring air quality. It will also serve as a venue for sharing stories and information, hosting discussions about community values, and strategizing ways to prevent the area from being treated as a sacrifice zone.

There is a strong sense of hope and determination. Residents are committed to building a future where the legacies of industrial pollution and economic extraction no longer mar Allegheny County.

1. David Masur, Penn Environment (2022), [Allegheny County's Toxic Ten](#)
2. [Women for a Health Environment](#)
3. [Valley CAN](#)

For more information, contact us at equitymapper@industriouslabs.org and visit the tool at industrialequitymapper.org

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