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Amazon’s warehouse boom linked to health hazards in America’s most polluted region

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By Sam Levin

Amazon has dramatically expanded its warehouses in southern [California](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/california) in the past year, part of an effort to speed up deliveries during the pandemic’s online shopping boom.

But new research raises concerns about pollution and other environmental harms in low-income communities of color in the region, many of which already suffer from high rates of toxic emissions, traffic problems and some of the worst pollution in the US.

The [research done by the People’s Collective for Environmental Justice](https://earthjustice.org/sites/default/files/files/warehouse_research_report_4.15.2021.pdf) (PCEJ) and other local groups and shared with the Guardian, shows how warehouses have increased in the Inland Empire, an area 60 miles east of Los Angeles. The warehouses, which bring severe truck pollution to neighborhoods, cause bad air quality and related health problems that affect people of color more, the data shows.

Supporters, who are pushing new environmental restrictions for warehouses, are particularly concerned about the expansion of Amazon, which has scaled up more aggressively than some of its competitors – [tripling its hubs in southern California](https://www.ocregister.com/2021/03/26/amazon-triples-its-last-mile-delivery-network-in-southern-california/) over the last year while reporting huge [profits](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/29/amazon-profits-latest-earnings-report-third-quarter-pandemic). Some key findings from the data include:

* There are more than 3,000 large warehouses (over 100,000 sq ft) in southern California, and they are concentrated in areas that rank in the highest percentile for toxic emissions in the state (worse than 86% of the state’s census tracts).
* The populations living within half a mile of a warehouse are 85% people of color (compared with California, which is 64% people of color).
* There are 640 schools in the region that are located within a half mile of a warehouse.
* More than 450 warehouses are located in the top 10% worst census tracts for traffic-related pollution.
* The majority of warehouses are located in areas that do the least amount of online shopping in southern California overall. And the communities dominated by [Amazon](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/amazon) warehouses have the lowest rates of Amazon sales per household.

While the increase of warehouses has brought jobs to a region that has long suffered from high unemployment rates, advocates say the environmental consequences have been severe and that the jobs are sometimes hazardous or exploitative.

“Amazon has boomed in 2020 and tripled the amount of money it’s making, and it is happening at a cost to the folks who live in these communities,” said Ivette Torres, a PCEJ environmental science researcher, who put the research together alongside the Sierra Club and University of Redlands students.

A number of things contribute to the area’s extreme pollution, including rail yards and air planes, but research suggests that the warehousing boom and related truck emissions are a major factor.

There was a record high square footage of warehouse and industrial spaces built [in the Inland Empire](https://www.cbre.us/research-and-reports/Inland-Empire-Industrial-MarketView-Q4-2020) last year, and Amazon now has more than 50 locations in the region, according to a recent [OC Register](https://www.ocregister.com/2021/03/26/amazon-triples-its-last-mile-delivery-network-in-southern-california/) analysis. Corporations like Walmart and Target have also [expanded their warehousing](https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-12-03/warehouses-amazon-walmart-target-sold-2-billion-deal) in the area.

The city of San Bernardino, home to more than 75 large warehouses, has been ranked as having the [worst ozone pollution](https://www.hvvmg.com/report-ranks-san-bernardino-county-no-1-in-ozone-pollution/) in the US, recently [suffering](https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/are-warehouses-inland-empire-blessing-or-curse) more than 100 days of “bad air” each year.

“We’re dealing with smoggy summers that are getting worse and worse,” said Yassi Kavezade, an organizer with Sierra Club’s My Generation campaign, who lives in Riverside in the Inland Empire, which has the second-worst air pollution in the US. “We’re sick of getting alerts that say avoid being outside … because of dirty air. This is not normal.”

The groups’ data shows severe inequalities in the region where some coastal cities with the best air quality rely the most on Amazon for shopping, with the highest rates of sales per household. San Bernardino, where Amazon is one of the largest private-sector employers, has the lowest sales out of 40 largest cities in the LA metro area, the group reported.

“The neighborhoods ... are able to enjoy the benefits and convenience of online shopping and shipping without having to be in close proximity to these warehouses,” University of Redlands student researcher Vivian Pallares wrote in the report.

Andrea Vidaurre, a PCEJ policy analyst who is from the Inland Empire, said she was used to seeing new warehouses pop up and grew up alongside kids who were forced to leave school due to asthma attacks. But she was shocked to see how frequently the warehouses were located so close to schools: “You put something so dangerous by a vulnerable population like kids … I didn’t realize there were so many. It almost feels sick and wrong.”

The advocates are publishing the data as the South Coast Air Quality Management District, the local air pollution regulatory agency, considers new proposed warehouse restrictions that supporters say would be the first of its kind in the nation. The [Warehouse Indirect Source Rule](https://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/planning/fbmsm-docs/pr-2305_sia_2nd-draft_4-7-21.pdf?sfvrsn=8) would require new and existing large warehouses to take actions each year to reduce emissions locally, such as using zero-emission trucks, or otherwise pay a mitigation fee.

Jeff Bezos, Amazon’s founder and the world’s richest man, last year [pledged $10 billion to fight the climate crisis](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/17/amazon-jeff-bezos-pledge-10bn-fight-climate-crisis), and the company has said it was [acquiring more natural gas trucks](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-amazon-engines-natural-gas-exclusive/exclusive-amazon-orders-hundreds-of-trucks-that-run-on-natural-gas-idUSKBN2A52ML) to reduce pollution, and previously promised to be [carbon neutral](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-amazon-environment/amazon-vows-to-be-carbon-neutral-by-2040-buying-100000-electric-vans-idUSKBN1W41ZV) by 2040. Spokespeople did not respond to an inquiry about the data and proposed rule.

But Torres said the warehouse regulations could help bring about reforms that are urgently needed: “Last year, we saw some of the worst air quality, with wildfires adding to it, and the trucks were still in and out of our communities. So this is a huge change that we need right now, and that we actually needed yesterday.”

Link to article online:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/15/amazon-warehouse-boom-inland-empire-pollution>