

Children down in the dumps

HEALTH: RESIDENTS IN POLLUTED KYA SANDS INFORMAL SETTLEMENT LIVING ON THE EDGE

→ **Wasteland of burning toxic rubbish, poor air quality and sewage spills.**

Seth Thorne

GroundUp

Seeing children playing on top of heaps of smouldering trash has become a common sight in Kya Sands informal settlement in Randburg.

The thick, black smoke from illegally dumped waste burns day and night. It is a toxic mix of burning rubber, plastic, roof insulation and general trash.

"This is no way to live," says resident Richard Nyiza. "My two-year-old daughter is always sick."

He lives on the edge of the settlement, built on the banks of the heavily polluted North Riding stream.

Kya Sands is not unique in its pollution. The Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) surveyed 4 436 Johannesburg residents. One in five reported suffering harm from air pollution.

City of Joburg spokesperson Nthatsi Modingoane told *GroundUp* air pollution remains a "significant environmental challenge" and was largely driven by human activities such as waste and biomass burning, industrial operations, vehicle emissions and mining.

Modingoane said city monitoring found concentrations of particulate matter "periodically exceeding national air quality standards in certain areas".

Up to 85% of households near mining and industrial activity report experiencing harm or damage, according to the GCRO survey.

Researchers noted these areas are predominantly "previously disadvantaged communities characterised by lower monthly household income and spatial inequality".

Data from the South African Consortium of Air Quality Monitoring shows 376 out of the 581 hours monitored (65%) saw air pollution exceeding acceptable limits in Kya Sands last month.

The Kya Sands Burning Wasteland Community Forum non-profit company, which represents residents and businesses in Kya Sands and surrounds, is working to stop illegal waste dumping and burning.

Supported by a pro bono legal team, it has implemented private security measures, arguing authorities have failed to effectively address the problem.

Donald Ragzuma, a private security guard who is stationed on the main road, has the job of stopping trucks and bakkies that come from other areas to dump trash.

"People often come after we leave at night and burn the trash. It is most often businesses that send people to dump."

"The pile then smokes for days," added Ragzuma.

Modingoane said while most licensed industries comply with regulations and monitoring, localised pollution is still caused by smaller industrial operations, informal recycling, panel-beating workshops and illegal mining.

Johannesburg is updating its air quality management plan, including the implementation of measurable emission reduction targets.



SLIM PICKINGS. A resident of the Pipeline area, an eastern section of Kya Sands informal settlement, searches for materials to recycle at an illegal dump site in the area.



GOING TO WASTE. A child dumps rubbish outside a shack. Pictures: Ihsaan Haffeeje

20%
of Joburg residents reported harm from air pollution.

While working with provincial and national authorities, it will continue to monitor air quality, enforce environmental regulations and run education campaigns, said Modingoane.

While one in five Johannesburg residents reported harm from air pollution, one in 10 households experienced harm from water pollution, according to the GCRO research.

Standing on the banks of the Jukskei river in Bruma, the pungent, murky river is awash with raw sewage, trash, industrial runoff and shows no signs of life.

The Jukskei is now one of the most polluted and degraded urban waterways in South Africa, suffering severe contamination with high E. coli levels and heavy trash accumulation.

Other waterways in the city, like the Klip River, are suffering a similar fate, driven by failing wastewater treatment works, ageing sewerage infrastructure, rapid urbanisation, illegal dumping, industrial and urban runoff and pollution from mining.

Johannesburg's Green Drop audit score has plummeted from 91% in 2011 to a "poor" 49% last year.

Half of the city's six wastewater treatment works are in a "critical state",

info

► The Kya Sands settlement is about 38km northwest of Johannesburg's CBD. It is bordered on the west by the Kya Sand industrial area. Residents have to endure thick smoke billowing from an illegal dump site in the informal settlement and a toxic stream on its edge. The area is not unique. According to the Gauteng City-Region Observatory, nearly a quarter of Joburg residents suffer harm from polluted water and sewage spills, among other hazards.

discharging raw or poorly treated effluent directly into fresh water sources.

The SA Human Rights Commission's Gauteng water crisis investigative inquiry heard how this contamination has had a devastating effect on ecosystems and directly impacts people who use the water for consumption, recreation and agriculture.

According to the GCRO, nearly a quarter of Johannesburg residents experience harm from water and sewage pipe bursts, "reflecting underinvestment and a lack of maintenance".

According to Joburg Water's 2024-25 annual report, there were 1 659 recorded sewage plant spillages.

With about 145 leaks reported per day and 328 water pipe bursts per 100km of water pipes in 2024-25, Joburg Water has responded with a R64 billion turnaround strategy, which seeks to replace 85km of water pipes annually and upgrade sewer mains.

The utility has also said it is filling technical posts for faster response times, while poorly performing wastewater treatment works will see refurbishments and capacity expansions to improve effluent compliance and prevent environmental pollution.



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