

September 26, 2023

## THE ISSUE: Allegheny County's Air Quality

**Summary:** Critics like to claim that the Pittsburgh area has some of the worst air quality in the country. They better stay away from Seattle, San Diego, and Austin. All three of those popular spots have worse air quality than Allegheny County, according to the latest EPA data.

**The Candidates\*:** Do you believe the air in Allegheny County is safe to breathe?

**Sara Innamorato:** No    **Joe Rockey:** Yes



**Background:** Seattle, San Diego, and Austin are incredibly popular tourist destinations. And for most of the last decade, thousands of people moved to those places each year.

So, it may be surprising to discover that their air quality is worse than Allegheny County's, according to the latest EPA data.<sup>1</sup>

Allegheny County in 2022 had a lower average level of tiny soot particles (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) than King County (Seattle), San Diego County (San Diego), and Travis County (Austin). Allegheny County also had a lower average ozone score than Austin/Travis County, and the same as Seattle/King County and San Diego/San Diego County.



These are among the findings that will be included in the upcoming *Clearing the Air 4.0*, the annual assessment of the region's air quality published by **Pittsburgh Works Together**. The conclusion of the first *Clearing the Air* report in 2021<sup>2</sup> has been reinforced by each subsequent assessment:

<sup>1</sup> For PM<sub>2.5</sub>: [https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-05/PM25\\_DesignValues\\_2020\\_2022\\_FINAL\\_05\\_23\\_23.xlsx](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-05/PM25_DesignValues_2020_2022_FINAL_05_23_23.xlsx) For ozone: [https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-05/O3\\_DesignValues\\_2020\\_2022\\_FINAL\\_05\\_22\\_23.xlsx](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-05/O3_DesignValues_2020_2022_FINAL_05_22_23.xlsx)

<sup>2</sup> <https://pghworks.com/clearing-the-air-3-0/>

The air quality in the Pittsburgh region is pretty typical of a large metropolitan area – better than in some places, worse than in others.

The American Lung Association’s annual *State of the Air*<sup>3</sup> report uses PM<sub>2.5</sub> and ozone levels to grade air quality since they are “two of the most widespread and dangerous air pollutants.” But the Lung Association each year only uses some of the available data to make claims that the Pittsburgh metro area “continues to rank among the most polluted in the U.S.”<sup>4</sup>

Consider the reason that Pittsburgh landed at #14 of the “most polluted cities” for annual PM<sub>2.5</sub> levels in the 2023 report while Seattle, San Diego, and Austin were nowhere to be found on the list.<sup>5</sup>

It is because the Lung Association uses a single monitor in a single location to judge the air in Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, and an entire 12-county area spread across three states. When you look at the monitors recording the *actual* air quality in Allegheny County and other urban areas around the country, the story is much, much different.

	<b>2022 PM2.5 Level (Avg.)*</b> micrograms/cubic meter	<b>2022 Ozone Levels (Avg.)**</b> parts per billion
<b>Allegheny County</b>	8.52	64
<b>Seattle / King County</b>	8.73	64
<b>San Diego / San Diego County</b>	9.10	64
<b>Austin / Travis County</b>	8.68	70

\* Average of every county monitor reporting PM<sub>2.5</sub> annual data to EPA in 2022; federal standard is 12.

\*\* Average of every county monitor reporting ozone data to EPA in 2022; federal standard is 70.

The average of the PM<sub>2.5</sub> monitors located around Allegheny County was lower in 2022 than the average of the monitors in the three other urban counties. For ozone, the Allegheny County-wide average was lower than Travis County’s and the same as in King and San Diego counties.

Yet awareness of the true nature of Allegheny County’s air quality can sometimes seem stuck in the past, when the county did not comply with federal Clean Air Act standards as it has for several years. “Allegheny County ranked among most polluted places to live,” said one news outlet while reporting on the skewed Lung Association report in April.<sup>6</sup>

\* The candidates’ responses from May 1 PGH Works candidate questionnaire (<https://pghworks.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AF-Candidate-Questionnaire-052323.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lung.org/research/sota>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.lung.org/media/press-releases/pittsburgh-sota-2023>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lung.org/research/sota/city-rankings/most-polluted-cities>

<sup>6</sup> <https://triblive.com/local/morning-roundup-allegheny-county-ranked-among-most-polluted-place-to-live/>

*The **Our County. Your Vote. Allegheny's Future** initiative is designed to call attention to the pressing issues that face the residents of Allegheny County and the next county executive.*

***Pittsburgh Works Together** is a nonpartisan business-organized labor-workforce-economic development alliance working to grow jobs and expand the industries that are the foundation of our economy, including energy, manufacturing, and construction, to provide opportunity for all residents.*

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