Thousands of U.S. Neighborhoods Suffer Higher Lead Poisoning Levels Than Flint, Michigan

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One year since Flint, Michigan, made headlines after children across the city were exposed to lead in drinking water, a new report found that almost 3,000 cities across the United States face at least double that city's lead poisoning rate. Yet local health officials say many of these "lead hot spots" are receiving little attention or funding, Reuters reports.

For the study, researchers examined blood test results from neighborhoods they obtained from state health departments and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). After reporters submitted public information requests in all 50 states, they found that more than 1,100 of these neighborhoods showed that the rate of elevated lead levels in the blood measured at least four times higher than those uncovered in the now-infamous city.

Among the most poisoned places on the map were Warren, Pennsylvania; Goat Island, Texas; and troublesome hot spots in the cities of Baltimore, Cleveland and Philadelphia, where tests show lead poisoning spanned generations.

As in Flint, the source of lead in many of these localities was crumbling lead paint, lead plumbing or industrial waste left behind from old infrastructure. The report found that while poverty was an important predictor of neighborhoods that were more likely to have high lead levels, victims of poisoning hailed from the ranks of the poor and rich, Black and white and those who dwelled in rural and urban areas. Unlike the water crisis in Flint, however, many of these lead poisoning emergencies were largely ignored, unfunded and unreported.

"I hope this data spurs questions from the public to community leaders who can make changes," said Robert Walker, MD, an epidemiologist and cochair of the CDC's Lead Content Work Group, which evaluates reports of lead poisoning across the country. "I would think that it would turn some heads."

The CDC currently defines elevated lead levels as above 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. But pediatricians say there is no safe level of lead for kids. In addition, there's currently no available treatment for lead poisoning.

To learn more about the lead crisis in Flint and what's been done to stop it, click here.

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