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Student Pages - New York's Asthma Rates

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Activity 9.1: New York's Asthma Rates

New York's Asthma Rates

A report just issued by the Center for Children's Health and the Environment at Mount Sinai School of Medicine has concluded that the poor and minorities in New York City are 21 times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than the affluent. For example, lower East Harlem, where the average household income was \$18,732, had the most serious problem, with a rate of hospitalization of 222.28 per 10,000 per year. In a neighborhood like the Rockaways [in Queens], where the average household income was \$103,125, the rate was zero, which means that not a single person had to be treated in a hospital for asthma in the last year. The report cited a previous study that has shown that asthma hospitalization rates were 7.5 times higher for minorities than for whites.

The report offers three factors that could be responsible for the disparity in asthma rates. The first is that residents in the poorest neighborhoods lack access to proper preventative care.

Asthma, if left untreated, can lead to wheezing attacks that restrict the victim's ability to breathe. However, the disease can be treated with careful and long-term monitoring in the home. Some of the measures that can be taken include the use of air filters and hypo-allergenic bedding.

The authors of the Mount Sinai study cited previous studies that indicate that poor black and Hispanic families receive substandard care, and are therefore compelled to rely exclusively on the treatment they receive in an emergency hospital room. Proper follow-up care is rarely provided after the asthma attack is treated. A number of emergency room physicians have told the *WSWS* that the environment they work in simply does not give them the time or the opportunity to provide the necessary follow-up care.

Second, poor housing is a critical factor for the high rates in certain areas. This is because buildings in low-income areas may have an increased exposure to air pollutants due to excess water created by water leaks and poor ventilation. This will increase exposure to indoor allergens. Experts, in general, have identified pesticides, dirt, dust mites, and cockroaches as major causes of respiratory problems.

Third, there is significant evidence that minority and low-income people live in the most polluted areas in the city. They are exposed to the highest levels of toxic pollutants such as lead, ozone, carbon monoxide and particulates. Other studies have demonstrated a correlation between low air quality and respiratory diseases.

Excerpts from Allan Whyte's [New York's Asthma Rates Reveal Social Disparities](http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/asth-a26.shtml)
as published on August 26, 1999 by World Socialist Web Site
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/asth-a26.shtml>

Discussion Questions:

- What are the three factors the study cites as contributing to increased asthma rates?
- How might these factors play out differently in the neighborhood of East Harlem vs. The Rockaways?
- What other effects might these same factors have in a neighborhood?