Your Air Quality Is Affected by Data Centers

Even if none are near you, pollution from distant AI hubs reaches the Triad.

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THE DATA

650

Premature Deaths

In 2023, data center electricity demand caused an estimated 650 premature deaths across the U.S.

This figure reflects the health cost of powering AI-driven data centers, not just their physical footprint. The study reveals that emissions from power plants responding to data center demand travel far beyond the facilities themselves, affecting regions with no on-site infrastructure.

Source: Massachusetts Institute of Technology · Published November 19, 2026
https://news.mit.edu/2026/study-reveals-data-centers-long-distance-damage-air-quality-1119

01

The Midwest Bears the Brunt

Despite Virginia and Texas hosting the majority of data center electricity demand, states like Iowa, Kansas, and South Dakota saw some of the highest per-capita premature mortality rates linked to data center emissions. This is due to regional power grid dynamics and atmospheric transport of pollutants. For the Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point MSA, this means that even without a data center in the region, the health burden of AI infrastructure is already being shared across state lines.

02

Rural Populations at Greater Risk

The study found that rural communities face significantly higher mortality risk from data center-related air pollution than urban ones. This is due to a combination of agricultural ammonia emissions enhancing PM2.5 formation and the downwind transport of pollutants from industrial power sources. In the Triad, this suggests that suburban and exurban areas—often more reliant on agriculture and less served by pollution mitigation infrastructure—may be disproportionately impacted by the energy demands of digital infrastructure built far away.

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