

Frequently Asked Questions

Washington Environmental Health Disparities (EHD) Map



The places where we live, work, and play affect our health — so does our social world. Aspects of these environments overlap and interact. Factors like pollution, racism, colonialism, cost of living, and pre-existing health challenges can add up and make things worse.

The primary goal of the [EHD map](#) is to identify communities most affected by environmental health risks. The tool ranks these risks by census tract, highlighting communities most burdened with the cumulative impacts of pollution. It also identifies environmental health measures by census tract, providing useful, data-driven insights for communities, policymakers, government leaders and staff, and others.



Here's a list of frequently asked questions about the EHD map:

Why does it take so long to update the map?

Each update to this map involves many steps that take time. These steps include community and Tribal engagement, evaluating and developing new measures, reviewing and updating existing measures, and updating and creating communication materials. Read the [EHD Map Report](#) to learn more about the steps for updating the map. We are a small team, and we appreciate your patience with us.

Why is the data out of date?

There are many steps to add data to the EHD map, and each of these steps takes time. Much of the data we use in the EHD map comes from state or federal agencies that conduct surveys, collect health data, or test water and air for pollution. It takes time for these agencies to summarize, check the accuracy of, and publish the data.

By the time we publish our map, it is common for the data to be at least a few years old. The EHD map team also has a process to add data, and we aim to update the data every 3 to 4 years. Updating the map is a balance between keeping the data relevant and maintaining some consistency for agencies that rely on it for decision-making.

Why is the map deficit based?

The [Healthy Environment for All \(HEAL\) Act](#) and [Climate Commitment Act \(CCA\)](#) suggest using the EHD map to help direct funding to address risks or deficits. The deficits are the result of structural inequities that need to be named and identified. For some, naming disparities make them uncomfortable. However, many highly impacted and minoritized community members have shared that naming their lived experiences validates their realities.

The move to an asset-based model requires that we start by identifying who and what is causing the most harm. Failure to properly identify the ways disparities affect different populations and geographies would create a weak foundation for an asset map. We would create more harm than good and have little effect on closing social, structural, population, and geographical inequities. We must make the invisible visible, the silence voiced, and the harm named.

In the future, we plan to provide resources that communities can use to protect themselves and add community strengths and assets.

Can community-based organizations and community members use other supportive tools for grant applications?

We highly recommend using other sources of knowledge when making decisions. This includes community and Tribal engagement and any additional relevant data. The EHD map is not a full representation of the risks a community experiences. Other organizations may have specific requirements for grants, so we recommend you reach out to whoever is administering the grant or funding for more information.

Why is measure “x” not on this map?

Generally, there are 3 main reasons a measure is not on the map, even though we’ve heard the concern expressed by communities or Tribes:

1. There are no data available for this concern at the census tract level. As a small team, we rely on data published by state or federal agencies, researchers, and groups as a starting point for creating our measures. When there are no data available, we do not have the financial resources to generate our own data to create a new measure.
2. The measure is already very similar to one of the existing measures. Because of the way the overall EHD rank is calculated, having topics that measure similar factors will bias the overall EHD rank in favor of those concerns represented multiple times. We do our best to balance specific community and Tribal concerns, and repeating data that is already on the map.
3. We want to include the measure, but we are still working on it. Sometimes it can take a while for us to figure out what data is available and create a measure that best reflects community and Tribal concerns.

Why can’t we have more measures of health or racism?

We are always looking to add important measures to the EHD map. Some measures may take longer to develop, depending on what data are available. Please refer to the [EHD Map Report](#) for more information on this process. If there are additional concerns that you think should be reflected on the EHD map, please reach out to our team.

Can you add more overlays to the map?

We try to limit overlays to topics that people actively use. Having too many can cause the map to load more slowly and make it harder to use. The new map platform allows users to add overlays for their own use from any spatial data file already published on the internet. This includes any data in the Washington State Geospatial Data portal and many federal databases. Users can do this by using the “Add Data” button at the top right of the map.

Is it possible to recalculate any of the rankings at a different geographic level instead of census tracts (e.g., school districts, zip code, block group, and/or county)?

No. The EHD map ranks (including individual measures and theme ranks) should only be used at the census tract level. We present these measures at the census tract level because it provides the best balance of protecting individual privacy for health and economic data and precision in representing environmental concerns.

Additionally, many measures are calculated using distance or population weights. These do not translate accurately to other geographic levels. Recalculating at a different geography would reduce the reliability of the results.

We recommend using the EHD map as a starting point and supplementing it with local datasets. If you need assistance with this, reach out to our team.

How has the change from 2010 to 2020 census tracts impacted the map?

The U.S. Census Bureau redraws census tract boundaries every 10 years. Each census tract has around 4,000 people. Major factors driving the change in census tract boundaries include people moving in or out of an area, changes in housing development, and gentrification.

The 2020 census tract redistricting created 313 new census tracts in Washington state. Most of these are areas where an urban census tract gained population and was divided into 2 or more new census tracts.

The main result of this change is that more census tracts are ranked at 9 or 10 since there are more census tracts. However, most of the changes in the rankings are not because of the change from 2010 to 2020 census tracts. Instead, they come from changes in how measures are calculated, new measures added, and updates to the data.

How were the rankings calculated?

The ranks were created in R using the COINr package. We followed the description of the model in the Methodology section of [this report](#). The full code is available by contacting us at EHDMap@doh.wa.gov.

How is the EHD map used in policy and program decisions?

The map is used as a starting point for identifying communities that should be prioritized for funding. The funding addresses environmental health disparities.

The EHD map is used as a resource to address environmental health disparities by many different agencies and programs. Each group uses the EHD map in different ways. We recommend reaching out to specific programs for more details on how they use the map.

The CCA lists the EHD map as one of multiple data sources that can be used to identify “overburdened communities.” Vulnerable populations must receive at least 35 percent of the direct benefits from CCA investments. Communities (i.e. census tracts) that contain Tribal lands or have an overall EHD rank of 9 or 10 are considered overburdened communities.

The HEAL Act establishes a goal of directing 40 percent of grants and other resources that create environmental benefits to vulnerable populations and overburdened communities. This law specifically applies to actions from 7 covered state agencies. These agencies are the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Ecology, Health, Natural Resources, and Transportation, and the Puget Sound Partnership.

Finally, other agencies, organizations, and programs sometimes use the EHD map to help inform decisions. We recommend using this tool in combination with additional tools, datasets, and resources. Many of these groups use the cumulative EHD rank as a useful piece of information to help decide where to direct funding, programmatic activities, or other efforts.

For all these uses, the EHD map should serve as a starting point for creating a plan for equitable community engagement. It should not be the only factor in allocating funding or making decisions.

We are available to consult with you on how to use the map or interpret information on the map. We encourage you to tell us about how you are using the map. Contact us at EHDMap@doh.wa.gov.

For more information, visit the [EHD map webpage](#).