

Tackling pollution and climate change in Europe will improve health and well-being, especially for the most vulnerable

Improving the health and well-being of European citizens is more important than ever, with attention currently focused on addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic provides a stark example of the complex links between the environment, our social systems, and our health.

A significant proportion of the burden of disease in Europe continues to be attributed to environmental pollution resulting from human activity, according to the EEA report '[Healthy environment, healthy lives: how the environment influences health and well-being in Europe](#).' The report, which draws extensively on World Health Organization data on the causes of death and disease, highlights how the quality of Europe's environment plays a key role in determining our health and well-being. It shows how social deprivation, unhealthy behaviours and shifting demographics in Europe influence environmental health, with the most vulnerable hardest hit.

'There is a clear link between the state of the environment and the health of our population. Everyone must understand that by taking care of our planet we are not only saving ecosystems, but also lives, especially the ones who are the most vulnerable. The European Union is devoted to this approach and with the new Biodiversity Strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan and other forthcoming initiatives we are on the path to build a more resilient and healthier Europe for European citizens and beyond,' said Virginijus Sinkevičius, Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries.

'COVID-19 has been yet another wake-up call, making us acutely aware of the relationship between our ecosystems and our health and the need to face the facts – the way we live, consume and produce is detrimental to the climate and impacts negatively on our health. From our Farm to Fork Strategy for sustainable and healthy food to Europe's future Beating Cancer Plan, we have made a strong commitment to protect the health of our citizens and our planet,' said Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety.

'While we see improvements in the environment in Europe and a clear focus in the Green Deal on a sustainable future, the report indicates that strong action is needed to protect the most vulnerable in our society, as poverty often goes together with living in poor environmental conditions and poor health. Addressing these connections has to be part of an integrated approach towards a more inclusive and sustainable Europe,' said Hans Bruyninckx, EEA Executive Director.

Key findings

- Air pollution remains Europe's top environmental threat to health, with more than 400 000 premature deaths driven by air pollution every year in the EU. Noise pollution comes second, contributing to 12 000 premature deaths, followed by the impacts of climate change, notably heatwaves.
- The burden of pollution and climate change varies across Europe, with clear differences between countries in the east and west of Europe. The highest fraction of national deaths (27 %) is attributable to the environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the lowest in Iceland and Norway at 9 %.
- Socially deprived communities typically struggle under a triple burden of poverty, poor quality environments and ill health. Poorer communities are often exposed to higher levels of pollution and noise and to high temperatures, while pre-existing health conditions increase vulnerability to environmental health hazards. Targeted measures are needed to improve environmental conditions for the most vulnerable in Europe.
- People are exposed to multiple risks at any time, including air, water and noise pollution, and chemicals, which combine and in some cases act in unison to impact on health. European cities are particularly vulnerable to these multiple threats, while also having less access to green and blue spaces.
- Ongoing research is investigating the links between the current COVID-19 pandemic and environmental dimensions. The virus behind COVID-19 is thought to have "jumped species" from animals to humans, an unforeseen outcome of the pressure that increasing consumption places on our natural systems. Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on communities, early evidence suggests that air pollution and poverty may be linked to higher death rates. Further research is still needed to clarify these interactions, according to an initial assessment in the report.

Better integration of policies, more green, blue spaces key part of solution

The report stresses that an integrated approach to environment and health policies is needed to tackle environmental risks, protect the most vulnerable and fully realise the benefits that nature offers in support of health and well-being.

A healthy nature is a key mechanism in the delivery of public health, reducing disease and fostering good health and well-being. Green solutions offer a triple win for health, society and the environment. Quality green and blue spaces in urban areas support health and well-being, offering venues for physical activity, relaxation and social integration, with major benefits for poor communities. Green and blue spaces cool cities during heatwaves, alleviate flood waters, reduce noise pollution and support urban biodiversity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many commentators have noted a renewed appreciation of the benefits to mental health and well-being

delivered by access to green and blue space, especially in urban areas.

Within the EU, the [European Green Deal](#) represents a critical direction-setting change in the European policy agenda and sets out a sustainable and inclusive strategy to improve people's health and quality of life, care for nature, and leave no one behind.