

Morning Mix

## Untold cities across America have higher rates of lead poisoning than Flint

By Yanan Wang February 4 at 5:53 AM

By now, the public health emergency resulting from lead-contaminated water in Flint, Mich., has been made abundantly clear.

The city changed its water source from the Detroit system to the Flint River in April 2014 as a cost-saving measure, exposing its residents to untreated water replete with lead leached from aging pipes. Last September, a local health center found that the proportion of children with elevated lead levels in their blood had nearly doubled since the switch was made.

Flint has experienced “[a man-made disaster](#),” a press release from the city said last December. Similar official declarations of emergency followed from county commissioners, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) and, most recently, President Obama.

As attention grew around the issue, so too did the public alarm — with good reason. Photos showed Flint residents standing in long lines to collect bottled water and get their children’s blood tested, or standing in court calling for compensation.

And then there were the photos of people holding up samples of the water that had come out of their taps for more than a year. The liquid appears a translucent yellow-brown instead of colorless and clear; if images could emit odor, these ones would be foul.

But the truly terrifying fact about the water crisis in Flint is invisible. It is the insidious effect of growing up or growing old while unknowingly allowing lead into your bloodstream. According to the [World Health Organization](#), lead creates developmental and behavioral issues in children that are believed to be irreversible.

This is the real emergency for which city and state officials are bracing: [the rising demand for special education and juvenile corrections programs that will emerge once lead is translated into reduced IQs, shortened attention spans and greater incidences of violence](#).

This is the poisoning that has occurred not just in Flint but all over the country, for decades — and not from water, but (primarily) from the paint that colors old homes.

Data collected by the [Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) shows that over 40 percent of the states that reported lead test results in 2014 have higher rates of lead poisoning among children than Flint.

In Flint, [4 percent of kids aged five and under](#) tested with blood-lead levels of at least 5 micrograms per deciliter, the threshold of lead intake that necessitates public health action, as defined by the federal government.

Elsewhere in the country, 12 states reported that a greater percentage of kids under six years old met or surpassed that threshold. The most egregious example is Pennsylvania, where 8.5 percent of the children tested were found to have dangerously high levels of lead in their blood.

Only 27 states (including Washington, D.C.) reported childhood blood lead surveillance results to the CDC's national database for 2014, the most recent statistical set available.

These represent just a slice of the infant population. In Texas, for instance, only 184 kids were tested for lead poisoning. The state's population of kids under six exceeds 2 million.

On the federal level, then, there is no comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the population is being exposed to hazardous amounts of lead. While the percentage of children with more than 5 micrograms per deciliter of lead has been steadily declining, the CDC says [no blood-lead level](#) in children has been determined to be "safe."

Flint may have in recent months become synonymous with lead contamination in America, but it is by no means the only — or the most extreme — example of how the toxic element can make its way into our bodies.

Lead poisoning has a variety of sources, nearly all of them household items. The most common source of lead poisoning is paint peeling inside older houses or apartment buildings.

As David Rosner, a public health and history professor at Columbia University and the author of "Lead Wars," told The Post's Philip Bump last month, lead was a ["gift of God"](#) — an expression attributed to a representative of General Motors — in the early 20th century, when industrialists considered it "essential to modern production."

Lead paint is opaque and water-resistant. It's durable. Only decades later did the American Psychological Association discover that lead in the body had [serious repercussions](#) for children's development. But the revelation came too late, as countless homes had already been painted with lead.

As Flint has raised the specter of lead, advocacy groups elsewhere are seizing on the attention to raise awareness about contamination in their own jurisdictions.

At a press conference in Trenton, N.J., this week, a coalition of groups led by community development nonprofit

Isles, Inc. urged Gov. Chris Christie (R) to devote \$10 million towards the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund, which oversees the removal of lead from old homes and other lead abatement projects.

Using state data from New Jersey and Michigan, Isles pointed out that 11 New Jersey cities have a higher proportion of children with dangerous lead levels than Flint.

“While lead levels in children in the suburbs have plummeted, the harsh fact is that minority children in urban communities continue to be poisoned,” Isles environmental health director Elyse Pivnick said in a phone interview with The Post. “If you’re a mother in Trenton or Newark, we do not think the problem has been solved.”

Kevin Roberts, a spokesperson for Christie’s office, rejected the comparison to Flint, calling it “apples-to-oranges” in a phone interview with The Post.

The state’s latest data show that more than 600 fewer New Jersey children tested for blood lead levels greater than 10 micrograms per deciliter in 2015 than 17 years ago, when less testing was conducted.

“Even as the number of screenings have gone up dramatically, incidents of elevated blood levels have fallen dramatically,” said a statement from Christie’s office emailed to The Post. Last month, the governor vetoed a bill that would dedicate \$10 million to the lead assistance fund because it fell under the category of supplemental spending.

“It’s entirely possible that there are urban areas with more total instances of elevated blood levels,” Roberts told The Post. “We were one of the first areas settled when the Europeans came over here. Naturally we have old housing stock.”

Meanwhile, in Michigan itself, reports from [Detroit News](#) and [MLive](#) have pointed out that several cities outside of Flint have higher rates of lead poisoning — again, not from water, but old paint and soil contaminated by factory emissions from yesteryears.

“Flint is an anomaly because they screwed up so badly with the water,” Matt Milcarek, a city commissioner in Kalamazoo, Mich., told MLive. “But lead in the home is what’s poisoning our children. It makes me nervous that everyone is focused on water right now, and so people may test their water and think they’re safe, when they may not even be remotely safe [from lead].”

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Yanan Wang is a reporter on the Morning Mix team.

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