

FRANCE

2026 CITY DATA INSIGHTS



The 2026 Europe Cities Report of the *Lancet* Countdown presents a systematic, policy-relevant set of climate change and health indicators for European cities. This document highlights key France-specific city-level findings.

As the world's fastest-warming continent, Europe faces an escalating public health crisis. Cities sit on the front line of this threat, with dense populations, heat-trapping infrastructure and limited cooling due to inadequate green space. All of this multiplies the dangers from climate-related heatwaves, floods, droughts and wildfires. These environmental hazards directly harm human health and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, including children, older adults, outdoor workers and low-income communities. Cities also offer substantial opportunities for effective climate action.

In 2023, about 40% of France's population (26.8 million out of 68.3 million people) lived in 72 cities, according to the Urban Audit definition. About 49% of the urban population lived in France's two largest cities, Paris and Lyon, while only 27.6% lived in 59 small and medium-sized cities. This high population density exacerbates the health risks of climate change for urban populations. Among France's urban population, 4.7 million (17.7%) were aged over 65 and 4.8 million (18%) were children under 15, meaning over a third is at higher risk from climate change.

Heat and Health

Urban populations are increasingly exposed to extreme heat, contributing to rising heat-related illness and mortality, and undermining livelihoods and wellbeing.

Heat-related mortality

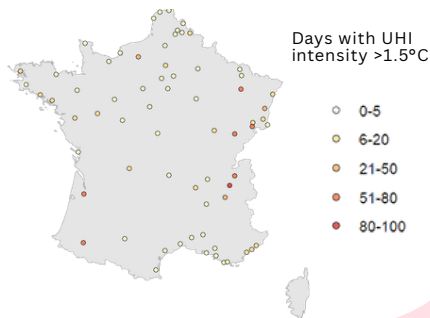


Across France's cities, average annual heat-related deaths increased by 73 per million between 2015-2024, compared with 1991-2000 (indicator 1.1.2).



Perpignan recorded the largest increase in average annual heat-related deaths per million people (1,184%), rising from 10.7 per million in 1991 to 2000 to 139.2 in 2015 to 2024, followed by Martigues (965%) and Toulouse (919%) (indicator 1.1.2).

Average number of days with UHI > 1.5°C between 2003-2020 across cities in France.



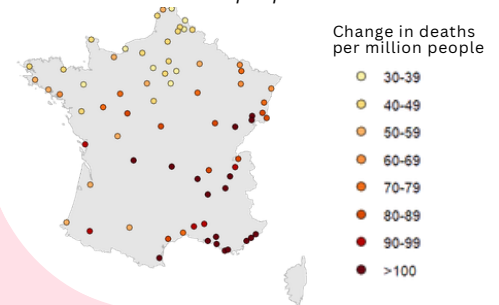
Heat exposure in cities

Most cities trap heat, creating an "urban heat island" (UHI) effect that makes urban areas significantly hotter than nearby rural areas. As climate change raises global temperatures and intensifies heatwaves, the UHI effect worsens health risks, driving increases in a range of heat-related health impacts, including heat exhaustion, cardiovascular strain and mortality, particularly among vulnerable populations.



For example, between 2003 and 2020, Chambéry, Annecy and Nancy each recorded more than 300 days on which urban temperatures exceeded those of surrounding rural areas by more than 1.5°C. This averaged 90, 78 and 75 days per summer, respectively, well above the French urban average of 12 days (indicator 1.1.1).

Change in heat-related mortality rate between 1991-2000 and 2015-24, expressed as the number of annual deaths per million people.



Sustainable urban cooling

To safeguard public health and prevent heat-related deaths, cities must adapt to extreme heat. Expanding tree cover offers a practical and effective means of cooling urban environments and building community resilience.

Urban tree cover

To support urban cooling, reduce air pollution and protect public health, the UN Economic Commission for Europe recommends that cities maintain at least 30% tree cover.



Cities in France had an average tree cover of 1,289 hectares in 2020, equivalent to 9.2% of total urban land area. Only two cities, Fréjus and Besançon, had tree cover of 30% or more in 2020 (indicator 2.2.4).



The Paris metropolitan area had the largest tree cover by area (19,500 hectares, or 8.9% of total area), while La Rochelle had the smallest (8.6 hectares, 0.2%). Dunkerque recorded the largest percentage increase since 2000 (33%), from 154.9 to 206.2 hectares (indicator 2.2.4).

Heat-reflecting surfaces

Darker, heat-absorbing materials contribute to rising urban temperatures. Replacing them with lighter, reflective or natural materials can help to lower land surface temperatures, for example, by replacing concrete with soil or vegetation. In France, however, the extent of such surfaces has decreased, leaving considerable scope to expand their use for urban cooling (indicator 2.2.2).

Sustainable and Healthy Transport

Active travel and public transport

Active and healthy transport, such as walking and cycling, and the use of public transport support urban decarbonisation and improve air quality by reducing vehicle emissions. It also builds daily physical activity into everyday journeys, significantly lowering the risk of chronic disease and improving mental health and wellbeing.

The Sustainable Transport Score measures how easily residents can walk, cycle or use public transport in a city, with 7 out of 10 considered a good score. In 2022, French cities fell short, with an average score of 5 out of 10. On average, cities had 30% of their total area within 250 metres of at least one public transport stop and 37% of pathways supported walking, while dedicated cycling infrastructure covered only 9.5% of roads (indicator 3.3.1).

In 2022, Paris achieved the highest overall score (6.3 out of 10). The top-performing French cities were (indicator 3.3.1):

- Walking: Marne-la-Vallée was the most walkable, with 53.2% of roads being pedestrian-friendly.
- Cycling: Strasbourg offered the best cycling access, with 18.6% of roads having cycle lanes.
- Public Transport: Paris led with 76% of its area within 250 metres of a public transport stop.

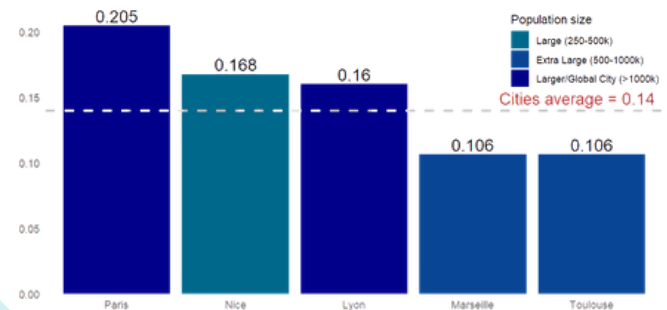
Heat-resilient cycling infrastructure

Climate change is bringing increasingly frequent and prolonged periods of extreme heat to cities, limiting when people can safely walk or cycle outdoors. Building heat-resilient pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, particularly through natural tree shading, is becoming vital to protect urban residents and keep communities moving safely.

In France, 14% of cycling paths and shared cycling and pedestrian paths were shaded by tree cover between 2018 and 2020 (indicator 2.2.5).

Of the French cities exposed to moderate to high heat stress, Belfort and Besançon had the highest proportions of shaded infrastructure, at 28.9% and 26.6%, respectively, roughly double the national average of 14% (indicator 2.2.5).

Proportion of shaded cycling infrastructure in cities in France



Energy, Air Pollution and Health

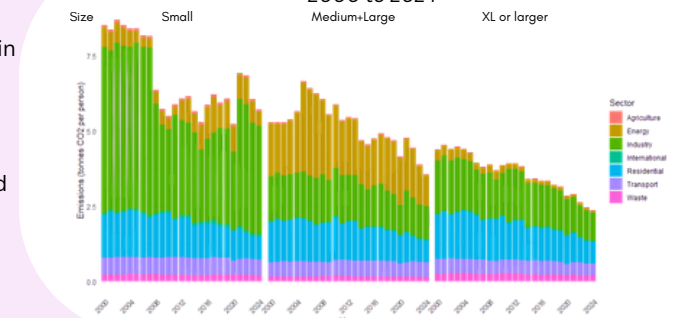
Fossil fuel combustion is a primary driver of rapid global heating and of fine particulate pollution (PM_{2.5}), both of which pose severe risks to human health. Decarbonising energy systems by switching to clean, renewable energy removes fossil fuel-related pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions at source, significantly reducing the risk of PM_{2.5}-attributable early deaths and chronic illness.

Sectoral sources of greenhouse gas emissions

Between 2000 and 2024, greenhouse gas emissions per person across French cities declined by 42.6%, with the largest reduction in the energy sector (68%) (indicator 3.1.1).

Within the energy sector, the French part of Annemasse-Geneva recorded the greatest reduction in average emissions per person between 2000 and 2024 (100%), followed by Grenoble (92.4%) and Le Havre (91.9%) (indicator 3.1.1). These reductions are possibly linked to the phase-out of coal and a wider transition to cleaner energy, supported by strict EU regulations.

Greenhouse gas emissions by sector and city size from 2000 to 2024



PM_{2.5} attributable mortality

Expanding renewable energy incentives has delivered major public health co-benefits across France. Between 2000 and 2023, PM_{2.5} mortality attributable to power generation declined by 82% in French cities, alongside an overall 52% decline in premature deaths linked to PM_{2.5} from dirty fuel use across sectors (indicator 3.2.1).

In 2023, Paris recorded 86 premature deaths per 100,000 people attributable to PM_{2.5} from polluting fuels, with transport being the leading sectoral contributor at 38%. Between 2000 and 2023, Béziers achieved France's largest reduction in PM_{2.5}-attributable premature deaths, falling by 69.2% (76.6 fewer deaths per 100,000 people) (indicator 3.2.1).

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