

Children in California show elevated lead levels at rates higher than Flint, Michigan

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Recent data released by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and reports from the Reuters news agency have revealed that children in 29 California neighborhoods have tested for elevated lead levels at least as high as children in Flint, Michigan poisoned by that city's 2014 decision to tap into the contaminated Flint River as the primary source of drinking water.

California's hardest hit areas showed nearly 14 percent of children age 6 or younger with elevated lead levels, compared to 5 percent across the city of Flint at the height of the ongoing water contamination crisis.

Lead is a dangerous neurotoxin that accumulates in soft tissues and bones, damaging the nervous system and causing brain damage and blood disorders. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention no level of lead exposure is safe.

The highest levels in the state came from a downtown Fresno neighborhood where 13.6 percent of children tested at or above the 5 micrograms per deciliter of blood that the CDC identifies as the level at which a public health response is warranted. In total, nine Fresno County zip codes in the state's Central Valley showed lead levels in children at the same rates or higher than in Flint.

According to a 2016 Brookings Institution report on concentrated poverty in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, Fresno was the hardest hit city in the country, with a concentrated poverty rate of 44 percent, 19 percentage points higher than prior to the recession. Estimates for 2016 place Fresno's population at 520,000 while the Brookings report classifies 254,008 Fresno residents as "poor."

Last year residents in Fresno began reporting a rust tinge in their tap water. Testing by the Fresno Public Utilities Department of 698 homes revealed the

presence of lead in 286 homes with 119 at the 15 parts per billion or higher threshold, set by the Environmental Protection Agency, at which a water agency must take corrective action.

A lawsuit was filed by residents of two northeast Fresno zip codes against the city of Fresno and two water-meter installation contractors alleging that the city knowingly switched from groundwater sources to surface water treated at the Northeast Fresno Surface Water Treatment Facility, causing their water to become discolored and contaminated with lead.

The complaint says the switch in water sources from the highly mineralized groundwater to the chemically different surface water destabilized the mineral coating built up in the pipes, causing lead from the pipes to leach into the water supply, an outcome that the city was aware of based on a 1998 study the city commissioned to analyze the consequences of such a change.

Also targeted in the lawsuit are Vulcan Construction & Maintenance Inc. and Measurement Control Systems, two companies contracted by the city to install water meters from 2008 to 2012.

"As a result of the defendants' failure to adhere to industry standards for the installation and connection of water meters, and specifically by joining dissimilar metals without taking the appropriate measures to prevent and protect against accelerated corrosion, the pipes supplying residents' water, including plaintiffs' water from the city, corroded at an accelerated rate, thereby exposing residents, including plaintiffs, to toxic levels of lead and other hazardous substances," the complaint alleges.

One of the attorneys representing the Fresno residents, Esther Berezofsky, expressed concerns over the findings in Fresno telling Law360 late last year,

“This concerns me as another canary in the coal mine, and emblematic of an emerging crisis across the country with steps not being taken to protect residential drinking water and the deleterious effects that result.”

Other areas that tested for high lead levels include neighborhoods in and around Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, the second- and seventh-highest GDP-producing metropolitan areas in the country. Eight Alameda county neighborhoods, in the San Francisco Bay Area, showed rates equal to or higher than in Flint.

This includes the Fruitvale neighborhood in Oakland where 7.6 percent of children tested showed elevated lead levels. The data shows high lead levels in large portions of Oakland as well as nearby Emeryville and Fremont, all areas with a long history of heavy industry contaminating soils with a variety of pollutants, including lead.

The areas in Los Angeles with the highest rates are the impoverished and working class neighborhoods of Westlake, Koreatown and Pico Union.

The common denominator linking all the neighborhoods showing elevated lead levels is high rates of poverty and social neglect. The zip codes that tested highest represent older neighborhoods with substandard and decaying housing and infrastructure.

Despite the fact that the toxicity of lead has been known since times of antiquity, the federal government only banned its use in household paint in 1978. Consequently, many of the homes in older and impoverished neighborhoods are still coated with crumbling, lead-lined wall paint.

The lead in the chips that fall off as the paint disintegrates has a sweet taste making them appealing to young children which is a large part of why children in poor neighborhoods inordinately suffer from elevated levels of lead in their blood.

The CDPH responded to the Reuters report with rank cynicism, arguing that comparing lead levels in California to those in Flint is not warranted because California focuses on testing children deemed at risk for lead exposure, such as those enrolled in Medicaid or living in older housing.

“Testing of at-risk children, and not all children, skews California results to higher percentage of children tested showing lead exposure,” the CDPH said in a statement.

However, according to a response from Joshua Schneyer, the author of the Reuters report, “Michigan has what they call a ‘targeted’ testing approach, just as California does.”

The attempt by the CDPH to downplay the severity of the problem is not only criminal but completely at odds with report after report documenting the prevalence of lead contamination in working class communities across the US.



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