THE REAL URBAN EMISSIONS INITIATIVE

FACT SHEET

SEPTEMBER 2025

10 years after Dieselgate: Where are we now?

WHAT WAS DIESELGATE?

The Dieselgate scandal, which broke in September 2015, exposed the unlawful activities of the Volkswagen group in "cheating" laboratory emissions tests through the installment of illegal emissions control devices in nearly 11 million diesel vehicles worldwide.

These "defeat devices" detect when vehicles undergo emissions testing in a lab setting and temporarily alter the engine's performance to reduce NO_x emissions, making the cars appear compliant with environmental regulations. **Under real-world driving conditions, however, these Volkswagen vehicles would emit up to 35 times the legal limits**.

Additional testing revealed that virtually all diesel vehicles across all manufacturers were producing excess emissions on the road, and in the years to follow, legal cases citing real-world emissions measurements resulted in substantial fines. Dieselgate prompted stricter regulatory frameworks and accelerated the shift toward more stringent emissions standards and zero-emission fleets, **but the problem of excess emissions is not yet resolved.**

LAUNCH OF THE TRUE INITIATIVE

The scandal revealed a disconnect between lab testing and real-world driving conditions, highlighting a major knowledge gap for cities seeking to tackle their air quality problems. **The Real Urban Emissions (TRUE) Initiative,** a partnership of the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) and FIA Foundation, was launched to provide cities with an independent source of data showing what vehicles in their communities are really emitting. TRUE began with two pilot campaigns in 2017, in London and Paris, using roadside remote sensing technology to measure several hundred thousand vehicles in each city.

AN ESTIMATED 16 MILLION VEHICLES WITH SUSPECTED DEFEAT DEVICES STILL ON THE ROAD

Despite vehicle recalls post-Dieselgate, TRUE Initiative data show that most diesel vehicles produced before 2018, when real-driving emissions testing was implemented in Europe, remain high NO_x emitters.

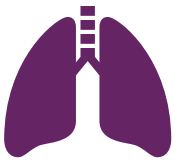
Through continued real-world data collection by TRUE in cities across Europe, the ICCT has estimated that a large majority of vehicles with suspected prohibited defeat devices, across all manufacturers, are still driven in Europe and the United Kingdom today.

- **16 million show suspicious emissions,** *consistent with likely use of a prohibited defeat device*
- **11 million show extremely high emissions,** *indicating almost certain use of a prohibited defeat device*

COSTING THOUSANDS OF LIVES

These defeat devices have a real human cost. A 2025 analysis estimated that vehicles suspected to be equipped with defeat devices will produce 4,000 kilotons of excess NO_x emissions between 2009 and 2050. This study estimates the toll these emissions will have on public health across Europe and the United Kingdom over this same period:

205,000
premature deaths



152,000
new cases of childhood asthma

€1.2 trillion
in health costs

WHAT CITIES CAN DO

The Dieselgate scandal revealed how laboratory measurements were substantially underestimating real-world vehicle emission levels for years. Cities are uniquely positioned to craft localized policies that can directly address air quality problems in high-traffic areas. These include:

- Conducting real-world emission testing to identify high-emitting segments of the local fleet and to track policy progress.
- Establishing clean air zones designed to accelerate the retirement of the highest emitters and significantly cut transport emissions.
- Designing procurement policies or incentives for electric vehicles to speed up electrification, particularly for high mileage vehicles such as buses and taxis.

Discover how TRUE supported Brussels and Warsaw and many other cities.

HOW TRUE CAN HELP

The TRUE Initiative works with cities around the world to gather and analyze real-world emissions data that can support localized efforts to improve air quality and public health. Our work can support policy scenario modeling, sharing best practices, and providing other technical expertise.

true
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FIA FOUNDATION

icct
THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON CLEAN TRANSPORTATION