

OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT OK

Nsedu Obot Witherspoon, MPH

Ten years ago the Children's Environmental Health Network (CEHN), a national non-profit with the mission to protect all children from environmental hazards, launched Children's Environmental Health Day (CEH Day). This is a day of action for and with our youth on the second Thursday of every October, which is Child Health Month.

CEHN and partners network, engage, and share resources, tools, and best practices, while lifting our collective voices among elected officials and influencers around various protections that are still necessary for current and future generations to thrive. As of 2025, there are officially over 200 CEH Day partners, and the number continues to grow.

Awareness is growing among the general public on the impacts environmental exposures have on public health. Between 1999 and 2021, the percentage of children in the U.S. living in areas with pollutant concentrations above national standards decreased, as did the number of days with unhealthy air quality.

However, the percentage of children served by community drinking water systems with monitoring and reporting violations has fluctuated during this period. And for children ages 6-10, higher median levels of phthalate metabolites were found in their urine between 2015-2018.¹

When it comes to chronic child health outcomes, childhood asthma rates increased to 9.4% and then decreased to 6.5% in 2021. Disparities in childhood asthma rates continue, with Black children at 12.3% in 2021 compared to White children at 5.6%. Childhood cancer incidence, learning disabilities, and obesity rates continue to rise. Environmental exposures are linked to 25-40% of these negative health outcomes.

While infant mortality rates overall have declined, a concerning and persistent disparity exists with Black infants dying at a rate of 10.8 per 1,000 live births.²

Climate change is increasingly exacerbating air, water, and soil pollution while contributing to physical and mental health concerns, especially among children. Increased wildfires contribute to air pollution, increasing respiratory illness. Increased flooding and extreme storms are contributing to contamination of waterways. The rising heat index is contributing to dehydration, increased allergies, and heat stroke.

The Trump Administration's proposed rollbacks on vehicle emission standards, deregulation of coal burning power plants,

and EPA's overall mission to protect the public's health add additional stress and challenges for all communities, particularly those most marginalized and disinvested in.

The stakes could not be higher for the health, safety, and well-being of all children. The lessons from decades of peer-reviewed science and lived experiences demand a much different sense of urgency. During this 10th Anniversary of Children's Environmental Health Day, CEHN's Call to Action is for community, business, public health, health professional, youth, and science leaders to engage and work with elected officials and influential leaders to ensure that the health and well-being of all children is at the core of all policy making. We invite all to utilize the resources, toolkits, and technical assistance available through all CEH Day partners that position the needs of children first.

Now more than ever, we need child health champions to stand up, have courage, and raise their voice. If not us, then who?



Nsedu Obot Witherspoon, MPH, serves as Executive Director for the Children's Environmental Health Network (CEHN). She serves on the External Science Board for the Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) NIH Research work. She is a Co-Leader for the Health/Science initiative of the Cancer Free Economy Network. For the past 25 years, she has served as a key spokesperson for children's vulnerabilities and the need for their protection, conducting presentations and lectures across the country.

References

1. America's Children and the Environment, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Accessed July 28, 2025.
2. Smith, IZ., Bentley-Edwards, KL., El-Amin, S., and Darity W. *Fighting at Birth: Eradicating the Black-White Infant Mortality Gap*. Duke University's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and Insight Center for Community Economic Development. March 2018 Report.

Editors' note: The brief articles in this special section come from esteemed members of the Collaborative for Healthcare & Environment (CHE), a network founded at the SFMMS, UCSF, and Commonweal in Marin in 2002. For more see: <https://www.healthandenvironment.org/>