

ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE AND HEALTH DISPARITIES NEAR THE SALTON SEA



1950's Postcard

Introduction

The Salton Sea, a shrinking and highly saline lake in Riverside and Imperial Counties, has been deteriorating since its accidental creation in 1905. Factors such as pollution, drought, and reduced water inflows have led to environmental and health impacts. These include dust storms and poor air quality, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. The children living in these areas face increased health risks which can lead to chronic absenteeism, potentially threatening their education and future. Though concern continues to grow regarding environmental injustice, there has been little research that explores the link between the conditions of the Salton Sea and school attendance. This study explores that link, with a focus on health disparities of children attending schools in the area. It also explores how better access to healthcare might help.

Methodology

Area of Focus:
Mecca, CA

Goal:
This study aims to highlight the environmental justice concerns to better inform policies that support the health and education of students.

Quantitative Research:
In order to find a link between proximity to the Salton Sea and higher absenteeism due to poor air quality, school attendance data and public health data was analyzed.

Secondary Data Analysis:
This study examines the absenteeism among K-12 students in the Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) by using:

- Absenteeism Reports (CVUSD, 2023-2024)
- CA Dept of Public Health (Asthma Dashboard, 2019-2020)
- U.S. Census Data (Demographics and Housing, 2022)
- CalEnviroScreen 4.0 (Air Quality and Pollution Data, 2015-2017)

Limitations:
Given a lack of individual health records and interviews, it is possible to result in an underreporting or generalization of absence causes.

Key Findings

- Demographics:**
- 98% of the population is Hispanic
 - 19.8% of the population is under 18 years, indicating a significant portion of school-aged residents
- Absenteeism:**
- Average absenteeism rate of CVUSD is 18.9 days
 - 42.1% of absences are excused, 55.8% are not
 - Riverside County's rate is 13.7 days
 - California's rate is 12.8 days.
- Asthma Prevalence:**
- 12.2% of Riverside County residents diagnosed with asthma
 - Children aged 5-17: 13.4%

Conclusion

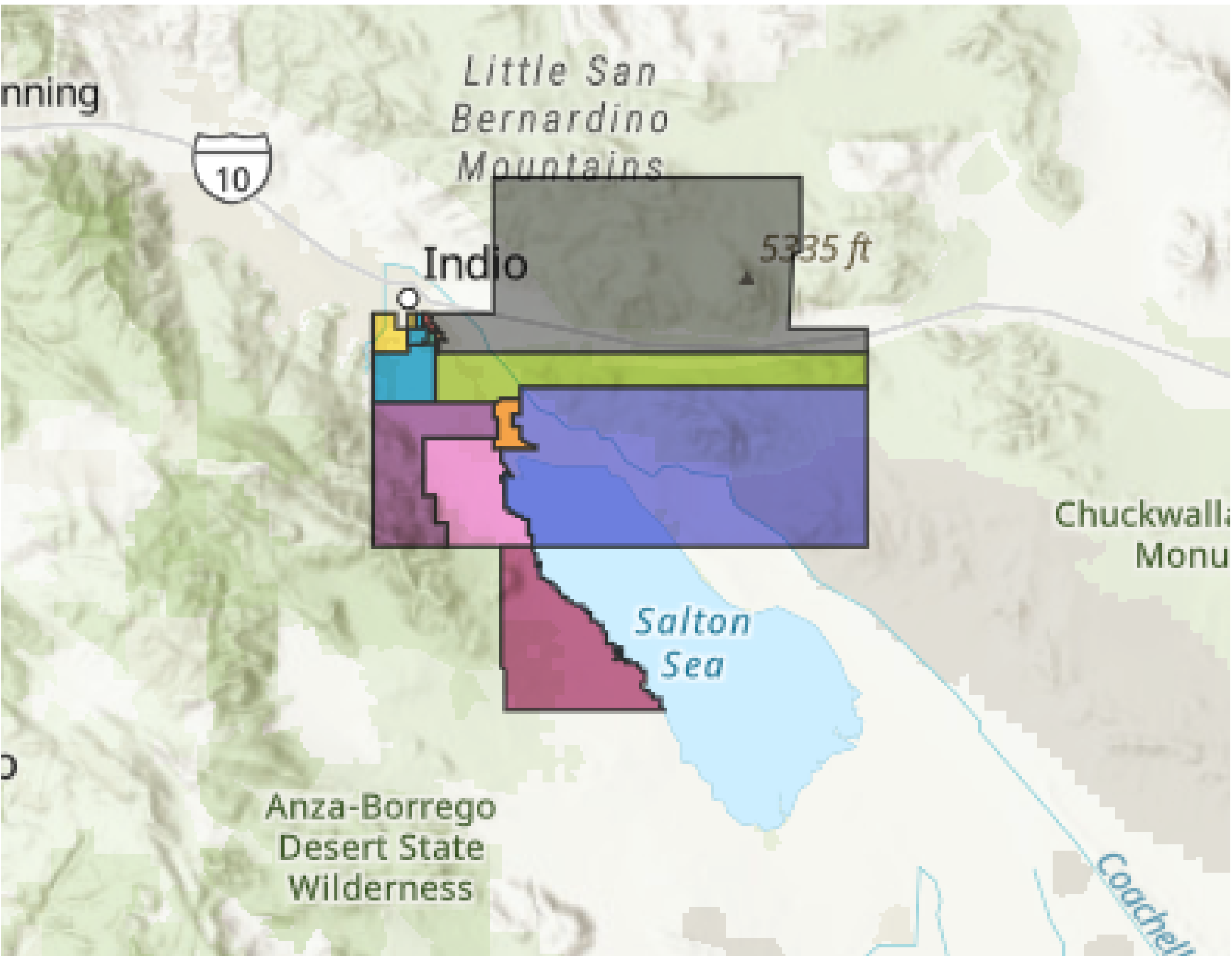
- Link:**
Proximity to the Salton Sea, asthma prevalence, and school absenteeism rates appear to be connected, as schools with higher average days absent are located closer to the Salton Sea with high asthma rates.
- Impact:**
The resulting health and educational outcomes disproportionately impact the low-income and Hispanic populations in surrounding communities.
- Addressing the Issue:**
It is urgent to address these environmental injustices through adequate policies, restoration efforts, and healthcare support. Approaches should be centered around the needs of the community to bring access to cleaner air, economic stability, and healthcare. Investment should be not only in short-term relief strategies, but those leading to long-term systemic change as well.

Recommendations

- Accelerate Restoration Projects
 - Prioritize funding & incorporate community input
- Implement School-Based Air Filtration Systems
 - Reduce students' exposure to harmful PM
- Attendance-Linked Health Interventions
 - Track & address absenteeism linked to asthma
- Involve Community in Decision-Making
 - Develop planning forums & include voices of affected residents
- Ensure Future Policies are Equity-Driven
 - Adopt APA framework for future Salton Sea-related policies

School	Average Days Absent (2023-2024)	Approximate Distance to Salton Sea	Nearby Community	Community Asthma Burden (Approximate) 2015-2017
La Familia Cont. High	24.8	10 miles	Mecca	26 per 10,000 ER visits; 18th percentile
Desert Mirage High	23.1	9 miles	Mecca	26 per 10,000 ER visits; 18th percentile
West Shores High	22.2	2 miles	Salton City	63 per 10,000 ER visits; 73rd percentile
Mountain Vista Elementary	13.7	19 miles	Coachella	56 per 10,000 ER visits; 63rd percentile
Peter Pendleton Elementary	14.5	14 miles	Coachella	56 per 10,000 ER visits; 63rd percentile
Palm View Elementary	14.6	14 miles	Coachella	56 per 10,000 ER visits; 63rd percentile

School Absenteeism and Environmental Factors:



CVUSD Boundary:



California's 10-Year Plan

- Dust suppression projects
- Preserve wildlife habitats
- Water delivery "backbone" system
- Adaptive management
- Public outreach
- Pilot projects and data collection

Can this 10-year plan succeed where others have failed?



1958 - Watersports Activities



Present - Dry Soil from Shoreline