

Air pollution increases the risk of various health problems (including of course respiratory diseases, but also lung cancer and cardiovascular diseases), with children and older people being particularly vulnerable. According to WHO estimates, nearly 500 000 deaths in Europe in 2012 were linked to exposure to outdoor air pollution (WHO, 2014).

Air pollution concentrations are greater in urban areas in all countries. Of all air pollutants, fine particulate matter (PM) has the greatest effect on human health. Most fine particulate matter comes from fuel combustion, including from vehicles, power plants, industries and households.

Despite a reduction in the emission of PM₁₀ over the past decade, a large percentage of the urban population in EU countries continued to live in 2011 in areas where PM₁₀ levels exceeded the EU and WHO threshold. The emission of PM₁₀ across EU countries decreased by 14% between 2002 and 2011, and the exposure of the urban population to PM₁₀ also fell in most countries (Figure 2.6.1). However, this was not the case in some central and eastern European countries (such as Bulgaria, Poland and the Slovak Republic) where urban population exposure to PM₁₀ increased sometimes dramatically over the past decade. Population exposure to PM₁₀ is also high in Turkey and Serbia.

In the European Union as a whole, one-third of the population lived in areas where the EU air quality limits for particulate matter was exceeded in 2011. This share varied from 20 to 44% between 2001 and 2011, reaching a peak in 2003 and 2006, and rising again in 2011 (Figure 2.6.2). The proportion of the EU urban population exposed to PM₁₀ levels exceeding the WHO air quality guidelines, which are stricter than the threshold set by EU legislation, was much higher, reaching 88% of the total urban population in 2011 (European Environment Agency, 2013).

A large percentage of people living in urban areas in EU countries are also exposed to other air pollutants which concentrations exceed the thresholds set in the EU legislation and the WHO air quality guidelines. In the period from 2001 to 2011, between 14 and 65 % of the urban population in EU countries was exposed to ozone (O₃) concentrations exceeding the EU target value set for the protection of human health. This proportion reached a peak in 2003 and another peak in 2006, but has declined since then. Similarly, in the period 2001-11, between 5% and 23% of the urban population in EU countries was exposed to nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) concentrations above the EU limit for the protection of human health. This proportion also peaked in 2003 and has come down since then.

While there have been improvements in reducing emissions of a number of air pollutants in the past decade, further efforts are needed to reduce air pollution, notably by reducing emissions from transports due to motor vehicles, but also from power stations which produce more pollution than any other industry. Better dispersion of

pollutants emitted by tall chimneys can promote better dilution in the air and lowers local concentrations of pollutants. However, this leads to wider dispersion of pollution and trans-boundary air pollution. Stricter operating practices and the use of modern techniques have resulted in a sizeable reduction in the amount of pollutants emitted from power stations.

Definition and comparability

The indicators presented here refer to population exposure to particulate matter 10 (PM₁₀) and other pollutants in cities with more than 100 000 population. The estimates represent the average annual exposure level of the average urban resident.

PM₁₀ refers to suspended particulates less than ten microns in diameter that are capable of penetrating deep into the respiratory tract and causing significant health damage. Fine particulates smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter (PM_{2.5}) cause even more severe health effects because they penetrate deeper into the respiratory tract and are potentially more toxic as they may include heavy metals and toxic organic substances (OECD, 2013).

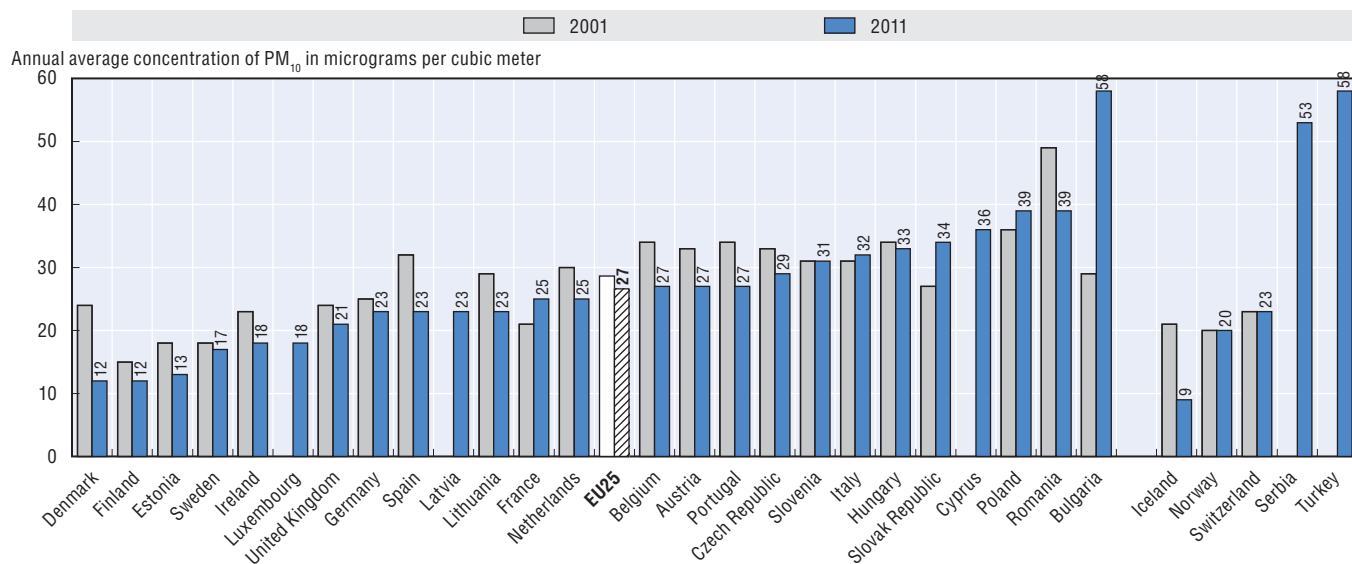
Ozone is a secondary pollutant (meaning that it is not emitted directly by any emission source), formed in the lower part of the atmosphere from complex chemical reactions following emissions of precursor gases such as nitrogen dioxides (which are emitted during fuel combustion).

Data on exposure to air pollution are available for most but not all European countries. Further efforts are needed to monitor or estimate overall population exposure.

References

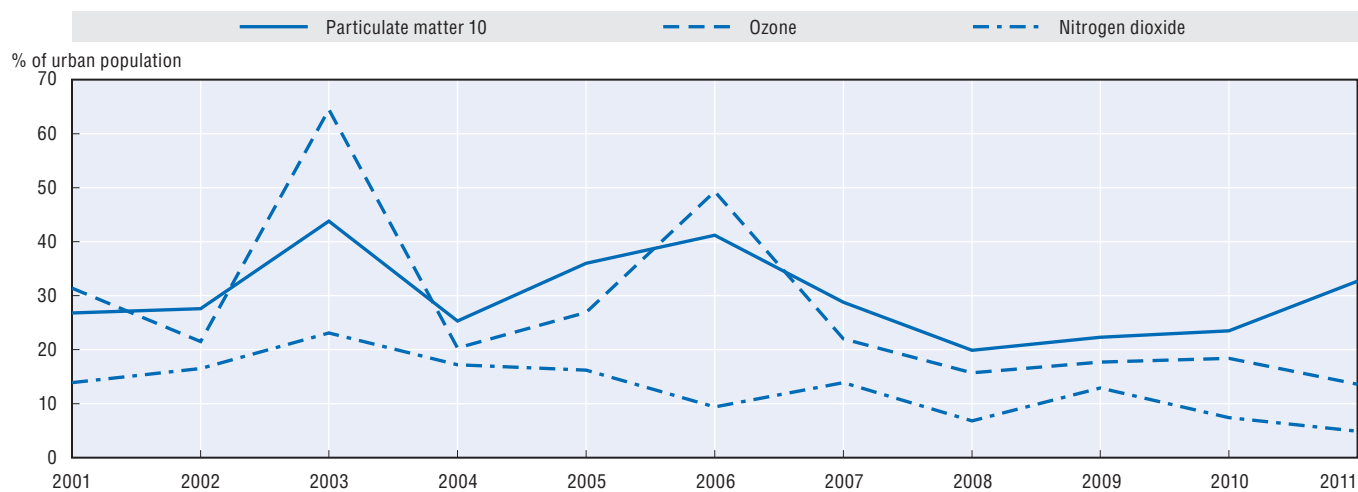
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2.6.1. Urban population exposure to air pollution by particulate matter (PM₁₀), 2001 and 2011 (or nearest years)




Source: European Environment Agency (EEA), Air quality in Europe – 2013 Report.

2.6.2. EU urban population exposed to air pollution exceeding EU air quality standards, 2001-11



Source: European Environment Agency (EEA), Air quality in Europe – 2013 Report.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933155540>



From:
Health at a Glance: Europe 2014

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/health_glance_eur-2014-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/European Union (2014), "Air pollution", in *Health at a Glance: Europe 2014*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/health_glance_eur-2014-24-en

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