

# Paris's Notre Dame fire: Two children test positive for lead poisoning

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Four months after the April 15 fire at the Notre Dame cathedral, during which up to 440 tons of lead roofing was dispersed by smoke into the surrounding areas of Paris, at least two children have tested positive for dangerous levels of lead in their blood.

The revelations are an indictment of the local Parisian government of Socialist Party Mayor Anne Hidalgo and the national government of Emmanuel Macron, which have worked to cover up the lead poisoning scandal since the fire occurred and insisted that there is no danger to the population. The government's actions, including its refusal to close local schools, have meant that hundreds of children have been kept at creches and on school grounds contaminated by lead for months. They are now in danger of permanent damage.

The Parisian Regional Health Authority (Agence Regionale de Santé-ARS) announced the results of the tests of 175 children on August 6. Sixteen were measured to have lead blood levels requiring continued monitoring (between 20 and 49 micrograms of lead per litre of blood), and two with levels above the 50 micrograms indicating a risk of lead poisoning.

While the French government's categorization assumes levels below 50 micrograms of lead per litre of blood do not pose an immediate risk of blood poisoning, the World Health Organization states that even levels as low as 5 micrograms per litre can pose a significant danger to children. Given the small number of tests conducted so far, it is likely that many more people are now threatened with lead poisoning.

Of the two children recorded with higher lead levels so far, one was a student at a school located in the 6th arrondissement—within a 500-meter radius of the cathedral—that was closed on July 25, when Parisian authorities were finally compelled to respond to a popular outcry at the reports of lead contamination in

the playground shared with a second neighbouring school.

Part of the school grounds had recorded lead concentration levels of up to 5,000 micrograms per square meter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$ ). This is more than 70 times the level of  $70 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$  level specified by a 2016 French General Health Directorate advisory as signifying “risk of lead poisoning to children.”

The authorities' cover-up of these results meant the school continued to function more than three months after the fire had occurred, during which time the government denied that there was any danger to the students.

On July 29, Annie Thébaud-Mony, the honorary research director at the National Institute for Health and Medical Research told *Le Monde*, that a measurement of  $5,000 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$  was “gigantic” and “corresponds to what one can see in decontamination factories for recycling batteries or treating electromagnetic waste materials. They are a sign of massive contamination that will inevitably create victims.”

On July 26, the environmental protection NGO Robin Hood filed a lawsuit against multiple government organizations for placing the population in danger through its response to the lead danger. The suit charges the Macron administration's Ministry of Culture, the mayor of Paris, the local councillors of the 4th, 5th and 6th arrondissements of the city, as well as the ARS, with the placing of other individuals' lives in danger, non-assistance to individuals in danger, and providing false and misleading information to the public.

“We estimate that, since the start, there has been a shortcoming of information diffused to the public and that [people] have been victims of false information and toxicity,” said Jacky Bonnemains, the president of the

organization.

The organization had published an alert about the risk of lead pollution from the cathedral's spires and roof on April 19—four days after the fire. This was followed up by a letter sent to the ARS for the Ile-de-France, the Minister for Culture, Minister of Health and the Minister for Labour. The letter requested that the authorities “put in place as soon as possible a coordinated protocol for monitoring dust and lead particles and other toxic substances in and around the cathedral.”

These appeals were ignored.

The Robin Hood NGO also published a letter received from University of Manchester Professor Michael Anderson. He emphasized the importance of rapid decontamination, given the risk that “lead particles will be carried into water sources.”

Not until a month after the Notre Dame fire were tests for lead levels ordered by the Parisian authorities. The results of the tests were made public in leaks published by *Médiapart* on July 18. They showed that of 196 tests in 10 schools and creches within 500 meters of the cathedral, 31 recorded levels equal to or greater than the 70  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$  threshold, and some many tens of times over.

The local Parisian government covered over these figures, citing only average concentrations of lead, rather than the highest local points of concentration, which children could nonetheless be exposed to.

Bonnemains noted that the government has focused its attention on rebuilding Notre Dame rapidly before the 2024 Olympic games, but “making the cathedral sanitary has been completely overlooked.”

Children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning, absorbing four to five times more lead than adults. Lead poisoning can cause many health difficulties, most severely, irreversible brain damage.

A deep clean of the schools that had been closed down in July began last week. The cleaning teams wore heavy protective gear appropriate to the danger of the site, which in the past three months children used regularly for play. Meanwhile the reconstruction efforts have now been halted on the site of Notre Dame itself, acknowledging the danger posed to workers. Nonetheless, the government has refused to accept calls by NGOs and the Stalinist CGT trade union federation to place a plastic cover over the cathedral itself.

Even the totally inadequate measures enacted so far have been due to public outrage at the government's lies and indifference to the health of the population. The emergency bill passed in the confusion following the fire ordering the immediate reconstruction of Notre Dame provides authorities with “exemptions or adaptations applying to the protection of the environment and the evacuation and treatment of waste.”

The fire itself was the outcome of the starvation of resources on the cultural site, including staffing cuts and overworked personnel unable to properly utilize the complex fire detection system.



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