



Lung Association Doesn't Tell All

Every year about this time—including last week's report on 2011 results—the American Lung Association reports on air quality across the country, singling out the cities and regions with the dirtiest air and the cleanest air. The Association reports also include a list of all the people in each area who are presumably most susceptible to pollution and likely to suffer serious negative health effects from the pollution.

One could reasonably infer from the Association's posturing and handwringing that folks living in the most polluted cities would have higher rates of disease and mortality than would prevail among people living in areas with the cleanest air. But is it true?

For years Los Angeles County has been ranked by the Lung Association as having the worst air pollution in the country. That includes 2011. Los Angeles was also ranked as the worst polluted area in 2008. In 2008, Cheyenne, Wyoming—Laramie County—was ranked by the Association as having the cleanest air with very low ozone and particulate matter readings. 2008 is chosen as a study year because the CDC National Vital Statistics has accessible mortality rate tables by county and age group for that year. Comparing age specific mortality rates for Los Angeles County, Laramie County, and the nation should provide an indication as to the relative deleterious health effects of very bad air as contrasted to the benefits of very clean air. The table shows the mortality rates for Los Angeles County, Laramie County, and the nation.

By age group for 2008, Deaths per 100,000 people in the age bracket

Age	Los Angeles	Laramie	National
Under 1	495.8	786.3	650.5
1 to 4	19.3	Na	28.3
5 to 9	14.4	Na	12.5
10 to 14	16.6	Na	15.7
15 to 19	48.4	Na	57.7
20 to 24	85.9	Na	94.0
25 to 34	72.6	108.6	103.3
35 to 44	138.8	261.1	179.7
45 to 54	346.0	440.1	420.4
55 to 64	761.4	777.0	879.2
65 to 74	1,640.6	1,904.4	1,995.6
75 to 84	4,313.6	4,674.7	5,017.7
85 and Up	12,083.1	13,012.4	13,015.1

*Na—not a large enough population to be statistically significant.

**Data extracted from wonder.cdc.gov/datarequest

Here's the question: With the years and years of extraordinarily high air pollution, how can it be that Los Angeles County mortality rates are lower for almost every age group than the national rates and substantially lower than Laramie County's rates where the air is rated among the best in the nation?

Obviously, there are many factors that determine mortality rates. But surely, if poor air quality is as harmful as the Lung Association and other groups portray it, then the low mortality rates in Los Angeles cry out for explanation. Moreover, the higher than national rates for several age groups in Laramie County are problematic for the clean air advocates. Certainly, if the policy objective is to lower death rates, there is not much more Laramie County can do as far as improving air quality is concerned. By the same token, how much could the Los Angeles death rates be lowered by cutting pollution in half?

Until the factors driving the opposite of conventional wisdom differences in mortality rates between Los Angeles County and Laramie County can be isolated and explained, the Lung Association should be somewhat more circumspect in its public pronouncements designed to frighten residents of any area with any air quality that is not pristine while congratulating cities with low pollution as if they are and free and clear in terms of health and death rates.

Granted, folks with lung disease or other respiratory problems might suffer more in bad air, but why is the terrible air in Los Angeles not producing more life threatening health problems and higher mortality rates than the clean air in Laramie County?

The Lung Association owes the public some answers. Sadly, such explanations will probably never be provided. After all, the Association persists in ranking the Pittsburgh region among the worst cities in the nation for air quality based on pollution measurements taken at one of the region's monitoring stations. What's even more deplorable is that the Lung Association will not consider changing its logic-defying methodology that produces terribly misleading and inaccurate portrayals of Pittsburgh's air quality.

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