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Unfettered Pollution (Not Racism) is the Cause of Louisville's Doldrums

By John Hans Gilderbloom Ph.D.

Industrial pollution is the major cause of West Louisville's health, housing, and economic problems (sunlouisville.org). Compared to East Louisville, West Louisville has six times the amount of [pollution](#) (75,000 pounds). Residents of West Louisville are two to four times more likely to experience pollution-related [illnesses](#). According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), high blood pressure is twice as prevalent. Kidney disease, obesity, and physical and mental health issues occur at [three times](#) the rate. Diabetes, COPD, and strokes are more severe, affecting residents four times as often. These [impacts](#) extend to children and their education—cannot read or do math at proficiency levels. . Consequently, the average life expectancy of those living in West Louisville is 12 years shorter. Due to extreme pollution levels in West Louisville, the median [housing values](#) in this area are approximately one-half to one-third of those observed in East Louisville.

The Gilderbloom research team is collecting data that might show that birth defects, autism, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, and miscarriages are higher in neighborhoods with high pollution. Excessive levels of pollution not only affect health and housing in industrial neighborhoods, but also impact Earth's atmosphere, making Louisville one of the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases. For example, in their [article](#) in the *Courier Journal*, environmental writer James Bruggers and his colleague Phil McKenna estimate that just one chemical plant out of the 45 in Louisville emits enough dangerous greenhouse gases to equal the pollution of 671,000 automobiles.

Although the University of Louisville's recently established [Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil](#) does not address the health disparities observed between East and West Louisville, it advocates for [increased tree planting](#) in West Louisville as a strategy to enhance public health. This idea was shared at an August 2024 press conference at which former University of Louisville President Kim Schatzel asserted that “trees are medicine”, and other attendees claimed that planting more trees would reduce the rates of cancer and increase lifespan.

However, [data](#) indicate that Louisville is among the leading cities nationwide in terms of tree foliage, and that the tree canopy coverage in West Louisville is about the same as East Louisville. Further, a comparison of 144 mid-size cities (including Louisville) shows that the size of tree canopy has no impact on lifespan or cancer. Thus, increased tree canopy is not the secret sauce of healthier neighborhoods.

Studies conducted by the now shuttered Kentucky Institute for the Environment & Sustainable Development (KIESD) and Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods have identified climate change as a cause of rapidly multiplying problems in Kentucky and around the world: reduced life expectancies; record low proficiency scores; and unprecedented fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, heat waves, and flooding. Our cities that are becoming increasingly unlivable. This is all documented in my just-released book, *Climate Chaos: Killing People, Places, and the Planet*, which describes how and why these severe problems are happening in Louisville and around the world.

Pollution prevention is a proven method for improving the health of West Louisville's 60,000 residents. A University of Louisville partnership between KIESD and a Louisville chemical company reduced cancer-causing pollutants by 90% after installing machinery to filter

out dangerous air-borne toxins. The \$3 million dollar [demonstration project](#), funded by the company, represents a major breakthrough. Unfortunately, the University pulled the plug on this effort.

Stronger environmental regulations could dramatically improve the lives of the 60,000 residents of West Louisville who are disproportionately affected by pollution. When Amazon was scouting locations for its second Midwest campus, Louisville failed to rank among the top 25 contenders—while Nashville secured the bid. The city’s environmental challenges are not just a public health crisis; they’re a barrier to economic opportunity and investment. Clean up the pollution and witness a renaissance of increased homeownership, healthier people, and improved learning in Louisville. Greater acceptance of data-driven impartial science can help usher in a new era.

John Hans Gilderbloom’s just released book *Climate Chaos: Killing People, Places, and the Planet* sparked the creation of a docudrama that was filmed around the world. Learn more about the film *Climate of Hope* by visiting climateofhopefilm.org. The film tells the story of Gilderbloom’s students, who, moved by his teaching, are determined to make a difference.