

# Chicago's toxic air

## TRIBUNE WATCHDOG REPORT:

Chicago-area residents face some of the highest risk of getting sick from pollution, but the EPA isn't making it widely known

By Michael Hawthorne and Darnell Little | Chicago Tribune reporters

September 28, 2008



The Fisk Generating Station with the Dan Ryan Expressway in the background. (Tribune photo by Alex Garcia / September 23, 2008)

People living in Chicago and nearby suburbs face some of the highest risks in the nation for cancer, lung disease and other health problems linked to toxic chemicals pouring from industry smokestacks, according to a Tribune analysis of federal data.

The [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) spent millions of dollars to assess the dangers that air pollution poses but has failed to fulfill promises to make the research more accessible to the public. So the Tribune is posting the information on its Web site, where users can easily find nearby polluters and the chemicals going into their air.

Those who look up Cook County will see it ranked worst in the nation for dangerous air pollution, based on 2005 data. The Tribune also found Chicago was among the 10 worst cities in the U.S.

The factory with the highest risk score in Chicago is a steel mill on the edge of upscale [Lincoln Park](#), a neighborhood where it isn't uncommon to find people buying organic dog food.

In Will and DuPage Counties, six factories rank in the region's worst 50, though residents of the collar counties generally face much lower risks than people who live in Cook. Nearby [Lake County](#), Ind., has nine of the worst polluters in the region.

So how much danger does a person living near these factories face? The EPA didn't try to answer that difficult question. Air pollution is just one factor that can affect the chances of developing health problems.

Instead, the agency's research sought to compare certain areas with others across the country.

Most of the air pollution is legal under federal laws and regulations. Environmental permits limit air pollution but don't eliminate it.

Yet there are increasing concerns that the rules don't adequately protect public health.

A growing body of research shows dirty air is more dangerous than had been thought. Heavy metals and chemicals these factories put into the air—such as chromium, lead, manganese and sulfuric acid—have been linked to cancer, learning disabilities and other ailments.

And federal officials acknowledge that existing regulations don't address the cumulative risk posed by multiple polluters. That's particularly significant around Chicago, where the legacy of a gritty industrial past is dirty factories operating close to residential neighborhoods.

"This raises very important questions about public health in our communities," said Dr. Peter Orris, chief of environmental and occupational medicine at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#) Medical Center. "If the government's own data shows we have a problem, they should be doing more about it."

Some of the polluters are highly visible, including the sprawling [Mittal Steel](#) plant in Riverdale and the Corn Products refinery in Bedford Park. Others are metal plating shops and chemical makers tucked away in low, nondescript buildings on the edges of residential neighborhoods where people might not know of the potential risks.

Minority neighborhoods have been hit hardest, from the mostly Latino enclave of [Pilsen](#) to mostly black communities on the city's South and West Sides. Of the Top 50 polluters in Cook County in 2005, 60 percent are where black or Latino residents outnumber whites.

Nearly two dozen of the region's top polluters are within 8 miles of the Altgeld Gardens public housing project off 130th Street on the Far South Side, where nearly all residents are African-American. The two-story brick apartments are surrounded by steel mills, abandoned factories, landfills and a sewage treatment plant.

"We're like a big environmental lab for all of the mistakes industry has made over the years," said Cheryl Johnson, a lifelong Altgeld resident who is carrying on the environmental activism her mother, Hazel, started in the 1980s. "We see and smell and live with this pollution every day. I may not have a science degree, but it isn't good."

EPA scientists spent a decade creating and refining the data analyzed by the Tribune. The project assesses the relative health risks of air pollution by combining industry-supplied emissions data, rankings of the health dangers posed by chemicals and heavy metals, how the pollution spreads in the air, and how many people live nearby.

The research doesn't consider air pollution from other sources, such as cars and diesel trucks. But EPA officials say the health-risk scores they compiled highlight polluted areas that deserve more scrutiny.

They also acknowledge they have fallen behind in identifying pollution hot spots and in tightening regulations to reduce health risks.

"We haven't gotten to all of the sources," said David Guinnup, a top official in the EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards. "It's an ongoing fight as we continue to look for ways that we can ratchet down emissions and reduce the cancer and non-cancer risk."

Risk scores can change from year to year when emissions from factories change or facilities open and close. In fact, the polluter ranked as the worst in Cook County— Chicago Castings Co. in [Cicero](#)—closed this year.

That could affect Cook's ranking in future studies. Still, between 2000 and 2005, Cook was worst in the nation four times and was in the Top 5 the other two years, according to the Tribune analysis.

One factory behind the county's high risk score is the A. Finkl and Sons steel mill just west of Lincoln Park.

Company officials actively promote themselves as environmentally friendly—a sign stretching over Cortland Street boasts that Finkl has planted 5 million trees, and for years the company hosted an annual Green Tie Ball to help fund highway beautification projects. Yet the chromium, lead, manganese, nickel and zinc it churns into the neighborhood are responsible for nearly a third of the city's total health risk from factory emissions.

Finkl plans to close the mill near Lincoln Park, where the population is 84 percent white, and move to another site on East 93rd Street on the Southeast Side, a neighborhood that is 96 percent black. Bruce Liimatainen, the company's chief executive, said the ranking surprised him, noting that steel mills on the South Side and in northwest Indiana release much more pollution.

"We are at the forefront of our industry as it relates to cleanliness," he said.

But Finkl ranks No. 1 in the city in part because it is so close to densely populated neighborhoods.

The database also demonstrates how measuring the total amount of pollution emitted into the air doesn't tell the whole story for people who live nearby. Some chemicals and metals are far more toxic than others.

For instance, an Avery Dennison plant in Niles had the third highest risk score in Cook County, even though it ranked 141st out of 308 factories based on pounds emitted. One of its pollutants is diisocyanates, a highly toxic ingredient in specialty paints, varnishes and foams that can trigger asthma attacks and other respiratory diseases.

The same chemical is responsible for No-Sag Foam Products in [West Chicago](#) ranking as DuPage County's third-highest risk score. Repeated calls to Avery Dennison were not returned; the new owner of No-Sag Foam declined comment.

The EPA created the database to push companies to clean up voluntarily. But success has been mixed, at best.

The agency used an earlier version of the database during the mid-1990s to identify about two dozen Chicago-area factories that emit the most hazardous air pollution. Many are still among the area's worst polluters.

Meanwhile, top agency officials delayed the public release of the latest version of the risk database for more than a year. The EPA held a workshop last year in Chicago to teach federal and state regulators how to use the database, but it appears that nobody locally has done so.

"I don't know if we got beyond getting the software," said Alan Walts, a lawyer in the EPA's regional environmental justice program, which is intended to make sure that minorities and the poor aren't disproportionately hit by pollution.

Illinois environmental regulators haven't turned to the data to help focus their efforts, either. In his Sept. 18 reply to a Freedom of Information Act request from the Tribune, a state lawyer wrote: "The Illinois EPA has no information about the [database], and has not used it in any way."