Many US communities face worse lead contamination than Flint

Shannon Jones
31 December 2016

In a report issued this week, the Reuters news agency said it found nearly 3,000 areas in the United States with recently-recorded lead poisoning rates that are at least double those found in Flint, Michigan during the height of the lead poisoning crisis in that city caused by tainted water.

According to the findings, more than 1,100 of those communities had lead levels four times higher than those found in Flint. In some areas of Baltimore, Cleveland and Philadelphia the rate of elevated lead tested over the last decade was 40 to 50 percent.

The lead poisoning epidemic is rooted in a variety of causes, from antiquated lead water pipes, to toxic wastes left behind by industry to peeling lead-based paint from old homes. Children in at least 4 million US households are exposed to high levels of lead.

In Flint, 5 percent of children screened showed lead levels in excess of the 5 micrograms per deciliter threshold set by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The worst-hit areas in the city had more than twice that level.

The report cites the case of St. Joseph, Missouri, where in one small neighborhood 120 children have been poisoned by lead since 2010. The neighborhood is filled with aging houses, whose lead-based paint poses a deadly hazard. From 2010-2015, more than 15 percent of children tested in seven census tracts had elevated lead levels, well above the statewide average of 5 percent.

In the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, California, 7.57 percent of children tested had dangerous levels of lead.

The Reuters report notes that Freddie Gray, the 25-year-old from Baltimore, brutally murdered by police in April 2015, suffered from lead poisoning. In 2008 Gray and his family filed a lawsuit against the landlord of the row house where they were living in Baltimore's Sandtown-Winchester area. According to legal filings, Gray and his siblings were exposed to lead and suffered developmental problems as a consequence. The case was settled for an amount that was not disclosed.

Pennsylvania had the highest number of individual census tracts, 1,100, where at least 10 percent of childhood lead tests were elevated over the last decade. In 49 census tracts, including areas of inner city Philadelphia and Harrisburg, at least 40 percent of children had elevated lead levels.

The Reuters report quotes Dr. Helen Egger, chair of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone Medical Center's Child Study Center. Dr. Egger said of the data, "The disparities you've found between different areas have stark implications. Where lead poisoning remains common, many children will have developmental delays and start out behind the rest."

Children who test for lead exposure levels above the CDC's 5 microgram standard are considered at risk. The CDC estimates that nationwide, 2.5 percent of small children have elevated blood levels.

In its study, Reuters submitted requests to all 50 states for testing data on lead exposure. In particular it examined data in US Census tracts and individual zip codes in order to isolate areas of particularly high lead exposure. A census tract typically has about 4,000 residents, while the average zip code has 7,500. Reuters found 2,606 census tracts and 278 zip code areas with a prevalence of lead poisoning at least twice the rate in Flint.

Reuters was able to obtain meaningful data from 21 states containing about 61 percent of the US population. Some states said data wasn't available and some refused to share it, citing privacy laws or other

© World Socialist Web Site

concerns.

In many communities, money for lead testing is lacking or inadequate. Reuters cited the example of South Bend, Indiana, where lead testing is falling, despite evidence of a serious lead poisoning problem in the city. In one tract, 31 percent of children tested between 2005 and 2015 had lead levels more than 6 times Flint's rate last year.

The impact of exposure to lead is well known. Children are most at risk and can suffer irreparable brain damage and harm to the nervous system, including cognitive impairment. In adults, exposure to lead can raise the risk of high blood pressure and cause kidney damage.

The CDC is currently considering lowering its threshold for lead exposure by 30 percent. Since 2012, the CDC has set a level of 5 micrograms per deciliter as its threshold for lead exposure in children under 6 years of age. No lead exposure is safe. However, the CDC sets that level as the point above which a public health response is warranted. The agency is now considering lowering the threshold to 3.5 micrograms. The CDC says the move is aimed at prodding states to take measures to reduce lead in the environment.

There has been a very significant drop in tested levels of lead in blood samples since the US government banned the use of lead in gasoline about 40 years ago. However, the experience of Flint residents and data from studies such as that conducted by Reuters demonstrate that the problem is far from resolved.

According to a CDC estimate, 500,000 US children have blood levels above the current threshold. However, there are virtually no federal resources to deal with the crisis. The current CDC budget for assisting states with safety programs is just $17 million.

Many states have not implemented programs to reflect the lower standard adopted in 2012, which saw the threshold reduced from 10 to 5 micrograms. For its part, the CDC does not have any regulatory authority to force states to act.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site