

High lead levels found in many Detroit metropolitan cities

James Brewer

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In recent days and weeks, Detroit area news sources have reported high levels of lead in the drinking water of many local communities. The demographically heterogeneous character of these reports is remarkable. Wealthier cities such as Birmingham, Michigan test with significant high lead levels just as less affluent working-class cities like as Garden City and Inkster.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha lives in Royal Oak, Michigan, one of the communities that showed high lead levels in the homes whose water was sampled. She is the Flint pediatrician who conducted the September 2015 study of blood-lead levels in Flint children that revealed the city's children were being poisoned as a result of the switch of Flint's water source. She says the recent discovery of high lead in many Michigan communities is a result of more stringent sampling protocols that were adopted and enforced by the state in June.

Hanna-Attisha is cited in the *Detroit Free Press*: “Michigan adopted this model lead and copper rule that's really allowing us to better see what's in our water ... The testing in the past never adequately captured the reality of lead in water. Now, as anticipated, community after community is learning they have elevated lead levels in their drinking water, and they can now do something about it.”

The City of Royal Oak issued a public advisory on October 29, stating, “This new, more rigorous sampling method is expected to result in higher lead results found at sample sites, not because the water source or quality has changed, but because of the Rule's more stringent sampling procedures and analysis.”

After the malfeasance and lies of state officials in the Flint water crisis were exposed in late September 2015—and Republican Governor Rick Snyder was forced to return the city to its long-time source of treated water—a barrage of state measures were introduced, ostensibly to address the harm done to the 100,000 residents of Flint. It is arguable that these initiatives were motivated by Snyder's need to establish “plausible deniability” to his claim that he knew nothing of the malignant effects of the state-imposed switch

to Flint River water until days after Hanna-Attisha's revelations of the lead-poisoning of Flint children.

Whatever Snyder's motivation, in April 2016 he announced that Michigan would enact a stricter new standard for enforcing lower lead levels. Since 1991, the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Lead and Copper Rule has set the “action level”—the point at which remediation would be required by law—at 15 parts per billion (ppb), if 10 percent of the sites sampled exceeded that level. Snyder's announcement called for a 10 ppb standard. By the time the law was enacted in January of 2018, the action level became 12 ppb, however, the lower action level won't be enforced until 2025.

In the meantime, the new law enforced last June includes sampling protocols that target sites which are known to have lead service lines, i.e., the underground lengths of pipe that bring municipal water service into homes, rather than just random locations. These would be older homes, since federal law banned the use of lead pipes in 1987.

Water expert Dr. Marc Edwards, who in the summer of 2015 led a team of his Virginia Tech University colleagues and students to sample the water of hundreds of Flint homes, was asked by Snyder after the lead poisoning was uncovered to help draft the new standards. He told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “When I co-authored the new Michigan rule, we expected that 60 percent of cities with lead pipes would suddenly ‘fail’ to meet the new standard. This is not because lead in water went up, but because the new sampling detected the existing problem better. It was a well-known loophole.”

The new protocol requires the sampling of an additional draw from each site. Besides evaluating the first draw from the tap, the fifth draw is also sampled.

Edwards added, “The AWWA [American Water Works Association] actually did a study, years ago, that showed if a second draw sample was collected, to capture lead in water from a lead pipe, that about 50-60 percent of utilities would suddenly fail the lead and copper rule. Certainly, we have known about this problem for a long time ... it has been

causing a lot of people to be exposed to higher than recommended levels of lead.”

Due to the experience of the 2001-2004 Washington D.C. lead-in-water crisis, Edwards anticipated that a disaster like Flint would be inevitable because of the previous official denial that lead in water was a danger and the lack of enforcement by EPA and other agencies of the minimal standards that were in place. The criminal catastrophe in Flint portended a widespread awareness of the dangers of lead poisoning through water systems nationally.

Lead had been used, in some cities mandated by law, as the predominant material for plumbing for decades until it was finally banned in 1987. Four years later, the EPA adopted the federal Lead and Copper Rule. In the 28 years of its existence, no major revisions have been made to the standard despite its widely known inadequacies. Arguably, millions have been unknowingly exposed to lead through their drinking water due to the “loophole” in the EPA sampling protocol.

The new Michigan law mandates the replacement of lead pipes throughout the state at a rate of 5 percent each year, with a projected elimination of all 500,000 lead service lines in the state by 2041. Water service lines have historically been the responsibility of the individual homeowner, so the estimated \$2.5 billion that the project will cost is expected to be paid mainly by individuals. This is a huge challenge, particularly for low-income homeowners, as replacing a single service line costs an average of \$5,000.

The law also requires that a statewide inventory of all lead service lines, estimated to number a half million, be completed by next year.

According to the Associated Press in June, “Local governments and water utilities remain unhappy with the new rules.” The executive director of the Michigan chapter of the AWWA, Bonniifer Ballard, called the 12 ppb standard “completely arbitrary.” She decried, “Where is the money going to come from? ... We’re just trying to figure out how in the world we’re going to get all this done.”

To date, this summer’s testing under the new sampling protocol has resulted in 11 suburban Detroit-area cities issuing drinking water advisories:

- In Birmingham, 5 out of 32 homes tested had high lead
- White Lake, 3 out of 20
- Dearborn Heights, 5 out of 30
- Melvindale, 9 out of 30
- Oak Park, 10 out of 30
- Highland Park, 9 out of 36
- Garden City, 8 out of 31
- Inkster, 4 of 30
- Harper Woods, 4 of 30
- Hazel Park, 4 of 33

- Royal Oak, 8 of 30

Other Michigan communities have tested high in lead this year:

- Parchment, 20 of 32 homes, last year was found to have PFAs
- Hampton Township, 8 of 41
- Benton Harbor, 12 of 47
- Clare, 2 downtown businesses

The broad-ranging discovery of lead also exposes the racist politics promoted largely by the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left advocates. Hillary Clinton in her 2016 campaign for the presidency declared that “we all know” what happened in Flint couldn’t happen in “mostly white” Detroit suburbs. Academics and state agencies have presented detailed reports advancing the theory that the Flint water crisis is a product of “structural racism.”

Those who promote this racist outlook do it to obscure the class character of society. American capitalism has made little effort to better the social conditions of the mass of the population. The EPA didn’t exist until 1970 and the first Safe Drinking Water Act was in 1974. Shortly afterwards, the federal budget for water infrastructure began to be cut significantly under the administrations of both Democrats and Republicans.

As the Michigan lead figures reveal, the reduction of lead in drinking water—not to speak of its total elimination—requires a massive social expenditure. One thing is clear: the assumption that the water coming out of the taps of millions is safe is a false one.

Dr. Hanna-Attisha asserts, “as a pediatrician, our focus is prevention ... We know there is no safe level of lead.”

Today, well into the 21st century, despite amazing technological advances, capitalism has been unable to guarantee even the most basic need to the population, such as clean, safe water. To achieve the total elimination of lead from drinking water will require a socialist reorganization of society to place priority on the needs of the mass of the population.



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