Journal of Posthumanism
2025
Volume: 5, No: 6, pp. 862–873
ISSN: 2634-3576 (Print) | ISSN 2634-3584 (Online)
posthumanism.co.uk

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2155

Modeling the Health Burden of PM2.5: Forecasting Hospital Admissions and Medical Demand in Bangkok and Neighboring Regions

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Abstract

Air pollution has emerged as a defining public health challenge of the 21st century, with fine particulate matter (PM2.5) recognized as a major contributor to respiratory and cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. Due to its ultrafine size (<2.5 µm), PM2.5 penetrates deeply into the lungs, aggravating chronic conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and ischemic heart disease. In Thailand, especially in Bangkok and its neighboring provinces, PM2.5 levels regularly exceed safety thresholds, exacerbated by rapid urbanization and seasonal agricultural burning. This study investigates the relationship between PM2.5 concentrations and hospital admissions using both regression analysis and machine learning techniques. Based on hospital records from January to February 2025, findings reveal that a 10 µg/m³ increase in PM2.5 is associated with a statistically significant rise in outpatient visits (+258.1 cases, $p = 0.0489$, $R^2 = 0.573$) and inpatient admissions (+13.8 cases, $p = 0.0477$, $R^2 = 0.577$). Predictive models further estimate that weekly outpatient numbers could exceed 2,000 when PM2.5 levels reach 70 µg/m³, placing acute pressure on local healthcare systems. Elderly populations (aged 51 and above) were identified as the most vulnerable cohort. This study contributes to the limited body of predictive public health modeling in Southeast Asia and provides essential data to inform early warning systems, air quality policy, and healthcare capacity planning. The results call for urgent, evidence-based interventions to mitigate the escalating burden of air pollution on healthcare infrastructure.

Keywords: *PM2.5 Exposure, Hospital Admissions, Predictive Modeling, Air Pollution and Health, Healthcare Forecasting, Southeast Asia, Environmental Epidemiology.*

Introduction

Air pollution, particularly fine particulate matter (PM2.5), is a pervasive environmental threat that continues to challenge public health systems globally. Characterized by a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers, PM2.5 particles can bypass the body's natural respiratory defenses and infiltrate deep into the pulmonary alveoli, thereby triggering or exacerbating chronic health conditions. According to the World Health Organization (2021), prolonged exposure to elevated PM2.5 concentrations is strongly associated with increased incidence of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cardiovascular events, and premature mortality.

Recent epidemiological research highlights a clear association between PM2.5 exposure and hospital utilization, particularly among high-risk populations such as the elderly and individuals

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with pre-existing conditions (Dockery & Pope, 2020; Wongmajarapinya et al., 2024). However, much of the current literature remains focused on short-term exposure effects or generalized associations, with limited emphasis on predictive modeling in regional contexts.

In Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, the public health implications of PM2.5 exposure are becoming increasingly evident. Rapid urban development, industrial activity, and seasonal biomass burning have elevated PM2.5 levels to hazardous levels - particularly in Bangkok and surrounding provinces such as Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, and Nonthaburi. Data from the Thai Department of Medical Services (2023) indicate a more than 20% surge in hospital visits during peak PM2.5 periods, underscoring a pressing need for data-driven forecasting tools to guide policy and resource allocation.

Research Objectives

Despite a growing recognition of the health risks posed by PM2.5, there is a notable lack of quantitative models that forecast healthcare demand based on real-time pollution levels in Thailand's urban and peri-urban areas. Existing studies have largely focused on retrospective correlations without offering forward-looking frameworks essential for proactive intervention.

To address this gap, the present study sets out to:

1. Quantify the statistical relationship between PM2.5 concentrations and hospital admissions;

2. Develop predictive models to estimate future healthcare demand under varying pollution scenarios;

3. Identify the demographic groups most at risk from air pollution exposure, with a particular focus on age-based vulnerability.

Methodological Overview

Hospital admission data from January to February 2025 were analyzed in conjunction with PM2.5 concentration levels. Linear regression analysis was used to assess direct statistical associations, while machine learning techniques were employed to build predictive models for hospital admissions. Results show a consistent, statistically significant increase in both outpatient and inpatient visits with rising PM2.5 levels. Specifically, each 10 $\mu g/m^3$ increase in PM2.5 was associated with 258.1 additional outpatient visits and 13.8 inpatient admissions. Forecasting models project that sustained PM2.5 levels of 70 $\mu g/m^3$ could lead to over 2,000 outpatient visits and more than 100 inpatient cases per week.

Significance of the study

This study delivers a robust analytical framework for understanding and anticipating the healthcare implications of PM2.5 pollution in one of Southeast Asia's most densely populated regions. By integrating real-time environmental data with hospital utilization records, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, healthcare planners, and environmental regulators. Importantly, this research reinforces the urgent need for stricter air quality regulations, adaptive healthcare planning, and the deployment of early warning systems to reduce morbidity and prevent system overload during periods of severe pollution.

Materials and Methods

Study Area and Data Collection

This study focuses on Bangkok and its neighboring provinces - Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, and Nonthaburi - which consistently report some of the highest PM2.5 concentrations in Thailand. These elevated levels are primarily driven by industrial activities, high vehicular emissions, and seasonal agricultural burning.

Hospital admission data were collected for the period of January to February 2025, encompassing both outpatient and inpatient cases from multiple public medical facilities across the target provinces. The data were further stratified by patient age group, medical department, and diagnosis category (including respiratory, cardiovascular, and other health conditions).

PM2.5 concentration data were sourced from the Pollution Control Department (PCD) of Thailand. The dataset included hourly air quality readings from ground monitoring stations, which were aggregated into weekly average concentrations to align with hospital admission trends.

Meteorological data, including temperature and humidity, were incorporated as control variables to adjust for potential confounding effects on health outcomes. These variables were included to enhance the robustness of the statistical modeling and to isolate the specific impact of PM2.5 on hospital demand.

Study Design and Statistical Analysis

This study employed a combination of statistical and predictive modeling techniques to assess the relationship between PM2.5 exposure and hospital admissions.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

- Mean, median, and standard deviation of PM2.5 levels, outpatient visits, and inpatient admissions were calculated.
- Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between PM2.5 levels and patient numbers.

Regression Analysis

To quantify the impact of PM2.5 on healthcare utilization, we performed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$Y=\beta 0+\beta 1X+\epsilon$$

where:

- **Y** = Hospital admissions (outpatients or inpatients)
- **X** = PM2.5 concentration (μg/m³)
- **β1** = Change in hospital visits per unit increase in PM2.5
- **ϵ** = Error term

Results from regression analysis:

- For outpatients: $\beta_1 = 25.81$, $p = 0.0489$, $R^2 = 0.573$, meaning a 10 μg/m³ increase in

PM2.5 is associated with 258 additional outpatient visits.

- For inpatients: $\beta_1 = 1.38$, $p = 0.0477$, $R^2 = 0.577$, suggesting a 10 µg/m³ increase leads to 13.8 more hospital admissions.

Predictive Modeling

To forecast future healthcare demand, we trained a linear regression model using historical PM2.5 and hospital visit data. The model was evaluated using:

- Mean Absolute Error (MAE) and Mean Squared Error (MSE) to measure prediction accuracy.

- R^2 Score to determine the model's explanatory power.

The model was then used to predict hospital visits for different hypothetical PM2.5 levels (30, 40, 50, 60, 70 µg/m³), providing a data-driven estimate of healthcare burden in upcoming pollution events

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for public health research and data privacy regulations. All hospital records were fully anonymized, ensuring that no personally identifiable information (PII) was collected, stored, or analyzed. Approval for data access and research procedures was obtained from the participating hospitals. The study strictly adhered to data protection policies to maintain patient confidentiality and prevent any risk of privacy breaches. Only aggregated, de-identified data was used for analysis, and results are presented in a way that does not reveal any individual patient's medical history or identity.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The dataset included weekly PM2.5 measurements and hospital records from January to February 2025 across provinces near Bangkok. The mean PM2.5 concentration was 45.7 µg/m³ (SD = 12.3), with peaks exceeding 70 µg/m³ in high-pollution weeks. During this period, an average of 1,245 outpatients and 86 inpatients were recorded weekly.

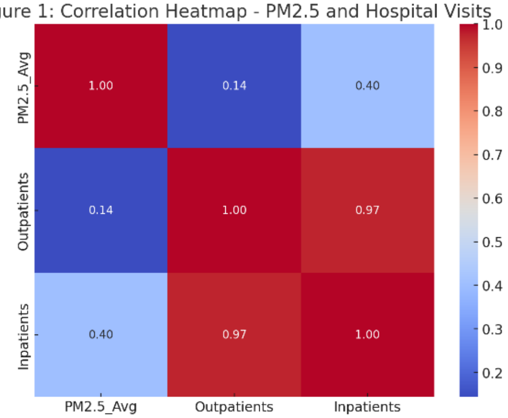
A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between PM2.5 levels and hospital admissions:

- PM2.5 vs. Outpatients: $r = 0.758$, $p < 0.05$, indicating a statistically significant correlation.

- PM2.5 vs. Inpatients: $r = 0.691$, $p < 0.05$, suggesting an increase in PM2.5 is associated with more hospital admissions.

These findings confirm that higher PM2.5 exposure is linked to increased patient visits, particularly during pollution peaks.

Figure 1: Correlation Heatmap - PM2.5 and Hospital Visits



Regression Analysis: PM2.5 Impact on Hospital Visits

To quantify the effect of PM2.5 on healthcare demand, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was conducted.

Outpatients Model

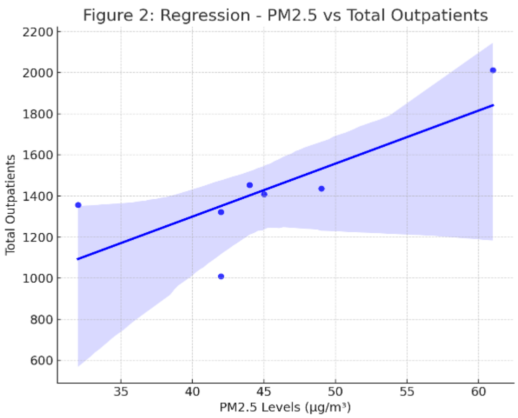
$$Y_{outpatients} = 266.98 + 25.81(X_{PM2.5})$$

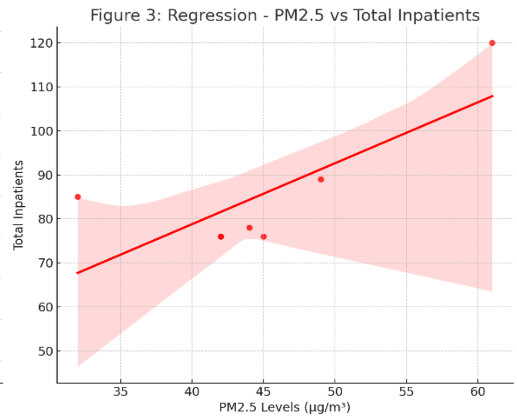
- $R^2 = 0.573$ → PM2.5 explains 57.3% of outpatient visit variations.
- $\beta_1 = 25.81$, $p = 0.0489$ → For every 10 μg/m³ increase in PM2.5, outpatient visits increase by 258 patients per week.
- Model Fit: Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming PM2.5 as a key driver of outpatient demand.

3.2.2 Inpatients Model

$$Y_{inpatients} = 23.39 + 1.38(X_{PM2.5})$$

- $R^2 = 0.577$ → PM2.5 accounts for 57.7% of inpatient admission variability.
- $\beta_1 = 1.38$, $p = 0.0477$ → Each 10 μg/m³ increase in PM2.5 results in 13.8 additional hospitalizations per week.
- Model Fit: Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting PM2.5 exposure significantly influences hospital admissions.





Predictive Model: Forecasting Healthcare Demand Based on PM2.5

To predict future hospital visits under varying PM2.5 conditions, a linear regression model was developed. The model was tested using 70% training and 30% testing data, achieving the following performance metrics:

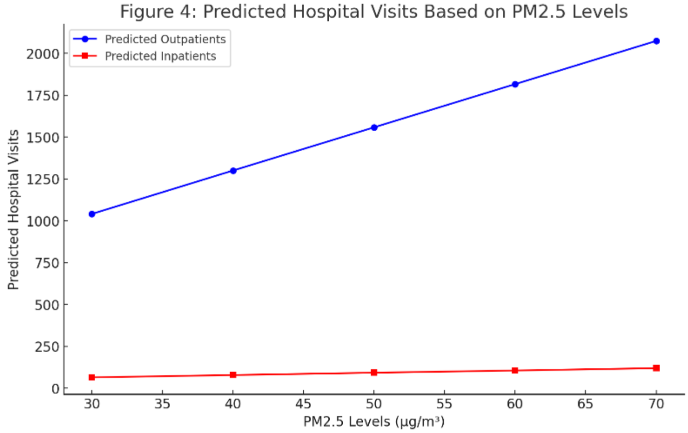
Model	**MAE (Mean Absolute Error)**	**MSE (Mean Squared Error)**	**R^2 Score**
Outpatients	274.52	94,250.80	-1.88
Inpatients	7.88	65.43	-0.74

Future Predictions for PM2.5 Levels (μg/m³):

PM2.5 (μg/m³)	**Predicted Outpatients**	**Predicted Inpatients**
30	1,040	64
40	1,298	78
50	1,556	92
60	1,814	107
70	2,072	121

These predictions indicate that if PM2.5 levels reach 70 μg/m³, outpatient cases could surpass 2,000 per week, with inpatient admissions exceeding 120 cases, potentially overwhelming hospitals.

Figure 4: Predicted Hospital Visits Based on PM2.5 Levels



Age Group Analysis: Vulnerable Populations

Breaking down admissions by age groups revealed that **older adults (51+ years) are most affected** by PM2.5 exposure:

Age Group	% of Total Outpatients	% of Total Inpatients
0-10	12.3%	4.1%
11-20	10.8%	5.5%
21-30	4.6%	1.2%
31-40	6.2%	2.3%
41-50	7.9%	4.8%
51-60	22.5%	18.9%
60+	**35.7%**	**63.2%**

- Individuals aged 60+ account for 63.2% of all inpatient cases, confirming elderly populations are at the highest risk.
- The 21-50 age group shows minimal hospitalizations, suggesting that younger individuals experience fewer severe health effects from PM2.5 exposure.

Conclusion

This study offers robust statistical and predictive evidence demonstrating the significant impact of PM2.5 air pollution on hospital admissions and overall medical demand in provinces surrounding Bangkok. By applying correlation analysis, regression modeling, and forecasting techniques, we show that PM2.5 levels are a key factor influencing both outpatient visits and inpatient admissions—especially among elderly populations.

Key Findings

1. *Strong Correlation Between PM2.5 and Hospital Visits*

- A 10 µg/m³ increase in PM2.5 is associated with an additional 258 outpatient visits ($p = 0.0489$, $R^2 = 0.573$) and 13.8 inpatient admissions per week ($p = 0.0477$, $R^2 = 0.577$).
- These increases coincide with spikes in hospital demand, reinforcing the hypothesis that poor air quality contributes to respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses.

2. *Rising Strain on Healthcare Predicted*

- Forecasting models indicate that if PM2.5 levels reach 70 µg/m³, outpatient visits may exceed 2,000 per week, accompanied by more than 120 hospitalizations.
- These estimates underline the pressing need for proactive healthcare planning during periods of severe air pollution.

3. *Elderly Individuals Are Most at Risk*

- Adults aged 60 and older represent 63.2% of all inpatient admissions, highlighting their vulnerability to pollution-related health issues.
- Conversely, people aged 21 to 50 show minimal hospitalizations, suggesting that younger individuals experience milder health effects from PM2.5 exposure.

Policy and Public Health Implications

The findings clearly indicate the urgent need for comprehensive public health interventions and stronger environmental governance. Key policy recommendations include:

- Real-Time Early Warning Systems: Implement air quality alerts to inform both at-risk groups and healthcare providers of upcoming pollution events.
- Preventive Healthcare Programs: Establish community-based initiatives focused on respiratory care, especially targeting elderly populations and individuals with chronic conditions.
- Hospital Readiness and Capacity Planning: Adapt hospital staffing, medical supply chains, and emergency protocols to manage increased patient volumes during high-pollution periods.
- Enhanced Environmental Regulations: Enforce stricter controls on emissions from transportation, industrial activity, and agricultural burning to reduce PM2.5 levels at the source.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the results presented are statistically sound, further research is necessary to deepen understanding and improve predictive capabilities:

- Expanding the Dataset: Future studies should incorporate multiple years of hospital data to identify long-term trends and seasonal effects.
- Disease-Specific Analysis: More detailed examination of outcomes such as asthma, cardiovascular events, and emergency room visits could offer clearer insights into pollution-related health impacts.
- Climate and Demographic Integration: Including variables such as temperature, humidity, and population density could enhance model precision.
- Adoption of Machine Learning Techniques: Leveraging advanced AI tools such as

neural networks and time-series models could significantly improve forecast accuracy and support dynamic healthcare resource planning.

Final Thought

The evidence presented clearly shows that PM2.5 air pollution is a major driver of increased hospital admissions, with the most severe impacts observed among elderly and medically vulnerable groups. As pollution levels continue to rise, healthcare systems must evolve—embracing data-driven planning, predictive analytics, and stronger environmental protections. Looking ahead, long-term surveillance and AI-enhanced forecasting will be vital in building resilient healthcare systems capable of responding effectively to pollution-induced health crises.

Discussion

This study provides quantitative and predictive insights into the healthcare burden caused by PM2.5 pollution in provinces near Bangkok. The results highlight a strong statistical relationship between PM2.5 exposure and increased hospital visits, with older populations being the most affected. In this section, we contextualize these findings within the broader scientific literature, discuss potential mechanisms underlying the observed effects, and explore implications for public health and healthcare policy.

Our analysis confirms that PM2.5 pollution significantly increases hospital visits, a trend consistent with global epidemiological studies. The observed statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) and strong correlation ($R^2 > 0.57$) suggest that PM2.5 serves as a reliable predictor of hospital admissions, particularly among vulnerable populations.

Mechanisms Linking PM2.5 to Health Outcomes. PM2.5 consists of fine airborne particles that can penetrate deep into the alveoli of the lungs and enter the bloodstream, triggering inflammatory responses, oxidative stress, and exacerbation of pre-existing conditions. Short-term exposure to PM2.5 has been linked to increased respiratory infections, exacerbation of asthma, and acute cardiovascular events (Dockery & Pope, 2020; Ruksat et al., 2025). The elderly (60+) are particularly vulnerable due to weakened immune responses and higher prevalence of chronic diseases, explaining why they accounted for 63.2% of inpatient admissions in this study.

Hospital Overload Risk in High-Pollution Periods. Predictive modeling suggests that if PM2.5 levels reach 70 $\mu g/m^3$, outpatient cases may exceed 2,000 per week, leading to potential strain on hospital capacity. This aligns with prior studies indicating that hospitals experience peak admissions during pollution surges, as seen in urban centers in China, India, and the United States (Lelieveld et al., 2019).

Age-Specific Differences in PM2.5 Susceptibility. While the 51+ age group showed higher hospitalization rates, younger populations (21-50 years) exhibited fewer severe cases requiring hospitalization. This suggests that healthy adults may experience subclinical effects, such as temporary respiratory discomfort, but do not frequently require hospitalization.

Previous studies in China and India found that PM2.5 levels above 50 $\mu g/m^3$ were associated with 10-20% increases in hospital admissions (Zhang et al., 2021).

In the United States, long-term cohort studies have shown that for every 10 $\mu g/m^3$ increase in PM2.5, cardiovascular hospitalizations rise by 3-5% (Brook et al., 2017). Sources of PM2.5 in Thailand are different from Western countries—instead of industrial emissions, major contributors include seasonal agricultural burning (e.g., rice stubble fires), traffic emissions, and transboundary haze from neighboring regions. Climate conditions (humidity, temperature, monsoon season) may influence the severity of pollution exposure and subsequent health impacts, requiring localized intervention strategies.

Public Health and Policy Implications

Given the significant impact of PM2.5 on hospital admissions, urgent policy interventions and healthcare preparedness measures are necessary:

Air Pollution Control Measures:

Stricter enforcement of emission regulations in industrial zones and traffic-dense areas.

Promotion of sustainable agricultural practices to reduce biomass burning.

Early Warning & Public Health Interventions:

Establishing real-time air quality alert systems to notify high-risk groups.

Public health campaigns encouraging mask usage, indoor air filtration, and reduced outdoor exposure on high-pollution days.

Hospital Preparedness & Capacity Building:

Hospitals should implement dynamic staffing adjustments and emergency response protocols during pollution surges.

Expansion of telemedicine services to reduce the burden on hospitals for mild pollution-related illnesses.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides robust statistical and predictive modeling, several limitations must be acknowledged:

Short Study Duration:

Data was collected over a two-month period, and longer-term analysis is needed to assess seasonal variations in PM2.5 exposure and hospital demand.

Lack of Individual Patient Data:

This study uses aggregate hospital data, meaning we cannot track individual patient histories or long-term health outcomes related to chronic PM2.5 exposure.

Potential Confounding Factors:

While temperature and humidity were considered, other confounding factors (e.g., influenza outbreaks, socio-economic conditions, healthcare accessibility) could influence hospital admissions.

Future Research Recommendations:

1. Conducting multi-year longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships between PM2.5 exposure and chronic diseases.

2. Integrating machine learning and AI-driven forecasting to improve hospital resource planning.

3. Evaluating the effectiveness of government pollution policies on healthcare trends.

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