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The lower the income, the greater the impact of noise, dust and heat

Conversely, environmentally harmful behaviour increases with higher income

Vienna, 2026-09-16 – People with high household incomes are more likely to report high levels of environmentally harmful behaviour (26.0%) than those with medium (18.0%) and low household incomes (9.7%). Conversely, the lower a person's income, the more severely they are affected by environmental problems such as noise or heat. This is shown by an analysis by Statistics Austria on environmental justice in Austria.

People on low incomes are more severely affected by noise or heat

Noise disturbances occur more frequently among people with low household income (16.8% experience very or fairly severe noise disturbance) than among those with high household income (10.1% experience very or fairly severe noise disturbance). The subjective level of burden during a heatwave – as measured in 2023 as part of the Microcensus module on 'Environmental Conditions and Behaviour' – also varies according to income level: 23.5% of people with a low household income report feeling very severely affected, compared with a significantly lower figure of 13.4% among those with a high household income.

The cumulative exposure to environmental problems decreases as income rises

For the first time, this study examined the combined effect of noise, dust, soot, heat and the effects of climate change across different income groups. When considered together, it becomes even clearer that the lower the income of the respondents, the more severely they are affected by environmental problems. More than one-fifth (21.5%) of people on low household incomes are severely affected by noise, dust and heat, while the group on high household incomes has the lowest proportion at 15.6%.

When further characteristics such as gender, age or employment status are taken into account besides income groups, it becomes apparent that women are slightly more affected by environmental pollution than men. Women on low household incomes (22.3%) are the most severely affected, while men on high household incomes (14.4% severely affected) are the least affected.

The older the respondents were, the less likely they were to report being affected by environmental problems. Among those aged 30 to under 40 with low household incomes, 31.4% reported being highly affected by adverse environmental conditions. Among those aged 70 and over with low household incomes, this figure was significantly lower at 13.0%.

When employment status is combined with income groups, even more pronounced differences emerge. Unemployed people with low household incomes have the highest level of negative environmental impact across all groups observed, at 39.0%. Among manual workers and white-collar workers with high household incomes, the figure is 15.5% – less than half that.

As income rises, so does behaviour that harms the environment

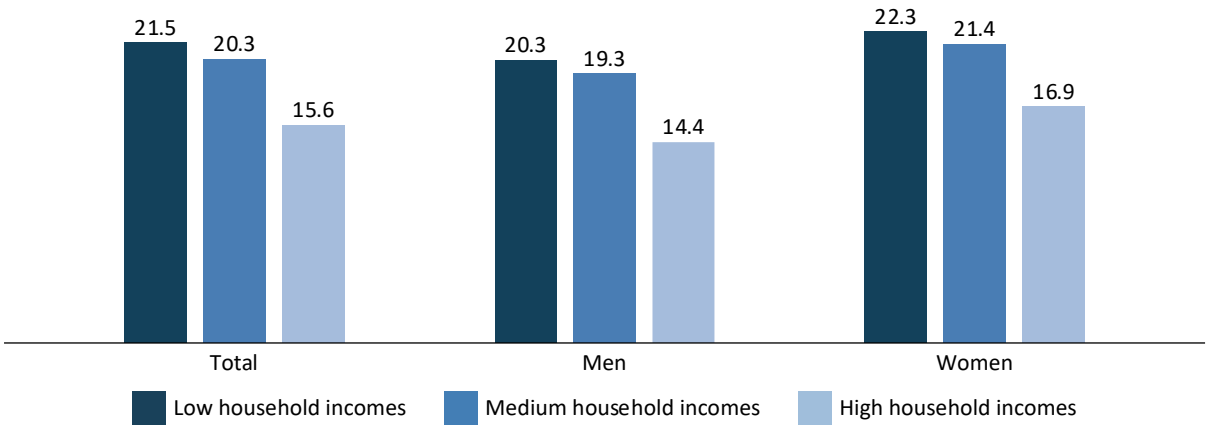
Regarding environmentally responsible consumption behaviour the data show that as income rises, the lifespan of smartphones and televisions before they are replaced decreases. People with high household incomes report more frequently than average that they buy clothes because they want new ones, even though the old ones are not worn out. Online clothing purchases increase clearly as income rises: 20.9% of people with low household incomes bought clothes online at least several times a year; this figure rises to 32.1% for those with medium household incomes and 38.8% for those with high household incomes. People on high incomes are also more likely to return clothes they have ordered.

Environmentally harmful behaviour increases with income

If one combines the potential environmental impact of shopping behaviour with that of transport choices and air travel, it is clear that environmentally harmful behaviour increases as household income rises. The differences in environmentally harmful behaviour are significantly more pronounced than those relating to concern about environmental problems. People with high household incomes are more likely to report high levels of negative behaviour that impacts the environment (26.0%) than those with medium (18.0%) and low household incomes (9.7%).

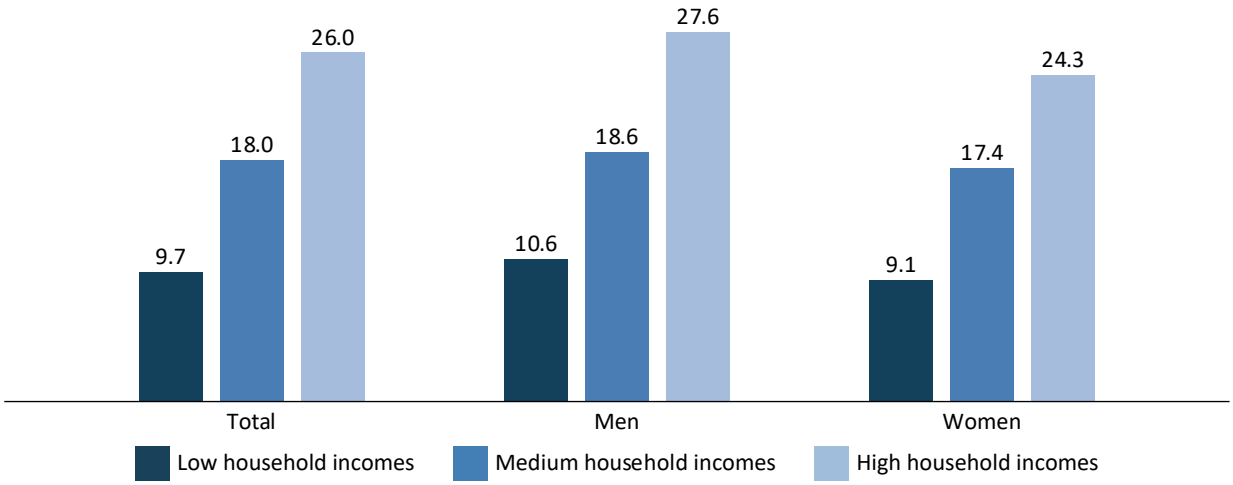
If gender and age are also taken into account when analysing the 3 household income groups, the differences in environmental impact increase further: the high negative impact caused by men is slightly above that of women across all income groups, with income having a greater effect than gender. The greatest difference between women and men within a single income group is evident among those with high household incomes. As with the exposure to environmental problems – which decreases with age – environmentally harmful behaviour also declines with age. Among those aged 30 to under 40 with high household incomes, the proportion of behaviours with a potentially high environmental impact is highest at 38.6%; the lowest level of high environmental impact is found among older people with low household incomes (aged 60 to under 70: 3.5%, aged 70 and over: 1.6%).

Figure 1: High exposure to environmental problems by income and gender – percentages



S: STATISTICS AUSTRIA, Environmental Microcensus, Q3 2023, resident population aged 15 and over.

Figure 2: High levels of environmentally harmful behaviour by individuals by income and gender – percentages



S: STATISTICS AUSTRIA, Environmental Microcensus, Q3 2023, resident population aged 15 and over.

For detailed results and further information on environmental equity, environmental conditions and environmental behaviour please refer to the report "Umweltgerechtigkeit 2023" (in German) and to our website.

Information on methodology, definitions:

What is environmental justice?

In this report, **environmental justice** examines the (un)equal distribution of the exposure to environmental problems, as well as differences in environmentally harmful behaviour **across five different income groups**. The focus is on questions such as: Are people with lower household incomes more severely affected by heat than those with higher incomes? Do noise and pollution levels differ according to income or other socio-demographic characteristics? And to what extent does the environmental impact of mobility and consumption behaviour vary between different income groups? The report was commissioned by the Vienna Chamber of Labour.

How is environmental justice measured?

For the analysis, data from Statistics Austria's **2023 Microcensus special module 'Environmental conditions and behaviour'** were supplemented with data on household income from administrative records and the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC 2024). This made it possible to analyse all environmental indicators broken down by total disposable household income **(3 income groups**, calculated according to quintile thresholds (fifths): people on **low incomes** (1st quintile), on **medium incomes** (2nd to 4th quintiles) and **on high household incomes** (5th quintile)) or by equivalised income (**2 income groups**: **people at risk of poverty** and **those not at risk of poverty**).

Total disposable household income (net) from EU-SILC corresponds to the sum of all income components recorded in the respective household, such as income from employment and self-employment, unemployment benefits, pensions, family benefits or allowances. **Equivalised income** (net) represents the disposable household income divided by the sum of the household's consumption equivalents. A basic requirement is assumed for each household; the first adult in a household is therefore assigned a weighting of 1. Each additional adult is assigned a weighting of 0.5, and children under 14 are assigned a weighting of 0.3. Those individuals whose equivalised net household income falls below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold of 60 % of the median are classified as **being at risk of poverty**.

For the **combined assessment of the five environmental conditions** – noise, odour, dust, climate change and heat – a simple, additive index was calculated, which makes it possible to consider the **exposure to environmental problems** as a whole. Methodologically, a higher number of points was assigned as the exposure

increased. Three exposure categories were derived from the index scores, using quintile thresholds (1st quintile, 2nd–4th quintiles, 5th quintile), as was done for the grouping based on household income. Those in the 5th quintile were defined as being highly exposed to environmental problems.

A simple, additive index was also calculated for the **combined analysis of the six behavioural variables**: length of time a smartphone, television and washing machine are used before replacement, frequency of online clothing purchases, use of a car as a driver, and frequency of air travel. This makes it possible to consider **environmentally harmful behaviour** as a whole. Methodologically, higher scores were assigned for earlier replacement of the products, more frequent car use and more frequent air travel. From these index points, three categories were again calculated, again based on quintile thresholds. Those in the 5th quintile were defined as exhibiting high levels of environmentally harmful behaviour.

Who is Statistics Austria?

Statistics Austria is the central organisation for official data and statistics on society, the economy, the state and the environment in Austria. As a national statistical institute, it is committed to the statutory principles of independence, impartiality and objectivity. Statistics Austria is headed by Manuela Lenk, Director General Statis-tics, and Franz Haslauer, Director General Finance.

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