

Thousands of children in New Jersey found to have elevated blood lead levels

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About 4,500 children in New Jersey had an elevated level of lead in their blood during fiscal 2018, according to a report by the state's department of health. This figure corresponds to 2.3 percent of the 191,000 children younger than 17 across the state who had their blood tested last year. In New Jersey's largest cities, particularly those with large working-class populations, the proportion of children with elevated blood lead levels was found to be as high as 6.4 percent.

The New Jersey Department of Health's annual report shows that scandalous levels of lead contamination in public water are not limited to the city of Newark, where local officials' criminal response made headlines this year.

New Jersey is one of the wealthiest states in the country, boasting the highest percentage of millionaire residents in the United States. The lead contamination is the fruit of intentional neglect, indifference, and ruling class arrogance, allowing basic infrastructure to deteriorate, endangering the health and very lives of workers and their families. This is being carried out by Democrats, such as Governor Phil Murphy, an alumnus of investment bank Goldman Sachs with a personal worth of over \$55 million, and Republicans such as former Governor Chris Christie, alike.

Lead is a neurotoxin that can cause developmental, learning, and behavioral problems, particularly in children. State law requires health practitioners to screen all children for lead at ages 12 months and 24 months. Children age three years or older must be screened at least once before they turn six if they have not been screened previously. The potential danger posed by lead in water pipes, older paints, and other sources is well known, especially for children, and has been for decades. Research shows that even very small

dosages can have serious consequences.

Exposure to lead from drinking water and other sources is a nationwide problem, yet little or nothing is being done to systematically address it, except when a particularly egregious case is exposed to the public.

In previous years, New Jersey used a threshold of 10 micrograms per deciliter ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dl}$) to define an elevated blood lead level. But in fiscal 2018, the state's health department followed the recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and adopted a more stringent threshold of 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dl}$. This change has more than quadrupled the number of children for whom state law requires a public health intervention such as assistance from a nurse or home assessment and pollution remediation.

The lower threshold, "reflects the science behind the fact that even low levels of lead may have a negative effect on the developing brain," Dr. Diane Calello, executive and medical director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center, noted in an interview with *NJ Spotlight*. Although the new threshold may be a "positive change," as she describes it, it is insufficient. Experts agree that no level of lead in the blood is safe.

The counties with the highest prevalence of children under age six with elevated blood lead levels were Salem (5.6 percent), Warren (4.8 percent), Essex (4.1 percent), Cumberland (3.9 percent), and Mercer (3.9 percent). Salem and Cumberland Counties have per capita incomes lower than that of the United States as a whole, and Cumberland County is the poorest county in New Jersey. Essex County includes cities such as Newark, Irvington, and East Orange, which have large working-class populations.

Of New Jersey's largest municipalities, the five with the highest prevalence of children younger than six with elevated blood lead levels were Irvington and

Trenton (each 6.4 percent), East Orange (5.0 percent), Atlantic City (4.8 percent), and Newark (4.4 percent). These cities have been devastated by significant economic decline in recent decades.

Trenton, the state capital, was a major manufacturer of rubber, wire rope, and ceramics until the deindustrialization of the 1970s decimated the city's manufacturing sector.

Irvington, Trenton, Newark, and East Orange have been designated by the state as Urban Enterprise Zones. The stated goal of this designation is to revitalize the cities and increase employment by attracting private investment. In practice, local governments give companies and investors tax breaks and other gifts, while workers receive little or nothing in return.

Newark, like Trenton, is a formerly thriving industrial center. Despite much-publicized attempts to revitalize the city, underemployment remains a persistent problem in Newark, and a 2010 report showed that about one-third of the city's residents were poor.

Lead contamination of Newark's water gained public attention when federally mandated tests indicated problems with the Pequannock water treatment plant earlier this year. The city's antiquated lead service pipes have been leaching lead into the water since at least 1992. Elevated levels of lead have been detected in the water in Newark's public schools since 2011. Instead of replacing the lead service pipes, city officials settled on the cheaper solution of treating the water with silica to prevent corrosion of the pipes.

Democratic US Senator Cory Booker, a current 2020 presidential candidate, was Newark's mayor when the water in the city's schools was found to be contaminated in 2011. He did little to address the problem beyond overhauling the New Watershed Conservation and Development Corporation, a public-private agency. Leaders of the agency subsequently were sued for having allegedly stolen millions of dollars from taxpayers.

After Booker became a Senator in 2013 and left Newark, tests revealed the dangerous extent of the lead contamination in schools and homes. Democratic Mayor Ras Baraka attempted to downplay the problem rather than address it. He mailed a brochure to all residents, assuring them that "the quality of water meets all federal and state standards."

Under pressure, the city distributed filters to be

installed on residents' taps, claiming that they would remove 99 percent of the lead. But Environmental Protection Agency testing found that the filters "may not be reliably effective." City officials then began distributing bottled water to residents, including bottles with expiration dates that had passed. Throughout these events, Baraka and other officials have staged town hall meetings where they have loudly praised their own response to the crisis.

According to estimates compiled from New Jersey municipal water utilities, approximately 350,000 lead service lines need to be replaced statewide in 104 water systems, affecting five million of New Jersey's nearly nine million residents.

A proposal by Governor Murphy to replace all lead service lines would not be completed until 2029. The project would only partly be funded by a \$500 million bond issue. The rest of the cost would be covered by allowing private water utilities to raise rates on customers. The cost of replacing a lead service line in an average home is estimated to be \$6,000. This is in addition to the cuts to social services and increases in taxes that would be imposed to pay back the bonds.

The widespread contamination of New Jersey's water is not an aberration. The discovery of contamination in Newark occurred five years after officials in Flint, Michigan, switched the source of the city's water to the polluted Flint River. This switch created a crisis of lead poisoning that is still unfolding.

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