



Air Quality: Much Worse on Paper Than in Reality

By Joel Schwartz

Journalists and environmentalists erroneously claim more than half the country has “some of the worst air pollution,” when in fact the worst areas of California stand head and shoulders above all others. The nation sorely needs an honest assessment of air pollution, which would be aided by greater skepticism from journalists about air pollution claims.

Which state has some of the worst air pollution in the nation? Is it Pennsylvania, Texas, New Jersey, New York, or North Carolina? Which city? Is it Phoenix, Chicago, Las Vegas, Baltimore, Milwaukee, or Atlanta? According to dozens of news stories and editorials over the last several years, the correct answer is “all of the above, and more.” Can all of these places have some of the worst air pollution? They can’t. In fact, not a single one does.

When it comes to air pollution, four California metropolitan areas—San Bernardino, Riverside, Bakersfield, and Fresno—stand head and shoulders above all others in the nation. For example, during 1999–2004 the worst location in California averaged more than ninety days per year exceeding the federal eight-hour ozone standard.¹ A monitoring site in Houston, Texas, had the worst ozone outside California, averaging about eighteen exceedance days per year over the same period. The situation is similar for fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}). The worst location in California averaged 28 micrograms per cubic meter (µg/m³) during 2000–2003.² Liberty, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh and the worst area outside California, averaged 21 µg/m³; Dearborn, Michigan, was second among non-California areas at 19.6 µg/m³. The federal PM_{2.5} standard is 15 µg/m³. The worst area outside California is therefore closer to the

federal standard than it is to the highest PM_{2.5} level in the country.

We’re All Way, Way below Average

No area outside California comes anywhere close to having “some of the worst air pollution in the nation.” And yet a search through newspapers both large and small reveals that journalists and environmental activists have collectively put more than half the country into this category. This may be one of the few cases where a thousand words are worth much more than a picture. Here then is a partial inventory of air quality false alarms.

Chicago, the *Chicago Sun-Times* reports, has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the nation.”³ Eighty miles north of Chicago is Milwaukee, which the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* says has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the nation.”⁴ Toledo joins its Midwestern brethren with “**some of the worst ozone pollution** readings in the nation,” according to the *Toledo Blade*.⁵ Ditto for Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which according to the Associated Press “has **some of the most polluted air** in the nation.”⁶

The Dallas–Fort Worth area has “**some of the country’s worst air**,” claims the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*.⁷ The *Baltimore Sun* says Baltimore has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country” as well.⁸ Houston? “[S]ome of the worst air pollution problems in the country,” says United Press

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International.⁹ The New York metropolitan area has “**some of the country’s dirtiest air**,” according to the *Westchester Journal News*.¹⁰ Don’t forget Atlanta, which the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* says has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country,” with agreement from the Associated Press as well.¹¹ Raleigh, North Carolina’s *News & Observer* says it is not only Atlanta, but the entire Raleigh-Greensboro-Atlanta “megalopolis” that has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”¹²

Las Vegas has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country,” according to the Greenwire News Service, but does a bit better with the *Los Angeles Times*, which says Sin City merely has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the Western United States” (italics added).¹³ The *Asheville Citizen-Times* reports that it is Asheville, North Carolina, that has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country,” while the Annapolis *Capital* says Anne Arundel County, Maryland, endures “**some of the nation’s dirtiest air**.”¹⁴ The *Capital* might be the most insistent on its area’s “dirtiest air” rating, as the paper ran at least five stories in two years that included that claim.¹⁵ The *Washington Post* puts not only the Washington-Baltimore metropolitan area, but also the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Phoenix in the “**some of the worst air pollution**” fraternity.¹⁶ The *Chattanooga Times Free Press* hedges its bets a bit, noting more vaguely that the park “is said to have **some of the worst air pollution** in the nation” (italics added).¹⁷ According to the *York Dispatch*, York County, Pennsylvania, has “**some of the worst air** in the country.”¹⁸ The *New York Times* reports that the northeast states have some of the toughest environmental regulations, but that northeastern cities “also have **some of the worst air pollution**.”¹⁹

Sometimes it is entire states that have “some of the worst air pollution.” New Jersey, the *Bergen County Record* says, has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”²⁰ The *Philadelphia Inquirer* agrees that “air pollution in New Jersey is **among the worst** in the country.”²¹ But just across the Hudson River, the *New York Times* claims it is the State of New York that “has **some of the nation’s dirtiest air**,” but also that “the

smog in Connecticut is among the worst in the nation.”²² North Carolina’s newspapers have worked hard to place the Tar Heel State among the nation’s smog capitals. The *Winston-Salem Journal* reports North Carolina “has **some of the nation’s worst air**.”²³ The *Durham Herald-Sun* is even more vigorous, stating “the facts are clear—we have **some of the worst smog and ozone** levels in the nation.”²⁴ The *Greensboro News & Record* concurs that North Carolina is “cursed with **some of the worst air pollution** in the United States.”²⁵

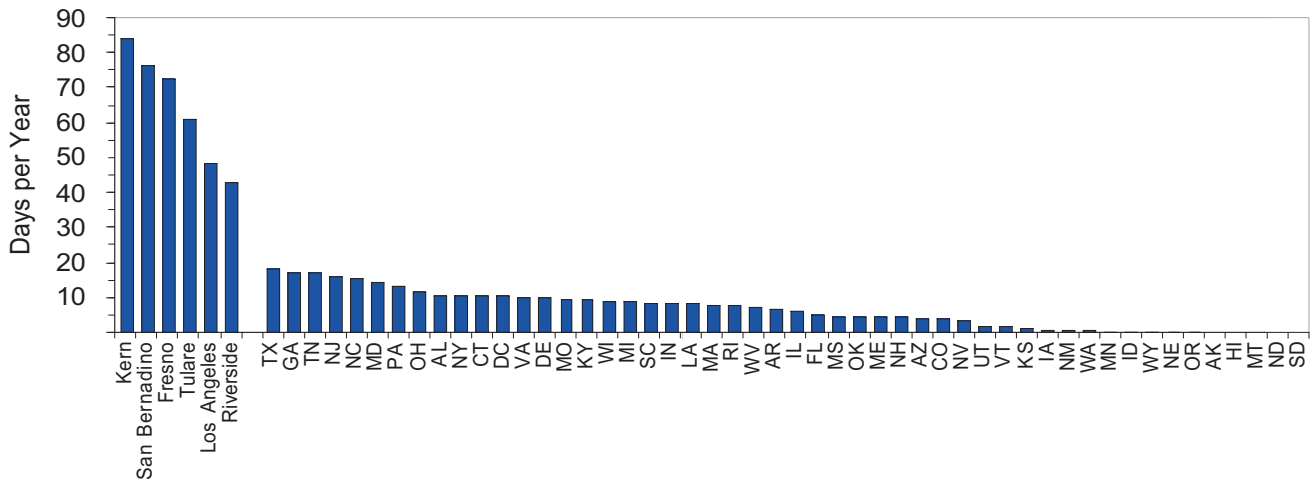
And of course Texas, the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel* reminds us, “suffers from **some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”²⁶ The *Akron Beacon Journal* concurs that parts of Texas “feature **some of the nation’s dirtiest air**,” as does the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which reports Texas has “**some of the worst air quality** in the country.”²⁷ “Tennessee has **some of the worst air pollution** in the country,” according to the *Knoxville News Sentinel*.²⁸ Maryland is “faced with **some of the worst air pollution** in the country,” according to the *Baltimore Sun*.²⁹ Not to be left out, the Bradenton *Herald* informs us that Florida’s air “is **among the worst and most polluted** in the nation.”³⁰

The Associated Press (AP) deserves an award for bestowing the “some of the worst” title on much of the United States all on the same day. On May 1, 2001, the AP reported in five separate stories that Maryland and Connecticut each have “**some of the worst smog** in the country,” New Jersey has “**some of the nation’s dirtiest air**,” eleven southern cities are “**among [the] nation’s most polluted**,” and “**some of the country’s worst air** can be found in the San Joaquin Valley” in California.³¹ Unfortunately for the AP, only the last of these five claims was correct.

The citations above came from journalists and editors, who get much of their information from environmental activists. But activists also make many “some of the worst” claims directly. For example, according to Emily Rusch of the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), “Passaic County [New Jersey] suffers from **some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”³² Elizabeth Ouzts of North Carolina PIRG says her state

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Figure 1: Days per Year Exceeding the Federal Eight-Hour Ozone Standard: Worst Location in Six California Counties vs. Worst Location in Other States, 1999–2004



SOURCE: EPA

NOTES: The chart compares the number of days per year exceeding the federal eight-hour ozone standard at the worst location in the six California counties that have the highest ozone with the worst location in each of the other forty-nine states plus the District of Columbia. All monitors with at least four complete years of data from 1999–2004 were included when determining the worst location in each area.

“has **some of the worst air quality** in the country,” a claim reinforced by her colleague Gregory Owens.³³ Erin Bowser, director of Ohio PIRG, notes Ohio has “**some of the worst air pollution** of any state,” with Molly Fontana of the Ohio chapter of the American Lung Association (ALA) echoing that claim.³⁴ Earth-justice attorney Keri Powell agrees, stating “Ohio has **some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”³⁵

John Noel, vice-president of Tennessee Conservation Voters, claims Tennessee has “**some of the worst air pollution** in the country.”³⁶ Peter Iwanowicz, director of environmental health for the New York chapter of the ALA, impugns New York State’s air as being “on par with **some of the worst polluted air** in the country.”³⁷ Not to be outdone, the Sierra Club puts Atlanta in the “**some of the worst air pollution**” fraternity.³⁸ And while Ms. Rusch focused only on Passaic County, her New Jersey PIRG colleague Jillian Waldman expanded the claim to the whole state, asserting “air pollution in New Jersey is **among the worst** in the country.”³⁹ The Sierra Club’s New Jersey state director agrees, saying “New Jersey has **some of the worst air quality** in the nation.”⁴⁰

Air Pollution Reality

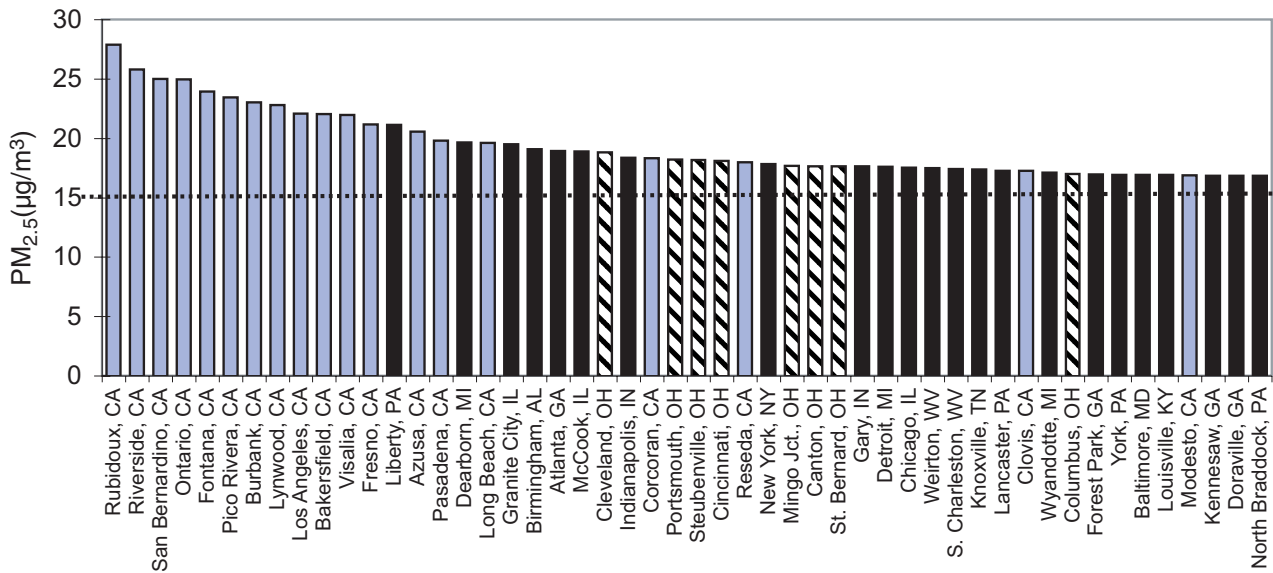
This is all a bit ridiculous. Even without looking at any air pollution monitoring data, it is obvious that most of these claims must be wrong. But to see just how wrong,

let us compare the claims with actual air pollution monitoring data. Figure 1 shows the average number of days per year exceeding the federal eight-hour ozone standard in the six California counties with the highest ozone levels, and in the other forty-nine states plus the District of Columbia. The data are for the worst location in the given state or county.

Note that no area outside California comes anywhere close to having “some of the worst” ozone air pollution in the country. An additional irony is that even if we remove California from the comparison, most of the areas cited in the news articles above still would not make it into the “some of the worst” fraternity. For example, the worst location in Texas has about 50 to 100 percent more ozone exceedance days per year than the worst locations in Ohio, New York, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. The *Washington Post*’s claim of high levels of air pollution in Phoenix, Arizona, and the Bradenton *Herald*’s claim of high pollution levels in Florida are particularly absurd. But not quite as absurd as New Jersey PIRG’s claim that Passaic County has “some of the worst air pollution in the country.” Passaic County does not even have some of the worst air pollution in New Jersey. In an average year, the worst location in New Jersey has nearly three times as many eight-hour ozone exceedance days as Passaic.

Most of the news stories cited above are really about ozone, even though they usually refer generically to “air

Figure 2: Average Annual PM_{2.5} Levels Relative to Federal Standard in the Worst Fifty Cities in the United States, 2000–2003



SOURCE: EPA

NOTES: Light bars are California areas. Striped bars are Ohio areas. Dark bars are areas in other states.

pollution.” There are a few reasons for this. First, many of the stories reported on the release of reports from environmental activists, such as the American Lung Association’s *State of the Air* and the Public Interest Research Group’s *Danger in the Air*. These reports focused only on ozone until their 2004 editions, when PM_{2.5} was added. Second, some of the stories were focused more generally on the summer “ozone season,” which runs from May through September and often generates news stories in areas that fail to comply with federal standards. And third, national PM_{2.5} monitoring data did not become widely available until around the middle of 2002.

Nevertheless, a number of the stories cited above did refer to particulate matter explicitly, while several others likely implicitly meant both ozone and PM_{2.5} when talking about “air pollution.” Figure 2 displays average annual PM_{2.5} levels from 2000–2003 in the fifty cities with the highest PM_{2.5} levels. Light bars are California areas, striped bars are Ohio areas, and dark bars are in other states. The dotted line marks the federal standard of 15 µg/m³.

PM_{2.5} is monitored at about 1,000 unique locations around the country. Some cities, such as Bakersfield or Birmingham, have more than one PM_{2.5} monitoring location within the city limits. In such cases, only the worst location is included in the figure. The only

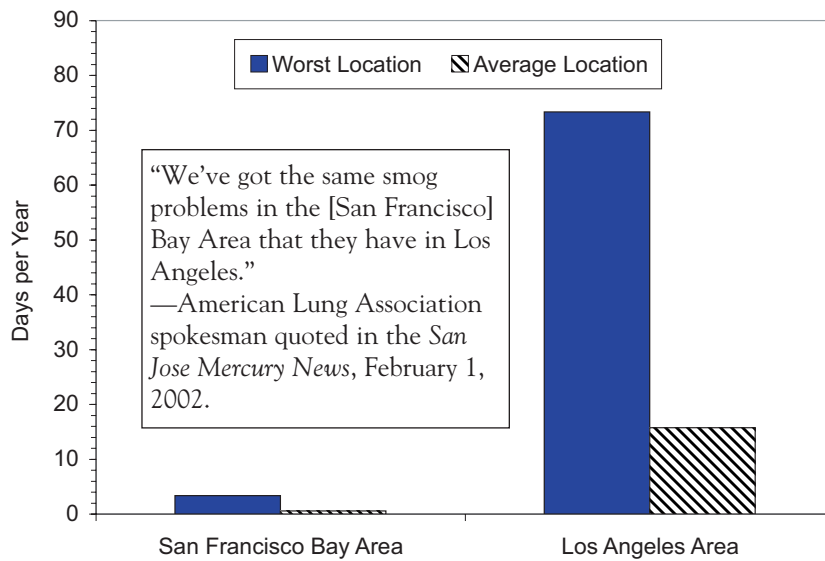
exception is Los Angeles, which covers a very large land area. The Lynwood and Los Angeles monitoring sites are both within the Los Angeles city limits but are about ten miles apart.

Liberty, Pennsylvania, is the worst location outside California, but it is still well below California’s worst areas. Compared with Rubidoux, the worst location in the country, Liberty is more than halfway toward attainment of the federal standard. Thus, just as for ozone, no area outside California can be said to have “some of the worst” particulate air pollution in the nation.

Note also in Figure 2 that PM_{2.5} levels decline rapidly in going from the worst location in the country down to the twentieth or thirtieth worst location. Figure 2 shows the cities that had the highest average PM_{2.5} levels in the country during 2000–2003. But even within this “top 50” group, the areas toward the right end of the graph are close to meeting the federal standard.

Figure 2 also shows that it is virtually impossible to make accurate generalizations about a state’s particulate levels. High particulate levels in California are found in mainly in the Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Bakersfield, and Fresno areas. PM_{2.5} levels are much lower in San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, and other parts of the state. Perhaps the only accurate statewide generalizations that can be made are that parts of California have by far the worst particulate

Figure 3: Average Number of Days per Year Exceeding the Federal Eight-Hour Ozone Standard during 2000–2002 in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Los Angeles Area



SOURCE: EPA

NOTE: The chart compares the worst and average areas in the Bay Area Air Quality Management District and the South Coast Air Quality Management District (the Los Angeles metropolitan region).

levels in the nation, while much of Ohio has some of the worst particulate air pollution outside California.

It is often difficult to generalize about air pollution levels even within a county. Liberty, Pennsylvania, is in Allegheny County in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. Although Liberty averaged $21 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ during 2000–2003, the next worst site in the county came in at about $17 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, and six of twelve county sites were below the $15 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ federal standard. Part of the problem appears to be that the Liberty monitor might not be representative of even local ambient pollution levels, as it is located near a U.S. Steel coke works.⁴¹ Nevertheless, based on this single unrepresentative monitor, an activist from Pennsylvania’s Group Against Smog and Pollution claimed “Allegheny County has **some of the worst air quality** in the state and nation.”⁴²

Figures 1 and 2 are based on an average of data for 1999–2004 for ozone and 2000–2003 for $\text{PM}_{2.5}$. Is it possible that a few areas outside California had “some of the worst air pollution” for at least one year during this period, and journalists just reported on those high-pollution years? Not for ozone. Among non-California areas, Atlanta had the worst single year, chalking up fifty-four ozone exceedance days in 1999. The Great Smoky Mountains came in second

with thirty-seven days, also in 1999. But in that same year California’s top two areas, Arvin and Crestline, had eighty-five and eighty-two exceedance days, respectively.

$\text{PM}_{2.5}$ levels are in a state of transition. From 1999–2002, the worst locations in California were well above the highest non-California levels. However, while $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ levels have been dropping around the United States, California has made very rapid progress. The worst levels in California were comparable to Liberty, Pennsylvania, and Birmingham, Alabama, during 2003 and 2004. Furthermore, owing to a long stretch of stagnant air during the winter of 2003–2004, Logan, Utah, chalked up some of the highest short-term $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ levels of recent times. So for $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ there are now three cities outside California that can truthfully be said to have “some of the worst” particulate air pollution in the country. Still, this provides no comfort for the news stories cited above, since almost all of them were written before the middle of 2004, when data on particulate levels during 2003 would have first become available. And in any case, hardly any of those stories were about the handful of non-California cities that could realistically vie for the “worst particulate pollution” title.

While much air pollution exaggeration involves a “some of the worst” claim, the director of the American Lung Association’s Santa Clara, California, chapter took a different approach, asserting simply that “we’ve got the same smog problems in the [San Francisco] Bay Area that they have in Los Angeles.”⁴³ Figure 3 shows that it would be hard to make a more erroneous statement about the relative air quality of southern California and the Bay Area. As of the end of 2004, the entire Bay Area complied with all federal air pollution standards. Nevertheless, some local reporters have not caught on to the Bay Area’s low air pollution levels. Reporting on ALA’s 2005 installment of *State of the Air*, the *Oakland Tribune* ran the headline “Air Pollution Still Abysmal in Bay Area.”⁴⁴

Uncovering journalists’ and activists’ air pollution bloopers makes for good sport, but the constant and ubiquitous inflation of air pollution levels has sinister

implications. Activists depend on public fear and outrage over air pollution to keep the donations flowing and maintain their political power. Constantly claiming that virtually everyone breathes “some of the worst air pollution in the country” helps to create and maintain the desired but unwarranted climate of fear and anxiety.

Journalists should be acting as a check on these exaggerations, but they are not. Part of the problem may be that journalists, like much of the public, consider environmentalists to be the presumptive guardians of the public good. Reporters get much of their information on air pollution levels from activists’ reports such as *State of the Air* and *Danger in the Air*. News stories on these reports suggest that most journalists take the information in them at face value and pass it along without even cursory validation. The exaggerations have been repeated so often by ostensibly credible sources that they are now “common knowledge.” Many of the news stories quoted above do not even source their “some of the worst” assertions. They have quietly become an unquestioned part of the zeitgeist.

Polls continue to show that most Americans “know” many things about air pollution that are in fact not true. Reporters and activists bear much of the responsibility. Environmentalists have a strong incentive and desire to keep people scared about the environment, even when fear is unwarranted, and they are unlikely to reform their behavior. But we should expect more from journalists. The public’s interest is in getting an accurate portrayal of air pollution levels, trends, and health risks. But this can only happen if journalists treat environmentalists’ claims with the same skepticism appropriate for other interested parties in environmental debates.

Notes

1. All information on air pollution levels in this report comes from the Environmental Protection Agency’s AirData database: www.epa.gov/air/data/geosel.html.

2. I used 2000–2003 for the PM_{2.5} averaging period to maximize the number of monitoring sites included in my calculations. National monitoring did not begin until 1999, and several hundred more sites were added in 2000. For 2004, about 100 sites still had not reported in with complete data as of this writing.

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