

Birmingham's toxic air 'cuts half a year off children's lives'

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Primary schoolchildren who grow up in Birmingham could lose half a year of their lives due to illegal levels of air pollution in the city, a new report says.

The study examined levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate pollution (PM_{2.5}) in the city and calculated that an eight-year-old child could die up to seven months early if exposed over their lifetimes to toxic air. The loss of life expectancy is worse in Birmingham than some other major cities in the

UK including Manchester, re-searchers found Birmingham is one of five cities required by the government to set up a clean air zone to reduce toxic air, as part of plans to tackle the illegal levels of pollution in 38 out of 43 areas of the country.

But in Birmingham and Leeds, the start date of January next year has been postponed because of government delays in providing vehicle-checking software.

Today, research commissioned by UK100 — a network of local government leaders across the country for the first time examines the burden air pollution places on mortality in major cities.

Carried out by King's College London, the report says the health cost of the city's toxic air is £470m every year.

The study examined NO₂ and PM_{2.5}, two of the leading causes of poor health from air pollution, in the city's 10 constituencies. It found that air pollution had the greatest impact in the most deprived areas, and that men were more likely to be affected than women.

More than half of children in Birmingham live in the top 10% of the most deprived areas of the country, and about 8,000 children in the city are growing up in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK, according to a report by the Children's Society.

Waseem Zaffar, the cabinet member for transport and environment on the city council, said the results were shocking.

"One life cut short by poor air quality is one too many, so this is exactly why the city is taking forward measures such as the clean air zone but we also need strong leadership on this issue at a national government level," he said.

Sue Huyton, the coordinator of the Clean Air Parents' network, said action was needed now.

"It's awful that children living in the UK are breathing air that may shorten their lives. As a parent, you want to do everything you can for your children, but when it comes to air pollution you can feel helpless that's why those in power must step up."

Air pollution has been identified by Public Health England as the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK. Evidence shows it can cause or worsen a range of lung and heart conditions including asthma, chronic bronchitis, chronic heart disease and stroke. Research suggests air pollution caused by NO₂ and PM_{2.5} could cause 36,000 deaths per year.

The government has been forced by the courts to improve its plans to clean up the air, after losing legal action taken by the environmental lawyers charity ClientEarth.

A government spokesperson said: "We are aware of concerns over delays and are carrying out work to develop key components of the system to support the charging clean air zones for January 2020."