

Michigan researchers investigate connection between Flint water crisis and high infant mortality rate

Carlos Delgado
18 July 2017

Health officials in Michigan's Genesee County are investigating a connection between the Flint water crisis and the high rate of infant mortality in the city. During 2015, when the lead-in-water crisis was at its height, the city saw a significant increase in the rate of infants who died before their first birthday.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Genesee County, whose county seat is Flint, had 43 infant deaths in 2015, the most since 2009. The infant death rate was 9.1 deaths per 1,000 live births, an increase over the 2014 rate of 8.3. The Genesee county infant mortality rate is the second-worst in the state of Michigan, with only Wayne County (which contains Detroit) faring worse.

The increase is even more pronounced at the city level. The 2015 infant death rate in the city of Flint was a staggering 13.7 deaths per 1,000 live births, a 38 percent increase over the 2014 rate of 9.9 and more than double the US national rate of 5.8.

By comparison, the infant mortality rate in Flint in 2015 was roughly on par with that of Saudi Arabia, which has a rate of 13.6 infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

Genesee County Health Department (GCHD) officials are now looking into whether the city's water crisis has contributed to the increased infant death rate. Throughout 2015, lead levels in Flint's water were dangerously elevated. In some homes, the lead levels had risen so high that the water could be classified as toxic waste.

The Flint water crisis began in April 2014, when the city, at the behest of a state-appointed emergency manager, severed its connection from the Detroit water system and began drawing water from the polluted and corrosive Flint River. In gross violation of federal law, the switch was made without implementing corrosion control measures.

That water corroded the city's pipes, causing lead to leach into drinking water. Local, state and federal officials ignored residents who protested the fetid, foul-smelling water, and both Democratic and Republican officials conspired to keep the high lead levels a secret.

In October 2014, the General Motors (GM) engine plant in Flint stopped using Flint River water because it was corroding

engine parts. However, neither GM nor the UAW made any attempt to warn the public of the dangerous state of the water. Water that was deemed too caustic for industrial use was still pumped into the homes of Flint residents for 18 months.

In October 2015, amid an intensifying political crisis, the state of Michigan switched Flint's water supply back to Detroit's. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency in January 2016. However, extensive damage had already been done to the pipes. The water continues, to this day, to be contaminated with lead and other chemicals.

Lead is a potent, irreversible neurotoxin that has a particularly deleterious effect on children. Because children's brains are still developing, lead exposure can cause serious damage, including mental retardation, abnormal aggressiveness, inattentiveness, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. Neurological damage caused by lead exposure is permanent, and the effects persist even after the child has been moved to a lead-free environment.

Lead exposure can also cause anemia, kidney damage, and damage to the immune system. Severe damage can occur at even very low levels of exposure. There is widespread scientific consensus that there is no "safe" level of lead.

Pregnant women who are exposed to lead are more likely to experience miscarriage or stillbirth, a fact that was known as far back as the late 19th century, when lead-based abortion pills were in use. Additionally, lead exposure has been linked to reduced fetal growth, low birth weight, and preterm delivery, all significant risk factors for infant mortality.

Throughout pregnancy, lead that has accumulated in a woman's bones passes to the developing fetus, rapidly damaging the fetus's developing neurological system and even reprogramming genes, which can lead to an increased risk of disease later in life. Lead exposure during the critical phase of immune system development can severely damage a child's immune system and cause dysfunction that may not be apparent until a period of immune system stress, such as during an infection. Because infants must consume a larger amount of food per unit of body weight than adults, they can quickly ingest a dangerous amount of lead through lead-laced baby

formula or by consuming breast milk from a mother with high blood-lead levels.

Though infants are particularly vulnerable to the effects of lead-tainted water, they are not routinely tested for lead. Medicaid screening requirements only call for lead testing at 12 months of age, meaning that many lead-poisoned children go untested.

Even before the water crisis, the residents of Flint had been suffering from a high infant death rate, a result of the city's high poverty rate and residents' lack of access to decent health care and nutrition. The poor health care outcomes in Flint are some of the sharpest expressions of the abysmal US health care system as a whole.

A recent study by the Commonwealth Fund comparing health care system performance in the US with that of 10 other high-income countries found that the US's infant mortality rate was the worst among them, driven largely by the massive gap between the rich and the poor. This rate is likely to climb sharply with the attack on health care currently unfolding in the US Congress.

The GCHD investigation comes as government officials are intensifying their drive to crack down on Flint residents and force them to accept the still-tainted water. Tax liens are being imposed on the homes of residents with outstanding water bills, threatening some 8,000 homes with foreclosure if homeowners do not pay for toxic water. Bottled water deliveries in the city are set to end in September, meaning residents will either have to drink the water or pay for bottled water out of their own pockets.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality has filed a federal lawsuit against the city for not signing off on a 30-year contract to buy water from the Great Lakes Water Authority, the entity that took over Detroit's public water system. This is part of a scheme to maximize the return on investment for wealthy bondholders who were a significant factor behind the drive to seize control of Flint's water system.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Nakiya Wakes, a Flint resident who suffered a miscarriage in 2015, losing twins. She said that she experienced a difficult pregnancy from the beginning.

"My twins couldn't even really develop," she said. "I had complications with my pregnancy from the get-go."

Wakes described her horrible ordeal. "Five weeks into my pregnancy I was having bad pain, so I went to the emergency room," she said. "They told me I was miscarrying, that the baby was no longer in the sac. I ended up going back, having problems, having pain. And then I miscarried the second twin.

"It was a horrible miscarriage. I was in the hospital three to four days. I had to have a blood transfusion. I had lost so much blood that it almost killed me. Now, what I'm worried about, with them giving me blood, it could have been from somebody that's already been contaminated by the lead. I don't even

know what's going on, what is in the blood that they even gave me. It's ridiculous.

"I lost my twins in 2015. [Michigan Governor Rick] Snyder didn't come out about the lead exposure until after my miscarriage. I put two and two together. I've been drinking this water for all this time. My kids have been drinking it. My daughter had hair loss. My babies couldn't form. If they had come out about the lead in 2015, my lead levels probably would have been quadrupled to what they are now."

Wakes denounced those who sought to cover up the extent of the crisis. "If GM is saying that the water is corroding their parts, what do you think it is doing to me, and my babies, and my kids, and the people of Flint? What do you think it's doing to our bodies? It was really money over lives to me. I don't see why Governor Snyder is not incarcerated. They're getting all the small people, but he's the one that brought in [Emergency Manager] Darnell Earley. It's ridiculous. Snyder should have to pay. Everyone who was involved should be held accountable for their actions. If it was me, I would be in jail.

"We had 13 deaths because of Legionnaire's disease. I don't understand. [Former Detroit Mayor] Kwame Kilpatrick is locked up for years for embezzling money. But Governor Snyder is still governing Michigan. He killed 13 people, and all of these people were poisoned under him. And he's still governor?"

Whatever comes of the GCHD investigation, it is clear that the state has no intention of doing anything to mitigate the disastrous effects of the crisis. The right to clean water, the right to health care for Flint's children, and the right to a job and a living wage can only be secured through an international struggle for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding a public meeting, "Flint & London: Social Crimes Against the Working Class," on Thursday, July 27, at 5:30 p.m. in Room B1 of the Flint Public Library. We encourage residents to attend to discuss the way forward in Flint's struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact