

# Making the Invisible Visible: Tackling Air Pollution

by Craig and Marc Kielburger



Stepping off a plane in Delhi a while back, Craig noticed a billboard in the distance. "Your whitest whites," it promised, advertising a new brand of laundry detergent. The once-white button-down in the photo had yellowed—so had the teeth of the Bollywood actor wearing it. Both were stained with soot.

We thought of this when, for a few days this June, air pollution in Delhi was [too high to measure](#). The dense, acrid smog choking India's capital was literally off the charts.

Dirty air surrounds [90 percent](#) of the world's population, and as many as [nine million](#) die each year from pollution-related illnesses—including [8,000 Canadians](#). It wasn't long ago that parents sent their kids outside for fresh air. Now smog warnings are as much a part of summer in Canadian cities as heat waves.

While the Great White North breathes easier than most countries—Canada [ranks third in air quality](#), according to the World Health Organization (WHO)—many cities, including Winnipeg, Windsor and [Montreal](#), come dangerously close to the recommended limit. Some, like [Sarnia](#) and [Chatham](#), exceed it. Inhaling pollutant particles can lead to everything from asthma, lung disease and cancer to [mental health](#) conditions, [diabetes](#) and [dementia](#).

Air pollution adds [\\$36 billion](#) to Canada's health care spending annually.

Global levels of [air pollution rose 8 percent](#) between 2011 and 2016—and though scientists practically shouted this from rooftops, few of us change our behaviour.

Air is invisible, making its contamination easier to ignore. So how do we gain perspective on what the WHO calls the world's single largest environmental risk?

Earlier this year, at an [art installation](#) outside London's Somerset House, visitors walked through geodesic domes filled with air climactically controlled to replicate the atmosphere of polluted environments. They tasted the sour ethanol of São Paulo, the bitter industry in Beijing and stale smell of old cars in Delhi.

The final dome came as a respite—the pristine, almost sweet-smelling air of Norway's Taura Island. With one last inhale, visitors were back on London streets, inhaling diesel fumes. Many took notice of London's poor air quality for the first time, inevitably leading to conversations about the city's pollution.

Experiences like this affect people in ways that facts and figures rarely do. If we want to move the needle, we need creative ways to make this invisible issue come alive for Canadians, including young people, who are more vulnerable to respiratory illness and the effects of air pollution.

In lieu of a ticket to Delhi, a science project will spark conversation. Take a piece of white plastic (a cut up milk carton will do), smear petroleum jelly over top and attach it to a pole or a fence. In a few days, particles of soot and exhaust will be stuck to your DIY pollution catcher. Kids are not the ones idling in driveways or culling rainforests, but they will inherit our dirty air and its consequences. Helping them see the issue from a young age is a first step.

This summer, as the mercury rises, and we escape to easy breathing at the lake, reminding ourselves of the urban haze is the least we can do.

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*Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the [WE movement](#), which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out [WE Stories](#).*