



OPEN BURNING OF GARBAGE IN HAVANA: COLLAPSE OF URBAN SERVICES, PUBLIC HEALTH RISKS, AND INDIRECT IMPACTS ON FOOD SECURITY

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Over the past week, reports on social media denouncing the open burning of waste in various parts of Havana have intensified. The phenomenon is linked to the accumulation of garbage in urban areas due to a lack of fuel to organize its collection. This reflects a collapse of urban sanitation as part of the sustained deterioration of municipal capacity to provide basic services and protect public health.

According to numerous reports, solid waste has been piling up at dumping sites for more than two weeks—often located directly on public roads and within residential areas—disrupting community life and basic functioning. The most recent episode, partly stemming from this situation, has been the proliferation of mosquitoes carrying arboviruses, a syndemic whose peak of infection occurred less than three months ago.

The authorities' response has been the widespread burning of these trash sites. However, this measure is little more than a desperate stopgap that is generating persistent smoke and black particles falling over the city. According to official sources, Havana reportedly has around 10,000 containers, although it would require three times that number; meanwhile, daily collection would have fallen to about half of previous volumes of 25,000–30,000 m³. In addition, the technical availability of the capital's truck fleet stands at between 37% and 44% of the vehicles that should actually be operating.

Based on Food Monitor Program's monitoring of testimonies, hotspots of indiscriminate burning indicate broad territorial dispersion as well as a diversity of methods and actors. Affected locations include Centro Habana, Guanabacoa, Vía Blanca, Plaza de la Revolución (Factor/Conill, Estancia/Conill, Santa Ana/Estancia), Lawton (Lagueruela between 8 and 9), Puentes Grandes (Metropolitan Park), among other areas of the city. Cases have been recorded in which neighbors decide to burn accumulated trash when multiple dumping points concentrate within the same perimeter, with impacts intensified by rising temperatures and organic decomposition. Likewise, practices sustained by the Communal Services Company—responsible for hygiene and urban sanitation—point to burning in residential and sensitive areas, including near the 26th Avenue Clinical-Surgical Hospital, alongside reports of respiratory impacts among vulnerable populations in the area.

Food Monitor Program underscores the consistent pattern behind this phenomenon: the collapse of sanitation services within Cuba's multifactor crisis, sustained accumulation of toxic waste, and the shifting of vector control toward high-risk practices such as open burning. In this case,

the burning and accumulation of garbage affect food security through multiple pathways within a broader circuit of material degradation:

- Exposed organic waste increases vector proliferation, contaminating domestic environments for food preparation and storage. This situation further endangers unhoused people who search through trash for reusable materials, placing their physical integrity at even greater risk.
- The same fuel shortage that paralyzes waste collection also affects food transportation, worker mobility, and the ability to sustain cold chains. The energy crisis reverberates through urban services and the availability of basic goods, including food.
- Near-total shortages of electricity make refrigeration impossible, which, regrettably, increases organic waste through losses of perishable foods—waste that, in turn, further strains the already overwhelmed sanitation system.

From a public health perspective, the open burning of waste in densely populated settings entails exposure to air pollutants with well-established evidence of harm—already visible in Cuba through the use of unclean fuels for cooking. Institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) underscore that outdoor air pollution causes millions of premature deaths, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations and reinforcing gendered burdens; the WHO therefore advocates for public health policies to reduce sources of pollution. Specifically, particulate matter (PM_{2.5}/PM₁₀) can penetrate deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream, with cardiovascular and respiratory impacts.

In scenarios involving the burning of “mixed” waste (plastics and other industrial products, textiles, organic remains), exposure becomes more complex because it includes irritating gases and particles carrying diverse chemical loads. Added to this are persistent organic pollutants associated with incomplete combustion and the risk of ash deposition on surfaces, objects, and domestic areas, as well as across urban environments, schools, hospitals, and other additional pathways of contact and exposure.

Open burning of garbage in Havana is a symptom of the breakdown of collective care infrastructure (sanitation, environmental health, prevention) and an amplifier of territorial inequality (exposure is concentrated in specific neighborhoods and among vulnerable populations). This is not an isolated cause but rather the predictable outcome of a lack of efficient management of public goods and services in Cuba—failures that have already manifested in deteriorating health conditions among Cubans, including the proliferation of vectors carrying chikungunya, dengue, and other fevers.

Food Monitor Program calls for contingency strategies grounded in a sustainable plan for official waste management, rooted in respect for the lives of residents in affected areas. The immediate challenge is to halt high-harm practices; the deeper political challenge is to rebuild public capacity and accountability in essential services.