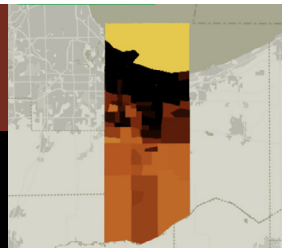


# Industrial Equity Mapper: Stories of Industrial Pollution in Lake County, Indiana



## Industry and Community Background

Heavy industry began moving into Lake County, Indiana, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Also, many Eastern European immigrants settled in the area during this time.<sup>2</sup> The significant industrialization of the region can be traced back to the establishment of the United States Steel Corporation's Gary Works in 1906. This massive steel mill complex, situated along the southern shore of Lake Michigan, was a pivotal development that spurred rapid industrial growth in Gary and its surrounding areas.<sup>3</sup>

In Lake County, Indiana, particularly around the Calumet region and cities like Gary, Hammond, and East Chicago, the history of Black immigration and segregation is deeply intertwined with the

industrial and social dynamics of the area. Many Black Americans migrated from the Jim Crow South, seeking better opportunities and escaping violence. Despite economic opportunities, racial segregation was pervasive in Lake County through practices like redlining. Schools, public facilities, and even workplaces were segregated, reflecting broader racial divides in American society.

In addition to steel production, other heavy industries such as oil refining, chemical manufacturing, and transportation infrastructure (including railroads and ports) also played significant roles in the industrial development of Gary and Lake County throughout the early to mid-20th century.<sup>4</sup>

## Industrial Impacts: Lake County, Indiana

Count of Facilities

13

Tons CO<sub>2</sub>e

21M

Tons Carcinogenic  
Chemicals

73K

Residents

500K

PM2.5

9.8

▲ National Average: 12

Ozone

44

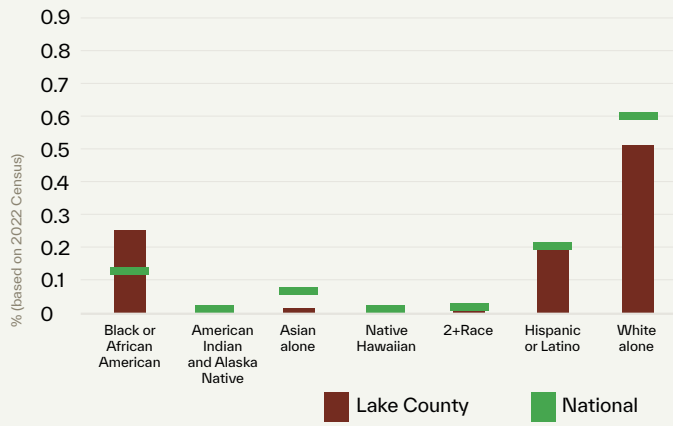
▲ National Average: 43

Cancer Risk from  
Stationary Facilities

360

▲ National Average: 36

## Racial Breakdown – U.S. Census 2022



Of nearly 500,000 residents living in Lake County, 48% identify as Black, indigenous, and other people of color

For decades, the area has been home to some of the largest and oldest industrial sites in the country:

- **BP Refinery in Hammond/East Chicago:** The largest inland refinery in the United States and the oldest active refinery in the country.
- **U.S. Steel in Gary:** Once a massive employer, it remains a critical part of the local industrial landscape.
- **Federated Metals Superfund Site in Whiting/Hammond:** A former smelting plant now recognized as a hazardous waste site.
- **Carmeuse Lime in Gary:** A plant that produces lime for cement and steel industries.
- **ArcelorMittal Steel Mill in Riverdale:** The last remaining steel mill on the Calumet River.

Population declines due to economic downturns in the steel industry have strained infrastructure maintenance efforts. This decline has disproportionately affected lower-income residents and people of color. Long-time residents recall the sulfur smells from refineries, the sight of flare stacks emitting black and white smoke, and the constant sounds of bustling industrial operations. For many, the lack of clean air and water was normalized until more recent efforts brought attention to environmental justice issues.

One poignant event was the outcry sparked by a photo of children crossing train tracks to get to school, highlighting concerns about industrial proximity to community sites like schools.<sup>5</sup>

## Impacts on Health and Environment

The extensive industrial activity in Lake County has had severe environmental and health impacts:



**Health Impacts:** Residents report high rates of asthma and cancer, although definitive studies linking these to industrial pollution are lacking. They also report lower birth rates and cardiovascular disease.

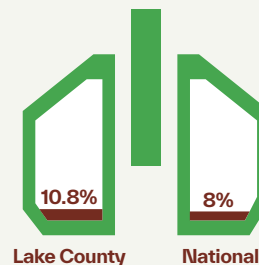


**Environmental Impacts:** The region has a legacy of soil and water contamination, with heavy metals and other pollutants prevalent due to decades of industrial activity. Efforts to clean up the environment have led to noticeable improvements in air and water quality compared to previous decades.



**Community Impacts:** Economic downturns in the steel industry led to massive job losses, population declines, and economic stagnation. For instance, Gary's population plummeted from 175,000 in the 1970s to around 69,000 today.<sup>6</sup> This has left behind abandoned buildings and struggling commercial districts, although efforts are being made to revitalize these areas through redevelopment and increased recreational opportunities.

### Annual Percent Adults with Asthma



### Annual Number of Deaths from Heart Attacks



## Advocacy, Community Organizations, and Vision

Residents cherish the natural beauty of the region, such as Lake Michigan. Community members envision a more civically engaged youth, sustainable and cleaner industry, community gardens, local farms, and recreational infrastructure. Local organizations such as Just

Transition Northwest Indiana (JTNWI)<sup>7</sup> and the Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD)<sup>8</sup> are key players in advocating for environmental justice and sustainable development.

Both actively engage in critical initiatives focused on environmental justice, economic development, and community empowerment in the Northwest Indiana region, particularly around Gary and its neighboring communities.

**Gary Advocates for Responsible Development (GARD):** GARD has advocated for environmental justice in Gary, focusing on addressing pollution, industrial impacts, and their effects on public health. They work to ensure that community voices are heard in environmental decision-making processes while emphasizing the need for safer and healthier living conditions for residents of Gary, particularly those in neighborhoods directly impacted by industrial pollution. They advocate for stricter environmental regulations and enforcement to protect community health. GARD is committed to promoting sustainable economic development in Gary that benefits residents and businesses.

**Just Transition Northwest Indiana (JTNWI):** JTNWI focuses on advancing environmental justice and equity across Northwest Indiana. They advocate for policies and practices that reduce environmental pollution and promote clean energy solutions. They support initiatives that mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, promote renewable energy adoption, and build community resilience to

climate-related challenges. They work to engage local communities, including residents of Gary, in environmental advocacy and education while encouraging community participation in decision-making processes and empowering residents to advocate for their rights and interests. Campaigns are built around a sustainable and regenerative transition away from an extractive economy. Currently, they canvass neighborhoods to inform residents about carbon capture and sequestration, as well as the proposed hydrogen hub in the region. They will also be working with local artists on mural projects.

More recently, the proposed hydrogen hub has sparked mixed reactions, highlighting environmental and health risks concerns. While residents are interested in renewable energy's potential to transform the industry and their quality of life, they are also skeptical about a process that may fail to include their voices. Information about the hydrogen hubs and other large-scale development plans feels inaccessible. At worst, locals are concerned that these changes may exacerbate inequities and further harm the region.

Advocates have renewed attention to permit hearings related to environmental quality. However, bureaucratic processes can leave residents feeling disenfranchised and burned by leaders. Some have noted that local leaders seem more responsive than leaders at the state level, who seem to ignore issues in Lake County or merely view it as an area of profit.

1. The History Museum Indiana (2024). [Indiana, A State of Change.](#)
2. Chicago Historical Society, (2005). [Lake County Indiana.](#)
3. Steve McShane, Indiana University-Northwest (2010) [US Steel Gary Works Photograph Collection, 1906-1971](#)
4. Ryan Schnurr. Belt Magazine (2017). [A 'Toxic Tour' of the Whiting Refinery on the Shores of Lake Michigan - Belt Magazine](#)
5. <https://www.propublica.org/article/trains-crossing-blocked-kids-norfolk-southern>
6. [DATA USA: Gary, IN \(2022\)](#)
7. [Just Transition Northwest Indiana](#)
8. [Gary Gard 219](#)

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