

New data exposes widespread lead poisoning of Michigan children

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A report released Monday by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) exposed the catastrophic level of lead poisoning throughout the state. Even as politicians are seeking to sweep the Flint water crisis under the rug, the new figures show that the percentage of children with lead poisoning is even higher in many Michigan counties.

The MDHHS report details the findings for 2015, the same year as professor Marc Edwards led an independent sampling of Flint's water and Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha released her findings on the blood-lead levels of Flint children. Hanna-Attisha's study last September showed that four percent of the tested Flint children five years old and younger had lead levels of over five micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$)—the level considered “elevated” by the Center for Disease Control—up from 2.1 percent before switch to Flint River water.

Hanna-Attisha came under immediate attack at the time by Michigan health authorities and the governor's office for having “sliced and diced” her figures to make a case against using the Flint River water, which had been forced on the city's population of 100,000. Shortly afterward, in the face of a preponderance of evidence and international public outrage, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder was forced to make the funds available for the city to return to its previous Detroit-supplied water source. The city's water still remains undrinkable due to the enormous damage done to the already dilapidated and largely lead-piped water infrastructure.

What is remarkable in the MDHHS report is that in its county-by-county listing of test results showing the percentage of children testing over the $5\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ threshold, 13 counties have higher percentages than Hanna-Attisha found in Flint children. The report

issued by MDHHS Monday is a routine report issued annually on the blood-lead levels of Michigan children. A story on it was featured prominently in the *Detroit News* Tuesday. Were it not for the attention that the Flint water crisis focused on the lead poisoning issue over the last year, the issuing of the MDHHS report may have been relegated to an obscure place in the media, if it was reported on at all.

MDHHS spokesperson Jennifer Eisner told the *News*, “Overall it's about where we were last year, but it varies county to county and even ZIP code to ZIP code.” An examination of the MDHHS reports issued for 2014 and 2013 bear this out. Moreover, the previous reports contained charts showing the long-term decline in the number of Michigan children with elevated blood-lead levels (EBLL) since 1998.

Eisner added, “It's an important reminder that we have to stay vigilant. We know that no level is safe, and it's important for parents to know to ask questions and take their concerns to their pediatrician.” The *News* article ignores the elephant in the room—the conveyed expression of concern for public health flies in the face of the actions of Michigan public health authorities and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regarding the lead poisoning of Flint's water. It makes one wonder what “staying vigilant” consists of.

The report lists findings by county and by zip code. The only city listed separately is Detroit, which has consistently been higher than Flint in the percentage of children tested with EBLLs above $5\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. In 2015, 7.5 percent of all children tested in the city had EBLLs over $5\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. Of the 840 Michigan zip codes listed, 14 had over 10 percent of tested children with EBLLs above $5\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$. Nine of those were within Detroit, four in Grand Rapids and one was in Adrian, Michigan, a small eight-square-mile city Southwest of Detroit,

which was once known as the wire fence capital of the world.

It is true that recent years have seen a reduction in the blood-lead levels of children—the most vulnerable of the population to lead poisoning—due largely to the efforts of Dr. Herbert Needleman of the University of Pittsburgh. Through his research, Needleman became alarmed and animated when he discovered the extent of the deleterious and irreversible effects of lead poisoning, especially when exposed to children.

Needleman was instrumental in ending the use of lead in gasoline after testifying before Congress in 1979. The banning of lead in paint and in plumbing followed later. In a 1991 appearance before Congress, Needleman warned that the danger wasn't over. Pointing out that 17 percent of Americans had a blood-lead level of 15µg/dL and higher, he insisted that more work must be done. He compared the fight against lead poisoning to the elimination of smallpox, insisting that lead poisoning could be eliminated if it were attacked with similar determination.

He told the Congressional committee:

“If you map where lead is piled up in superabundance, if you map where decent housing is in short supply and if you map where jobs are in short supply, the three maps are virtually identical. So what would a rational, unbound person do with this disequilibrium? Well, you might say ‘why don't we take the unemployed and train them in safe de-leading and pay them?’ And for the same health dollar we could get a decrease in unemployment—a very dangerous factor in our nation at this point—put more housing back into decent circumstances and wipe the disease out. This is perhaps utopianism, but I think its practical utopianism.”

Cuts in water infrastructure spending were being made as Needleman spoke. Urban blight, in which old houses still had peeling lead-based paint had become a permanent, worsening feature of life in inner cities. The eradication of toxic lead would require huge social investments which federal governments run by both Democrats and Republicans, weren't willing to make. Rather, spending cuts were deepened and continue to be.

The disaster that was inflicted on Flint was part of this process. In the aftermath of the financial collapse of 2008, the financial oligarchy and its political

representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties have pursued a ruthless agenda of looting pensions and privatizing schools, water systems and other critical services. In addition, 634,000 federal, state and municipal jobs have been wiped out since Obama took office in January 2009.

There are still huge unresolved issues over Flint's water. The forced removal of the city from a relatively safe water supply was carried out to benefit a handful of well-placed businessmen and their political front men. Those who drove this process were not in the least interested in protecting public health.

The recent revelations about widespread water-testing “cheats” in the US—where state and local authorities in Boston, Philadelphia and other cities used similar testing methods as in Flint to conceal high lead levels—and the release of new data showing the poisoning of working class communities throughout the country, underscores the need for a political movement of the working class to defend the social right to clean, safe water and a lead-free environment.



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