

Cities and towns across the US suffer lead poisoning rates worse than Flint

By Carlos Delgado
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While the Flint water crisis has drawn international attention due to the magnitude of the disaster and the callous criminality of government officials involved, the high rates of lead poisoning in the Flint population are not unique. Countless cities and towns across the United States suffer from lead levels that are as high as what has been reported in Flint—and in many cases, far worse.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health's 2014 figures, 18 Pennsylvania cities had a higher percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels than Flint. The highest rate was in the city of Allentown, where a staggering 23 percent of children tested had blood lead levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter, which is considered "elevated" by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). By contrast, the recent study done by Hurley Medical Center in Flint showed that the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels had increased to 4 percent during the time that the city was using the Flint River as its water source, with high-risk zip codes showing rates of 6.3 percent.

The state of Pennsylvania as a whole showed an elevated blood lead level rate of 9.37 percent in children tested.

Although only 27 states reported their 2014 blood lead level figures to the CDC, 12 of those states had higher rates than Flint. Adrian, Michigan, reported a rate of 12 percent, and 10 Detroit ZIP codes had rates over 10 percent. The city of Rochester, New York, reported a rate of 7.4 percent. In New Jersey, 11 cities and two counties reported higher blood lead level rates than Flint.

The nationwide rate of lead poisoning is even more severe than these numbers suggest. The CDC considers the 5 micrograms per deciliter level to be "elevated," but studies have shown that levels as low as 2

micrograms per deciliter can have a significant impact on a child's cognitive development. It is widely accepted that there is no safe level of lead exposure.

While Flint residents were exposed to toxic amounts of lead due to contaminated tap water, many cities across the US attribute high rates of lead poisoning to lead-based paint exposure. Though the deleterious effects of leaded paint on children were scientifically described as early as 1904, the major lead companies and their trade organization, the Lead Industries Association (LIA), worked for decades to thwart legislation and suppress scientific evidence that lead exposure was causing severe and irreversible damage to scores of children worldwide. Due to the LIA's efforts, millions of home interiors were coated with a deadly neurotoxin in order to boost lead companies' profits.

Though lead-based paint was banned for interior use in the United States in 1978, an estimated 24 million homes still contain deteriorated lead-based paint. Children can become exposed to dangerous levels of lead by inhaling paint dust or consuming leaded paint chips, which have a distinctive sweet flavor. The exposure disproportionately affects those in poverty, since the most toxic homes will be older buildings in low-income neighborhoods. Residents in these areas often have little choice in where they live, and for many people toxic homes are the only ones that are affordable.

After noting that children who were treated for lead poisoning often saw their symptoms reappear once they returned home, Alfred Jefferis Turner, one of the first doctors to describe the effects of lead on children, called the disease "a toxicity of habitation." Today it might be more accurately termed a toxicity of poverty.

Even homes that have supposedly been cleared of

lead can hold risks. The Maryland Department of the Environment recently revealed that several homes that had been certified lead-free still contained dangerous amounts of lead-based paint. Some, it turns out, had not actually been inspected at all.

As federal funding for public health programs has been gutted in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, lead abatement programs have had their budgets slashed nationwide. Funding for the CDC's lead poisoning prevention program was decimated in 2012, from \$29 million to a paltry \$1.9 million. The 2016 budget restored some of that funding, to \$17 million, but that is still less than 60 percent of the 2012 level.

Meanwhile, dilapidated homes continue to poison their residents year after year as old buildings with toxic paint deteriorate. In recent years, states have filed lawsuits against companies that produced lead-based paint, arguing that, by knowingly distributing toxic materials into people's homes, the companies' actions constituted a "public nuisance."

In 2006, a Rhode Island jury found against Sherwin-Williams, NL Industries and Millennium Holdings, ordering the companies to pay for cleanup in thousands of homes in the state. The Rhode Island Supreme Court overturned the verdict in 2008, however, stating, "However grave the problem of lead poisoning is in Rhode Island, public nuisance law simply does not provide a remedy for this harm." Similar cases have failed in New Jersey and Missouri, and a California case is currently on appeal.

Worldwide, the World Health Organization estimates that lead exposure is responsible for 143,000 deaths every year, as well as 600,000 new cases of intellectual disabilities in children. The toxicity of the environment and the inability of bourgeois governmental bodies to protect people from the deadly effects of lead and other environmental hazards is one expression of the subordination of the health and wellbeing of working people to the interests of profit.

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