

After three years, Michigan state officials acknowledge lead poisoning of Benton Harbor residents

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15 October 2021

Seven years after the Flint water crisis, which put the health and lives of 90,000 Michigan residents at risk, state officials have acknowledged large-scale lead contamination of Benton Harbor's water supply.

In 2018, increased water testing in the city of 9,600 residents revealed lead contamination at approximately 22 parts per billion, higher than the 20 parts per billion at the height of Flint's crisis.

Some Benton Harbor residents' tests were as high as 700 and 836 parts per billion. Until a month ago, state officials remained silent and did nothing other than distribute filters to residents, without an explanation of the crisis at hand.

The government cover-up of the lead poisoning crisis is a social crime. While the discovery of lead poisoning in Benton Harbor occurred in 2018, the condition likely predates the stepped-up testing.

Michigan officials, headed by Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer, did not warn the residents until October 6 of this year, when the state formally cautioned residents to switch off their taps and use bottled water for cooking, drinking, brushing teeth and mixing baby formula. In a belated gesture, the state has sent more than 26,000 cases of bottled water to Benton Harbor.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that can cause irreversible harm. Lead ingestion is associated with a host of neurological issues, especially in children.

While even low levels of lead are dangerous, high and extreme levels of lead consumption can severely damage the kidneys, general nervous system and brain development. It can also cause seizures, blackouts and even death. Until the advisory against drinking tap water, mothers were feeding their infants formula

mixed with the lead-tainted water.

Earlier this year, reflecting the callous indifference of the political establishment for the health of working people, local officials presented a two-decade removal and replacement plan for the city's piping. In September, under immense pressure from residents, Governor Whitmer asked the state legislature for \$20 million to replace the pipes. This amount, only two-thirds the estimated cost of replacing the piping, shortened the projected window to five years.

This month, Whitmer signed an executive directive calling on local officials to begin expediting the pipe replacement process on the basis of an 18-month timeline, while more quickly developing plans to provide safe drinking water and bottled water, and free or inexpensive lead-related health care services. In response to her initial proposal of \$20 million, the state legislature passed a budget providing half that amount.

The state government has avoided making any commitment to provide financial assistance for the removal of lead piping inside homes. Instead, the latest plan pushes the bill onto residents and the financially troubled local government.

The paltry funds designated to address the water crisis are a pittance compared to the trillions spent on the US military budget and financial bailouts. Moreover, the current crisis is the outcome of decades of neglect of the water system. Prior to the stepped-up testing in 2018, the roof of Benton Harbor's water treatment plant was collapsing in on itself, while the primary water supply line connected to Lake Michigan was in serious disrepair.

The dangerous conditions in Benton Harbor are far more widespread than the state government chooses to

admit. In 2019, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the results of lead testing in Michigan that revealed high lead levels in the Detroit metropolitan area.

A study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* last month found that 78 percent of the Michigan children included in the study had detectable levels of lead in their blood. While “detectable” is not the same as “elevated”—including levels lower than the Centers for Disease Control base line of 5 micrograms per deciliter—medical professionals note that any amount of lead in a child’s system is unsafe.

Another recently published report, issued by the Natural Resource Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group, exposed the extensive use of lead pipes throughout the United States. The report estimated that between 9.2 million and 12.7 million pipes in the US contain lead, while warning that the actual figure is likely higher due to either inept reporting by state governments or the absence of any reporting. Michigan is among the highest lead pipe usage states in the country.

Governor Whitmer granted a combined \$14 million to 28 Michigan communities, a miniscule amount compared to the funds needed to protect the population from lead poisoning.

It is another example of woeful underfunding of basic infrastructure. Last year, multiple privately owned dams belonging to Boyce Hydro failed after years of neglect, flooding large parts of Midland County. The resulting damage was in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The entire Village of Sanford was nearly destroyed and unknown amounts of toxic chemicals from Dow Chemical washed into the surrounding area.

Home to the corporate headquarters of appliance manufacturer Whirlpool, Benton Harbor’s last remaining manufacturing plant closed in 2011. In 2019, the city’s per capita income was \$14,828.

Benton Harbor’s population is roughly 9,600 according to the 2020 census. There are some 4,000 households in the city, with about 45 percent of the population living in poverty. In the face of these conditions, many residents have left the city over the last decade, leading to reduced water usage. The lack of water flow leads to stagnant water building up in pipes, eroding the system more rapidly.

The years of deindustrialization ultimately put the city at the mercy of then-Republican Governor Rick

Snyder’s Local Government and School District Financial Accountability Act, which subordinated cities to unelected emergency managers. Acting as the agents of the banks and bond holders, these officials gutted social services and public school systems in the poorest cities across the state.

While emergency management ended in 2018, the assault on Benton Harbor’s public resources continued under Whitmer. In 2019, Whitmer gave the Benton Harbor school board an ultimatum: either shut down Benton Harbor High School or the state would assume control of the district and liquidate it.

While mass protests by residents and teachers staved off this initial effort, the attack did not cease. Whitmer changed course in favor of a long-run liquidation, tying the fate of the high school to standardized test performance benchmarks.

Benton Harbor High School sits on a large plot of undeveloped waterfront real estate. Demolishing the school would open up the land to private investors.



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