

The 2025 edition of the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) Annual Update has been Published

The 2025 edition of the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) Annual Update reveals that air pollution reduces India's average life expectancy by 3.5 years, with the entire population living in areas exceeding the WHO's safe limits for PM_{2.5}. The report, published by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, identifies the northern plains as the most polluted region globally, with residents in Delhi-NCR potentially gaining 8.2 years of life if pollution were reduced to WHO standards.

Key findings of the report

- **India's health crisis:** Air pollution reduces India's average life expectancy by 3.5 years, a greater loss than from malnutrition, tobacco, or unsafe water combined.
- **Nationwide pollution:** The entire population of India lives in areas where PM_{2.5} levels exceed the WHO's annual safe limit of 5 µg/m³.
- **High-risk regions:** The northern plains are the most polluted region globally, with 544.4 million people living in areas with hazardous air quality.

Life expectancy losses:

- Delhi-NCR residents could gain 8.2 years of life if pollution met WHO standards.
- Other states like Bihar, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh show potential life expectancy gains of 5.6, 5.3, and 5 years respectively.
- **India's own standards:** Even by India's less stringent national standard of 40 µg/m³, 46% of the population still lives in areas with unhealthy air.
- **South Asia's challenge:** South Asia remains the most polluted region in the world, with a 2.8% rise in PM_{2.5} concentrations in 2023. Bangladesh is identified as the most polluted country in the region.

Key findings for India

- **Widespread exposure:** The report indicates that all 1.4 billion people in India live in areas where PM_{2.5} levels exceed the World Health Organization's (WHO) safe limit of 5 µg/m³.
- **Northern Plains crisis:** The Indo-Gangetic Plain in Northern India is identified as the world's most polluted region. It is home to nearly 544 million people (around 39% of India's population) who are exposed to severely hazardous air quality.
- **Delhi-NCR worst hit:** Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) are disproportionately affected, with residents facing a potential loss of up to 8.2 years of life expectancy compared to WHO air quality standards.

- **Impact surpasses other threats:** The negative health effects of air pollution in India are more profound than those caused by childhood and maternal malnutrition, tobacco use, and unsafe water and sanitation combined.
- **Policy shortcomings:** Shockingly, 46% of India's population lives in areas that fail to meet even the country's own, more lenient annual PM2.5 standard of $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Regional and global context

- **South Asia most polluted:** The report confirms that South Asia remains the most polluted region on the planet. Its PM2.5 concentrations rose by 2.8% in 2023 after a small decline in 2022.
- **Global perspective:** Worldwide, PM2.5 concentrations in 2023 were 1.5% higher than in 2022 and nearly five times the WHO's annual guideline. The report identifies particulate pollution as the "greatest external threat to human life expectancy" globally.
- **Other highly affected areas:** Canada and the US recorded the highest increases in pollution among all countries in 2023, largely due to wildfires. In Latin America, Bolivia was the most polluted country and entered the global top 10 for the first time since 2010.
- **Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is the most polluted country globally, with air pollution potentially reducing life expectancy by 5.5 years, particularly in cities like Gazipur.
- **China:** China has made significant progress, reducing pollution by 40.8% since 2014 through policy changes, though pollution levels still remain above WHO limits.

Policy implications and recommendations

The AQLI 2025 findings underscore the need for urgent policy interventions and stronger enforcement. Potential measures highlighted in news coverage include:

- Strengthening the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) and improving its implementation.
- Tightening national air quality standards to move closer to WHO guidelines.
- Enhancing coordination among agencies by filling vacancies in pollution control boards.
- Promoting a regional clean-air initiative across South Asia.
- Increasing investment in clean energy infrastructure and electric vehicles.

Practice Questions:

1. With reference to India's regional variations in air pollution, as highlighted in the AQLI 2025 report, consider the following statements:

Statement I: The Indo-Gangetic Plain in Northern India is identified as the world's most polluted region, exposing a significant portion of India's population to poor air quality.

Statement II: Among the major urban centers, residents of Delhi-NCR face the largest life expectancy reduction globally, and even meeting India's national air quality standards would not erase this life expectancy loss.

Which one of the following is correct in respect of the above statements?

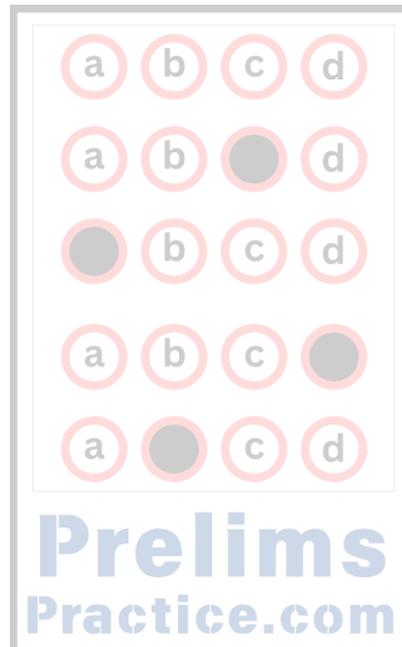
- a) Both Statement I and Statement II are correct and Statement II is the correct explanation for Statement I
- b) Both Statement I and Statement II are correct but Statement II is not the correct explanation for Statement I
- c) Statement I is correct but Statement II is incorrect
- d) Statement I is incorrect but Statement II is correct

Answer: b

Explanation: Statement I is correct- The report confirms that the Indo-Gangetic Plain is the world's most polluted region. It states that around 544 million people (approximately 39% of India's population) live in this severely polluted zone. **Statement II is correct-** The AQLI 2025 report shows that residents of Delhi-NCR face the most severe life expectancy reduction globally, at 8.2 years compared to WHO standards. Critically, the report mentions that even if the city were to meet India's less stringent standard of $40 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, residents would still lose 4.7 years of life, confirming that meeting the national standard does not eliminate the life expectancy reduction. **Conclusion-** Both statements are correct factual observations from the report. However, Statement II does not explain Statement I. While Delhi is part of the Indo-Gangetic Plain mentioned in Statement I, the general regional pollution does not explain the specific, disproportionate impact in Delhi-NCR mentioned in Statement II. Delhi's severe impact is due to a confluence of factors (traffic, industry, geography), making Statement II a separate point rather than an explanation for Statement I.

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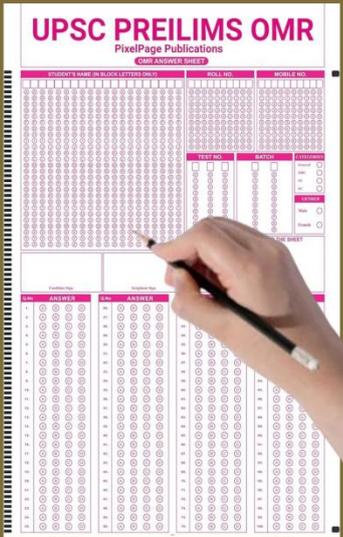




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