# Dieselgate defeat devices linked to 16,000 UK deaths and surge in childhood asthma



In the aftermath of the Dieselgate scandal, a new analysis has pointed to its grim legacy, revealing that excess pollution from diesel vehicles equipped with illegal "defeat devices" has led to approximately 16,000 premature deaths in the UK and triggered an alarming rise in childhood asthma cases. Researchers estimate these devices have caused around 30,000 cases of asthma among children, underscoring a significant public health crisis linked to the pursuit of diesel efficiency. Furthermore, the study projects that without urgent intervention, an additional 6,000 individuals may succumb to pollution-related diseases in the coming years.

The tragedy of Dieselgate first came to light in 2015 when it was discovered that many diesel cars emitted far higher levels of toxic air pollutants on the road than during laboratory tests, a revelation that seemingly caught regulators off guard. In stark contrast to the stringent actions taken by the United States, where Volkswagen faced hefty fines and mandatory vehicle buybacks, the UK government and much of the EU have been slow to respond. Many older, highly polluting diesel vehicles continue to contribute to poor air quality across British cities, leading to calls for immediate action to mitigate their health impacts.

According to the analysis, which focused exclusively on the harmful emissions exacerbated by the defeat devices rather than total diesel emissions, these excess pollutants have resulted in over 800,000 days of sick leave in the UK alone and a staggering economic burden estimated at £96 billion by 2024. On a wider scale, the fallout from Dieselgate has predicted about 124,000 premature deaths and an economic toll of €760 billion (£637 billion) across the UK and EU. If unaddressed, an additional 81,000 premature deaths and an extra €430 billion in economic damage could stem from the repercussions of this ongoing crisis by 2040.

Dr Jamie Kelly, affiliated with the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, commented on the implications of these findings, stating, “Our calculations reveal the widespread and devastating health impacts of excessive diesel emissions – thousands of lives cut short, countless children developing asthma, and an immense burden of chronic illness.” He highlighted the urgency for government action, as failure to address this issue will leave a long-lasting legacy affecting future generations.

This dire scenario has drawn criticism from various advocacy groups. Emily Kearsey, a lawyer at ClientEarth, expressed frustration with the UK government’s inadequate response to the health crisis. “Auto manufacturers have been trying to sweep the Dieselgate scandal under the carpet for too long. The UK government has the opportunity to finally stand up for people’s health and hold polluters accountable,” she argued. Jemima Hartshorn from the campaign group Mums for Lungs echoed these sentiments, noting that millions of diesel cars on the streets are continuing to emit toxically high levels of pollution, detrimentally affecting public health, particularly that of children.

Legal measures, albeit slow and insufficient, have begun to emerge. In 2020, legislation was enacted placing a duty on the UK government to investigate vehicles suspected of employing defeat devices, yet critics note that these powers have yet to be fully realised. Despite a legal complaint launched by ClientEarth in 2023, which highlighted substantial evidence of ongoing pollution from such vehicles, definitive action remains elusive. The UK government revealed in 2024 that it was investigating numerous car models linked to 11 manufacturers under suspicion of using defeat devices, but activists demand swifter accountability.

Internationally, the stark contrasts in regulatory responses are evident. In the U.S., Volkswagen faced fines totalling £1.45 billion alongside a commitment to invest $5 billion into pollution mitigation. By comparison, the UK has yet to impose any fines on car manufacturers or mandate recalls, essentially leaving consumers to seek recompense through the courts. This has resulted in an ongoing wave of legal claims, with almost 2 million consumer lawsuits filed against various auto manufacturers. While Volkswagen recently agreed to compensate around 91,000 drivers in England and Wales with £193 million, most owners of affected vehicles remain uninformed about whether their cars were recalled or repaired.

The Crea report informing these findings relied on extensive data regarding car fleets and real-world emissions modelling, reinforcing the correlations between air pollutants, such as nitrogen dioxide, and their detrimental health outcomes. Estimates indicate that emissions exceeding legal limits have escalated mortality figures that could be conservatively assessed at around 13,000 deaths in the UK by 2024, a reflection of the deep-rooted public health challenges induced by toxic diesel emissions.

The environmental ramifications of diesel emissions are further compounded by recurring warnings from health authorities. The World Health Organization has previously stated that air pollution contributes to an estimated 7 million deaths annually worldwide, with the true toll likely much higher when considering the far-reaching consequences of these emissions. As pressure mounts on governmental bodies to enforce stricter measures, the immediate need for decisive action to mitigate the public health risks posed by diesel emissions has never been clearer.

Echoing the urgency for reform, a spokesperson for the UK’s Department for Transport stated that defeat devices are illegal and misleading, with negative health implications. The official highlighted ongoing investigations into vehicle emissions standards but failed to provide a definitive timeline for substantial changes.

As the Dieselgate scandal continues to unfold, the implications for public health and economic stability demand heightened scrutiny and action. Without a reassessment of diesel policies and a commitment to cleaner air, the UK faces a lingering crisis with repercussions that will echo for generations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/15/uk-car-industry-must-pay-up-for-toxic-air-catastrophe-super-inquiry-finds)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/15/diesel-emissions-test-scandal-causes-38000-early-deaths-year-study), [[6]](https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/scientists-link-dieselgate-to-5000-premature-deaths-per-year-in-europe/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/15/diesel-emissions-test-scandal-causes-38000-early-deaths-year-study), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/15/uk-car-industry-must-pay-up-for-toxic-air-catastrophe-super-inquiry-finds)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/30/emissions-scandal-how-the-drive-for-diesel-ran-out-of-gas), [[6]](https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/scientists-link-dieselgate-to-5000-premature-deaths-per-year-in-europe/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates)
* Paragraph 8 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/15/uk-car-industry-must-pay-up-for-toxic-air-catastrophe-super-inquiry-finds)
* Paragraph 9 – [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/30/emissions-scandal-how-the-drive-for-diesel-ran-out-of-gas), [[6]](https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/scientists-link-dieselgate-to-5000-premature-deaths-per-year-in-europe/)
* Paragraph 10 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/30/emissions-scandal-how-the-drive-for-diesel-ran-out-of-gas)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/dieselgate-pollution-killed-16000-people-in-uk-study-estimates> - A recent study estimates that pollution from vehicles equipped with defeat devices has resulted in approximately 16,000 premature deaths in the UK and 30,000 cases of childhood asthma. The study also projects an additional 6,000 premature deaths in the coming years if no action is taken. The Dieselgate scandal, which began in 2015, revealed that diesel cars emitted significantly more toxic air pollution on the roads than during regulatory tests due to the use of illegal 'defeat devices'. While the US imposed large fines and compulsory recalls, the UK and most EU countries have been slower to act, leading to severe health impacts. The analysis focused solely on the excess pollution from these devices, estimating that in the UK, it led to 800,000 days of sick leave and an economic burden of £96 billion by 2024. Across the UK and EU, the fallout from Dieselgate has resulted in about 124,000 early deaths and economic damage of €760 billion (£637 billion). Without intervention, a further 81,000 premature deaths and €430 billion in economic damage are projected by 2040, by which time most Dieselgate vehicles will no longer be in use.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/15/diesel-emissions-test-scandal-causes-38000-early-deaths-year-study> - A global study revealed that diesel emissions testing failures have led to at least 38,000 premature deaths annually due to vehicles emitting more nitrogen oxides (NOx) than regulations permit. Researchers created a global inventory of emissions from cars and trucks, finding that excess emissions amounted to 4.6 million tonnes in 2015, resulting in early deaths from heart and lung diseases and strokes. The study highlights the serious consequences of manufacturers' irresponsible actions and underscores the urgent need to address the public health crisis caused by NOx emissions.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/15/uk-car-industry-must-pay-up-for-toxic-air-catastrophe-super-inquiry-finds> - A parliamentary inquiry has called the UK's toxic air pollution a 'national health emergency' and criticized the government's inadequate response. The inquiry found that air pollution causes 40,000 early deaths annually and accused ministers of avoiding tough action for political convenience. The MPs recommended bringing forward the 2040 ban on conventional diesel and petrol cars to match other nations' ambitions around 2030. They also criticized the government's clean air plans, which have been deemed illegal three times in the High Court, with the latest plan condemned as 'woefully inadequate' by city leaders and 'inexcusable' by doctors.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/30/emissions-scandal-how-the-drive-for-diesel-ran-out-of-gas> - The UK's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) acknowledged that the failure of Euro standards to deliver expected emission reductions under real-world driving conditions means that road transport is the largest contributor to NO₂ pollution. The document also revealed that, for the first time, UK officials used World Health Organization data to calculate the toll of premature deaths caused by NO₂, estimating 23,500 deaths annually, in addition to 29,000 deaths from particulate pollution. The combined impact of these pollutants represents a significant public health challenge.
6. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/scientists-link-dieselgate-to-5000-premature-deaths-per-year-in-europe/> - A study published in the journal Environmental Research Letters estimates that emissions from diesel cars rigged to appear eco-friendly may be responsible for 5,000 extra deaths from air pollution per year in Europe. This study aligns with previous assessments of deaths due to the 'Dieselgate' scandal, which erupted when carmaker Volkswagen admitted in 2015 to cheating on vehicle emissions tests. The new study focuses on the perils for Europe, calculating that about 10,000 deaths in Europe per year can be attributed to small particle pollution from light-duty diesel vehicles.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/27/health-effects-of-diesel-cost-european-taxpayers-billions> - A report indicates that the health effects of diesel pollution cost European taxpayers billions annually. The World Health Organization's global figure of 7 million early deaths is considered an underestimate, as it only includes particle pollution and the five most firmly linked causes of death. Early estimates using improved models indicate a total figure of 9 million from particle pollution alone. The report suggests that ambitious action by 2030, including two-thirds of new cars being electric or plug-in hybrid and a ban on all pre-2014 vehicles, would cut health costs by 80% compared with today.