

Editorial: We must take the lead on stopping lead poisoning



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We see the scenario again and again — invest now and pay less later.

It's the economics at the heart of our state's recent investments in early education. Ignoring these forces is a key reason the state's roads are in such terrible shape. And for thousands of Michigan's children, it's the means to finally ending the silent but pernicious effects of lead poisoning on our most vulnerable residents.

A [study by the University of Michigan](#) released last week found that remediating 100,000 of the homes in Michigan most at risk for having lead paint would cost about \$600 million, but taxpayers quickly recoup the expense.

The U-M's Risk Science Center estimates that overall effects of lead poisoning result in more than \$330 million in costs a year — and \$145 million of that is from tax dollars.

It's easy to think of children being the victims, but those children grow up and their chances at successful livelihoods are reduced because of lead exposure. To that end, the study measures short and midterm costs like testing, treatment and special-

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education classes (\$21 million). It takes a long view, as well, measuring the cost of juvenile and adult crime associated with childhood lead exposure (\$105 million). Looking even further out, the study measures the loss of lifelong earnings for kids with the irreversible declines in IQ that are associated with lead exposure, which in a given year adds up to \$206 million.

In Michigan, the problem of lead paint in homes is at its worst in Detroit and Wayne County. But this is not just a Detroit issue, says Lyke Thompson, who has been fighting for dollars to clean up lead-infested homes for decades. He's the director of the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University. Outside of Detroit, trouble spots include Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Muskegon, Jackson, Kalamazoo and Benton Harbor, according to the state's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program

And over time, the number of children reported to have high blood lead levels has decreased — from 15,000 reported cases in 2008 to 5,700 reported cases in 2013. But the work on this issue isn't complete.

In the long run, Thompson says, remediating homes is a trivial investment compared to the cost of lifelong problems associated with high levels of lead exposure. Indeed, the U-M study bears that out.

State government is paying attention. The state Legislature passed a budget last week that included \$500,000 more for lead abatement, raising the total for lead remediation in the 2015 budget to \$1.75 million.

But U-M's study makes an argument for expanding the state's program further — and for fervently pursuing all possible federal grants for lead abatement.

No doubt funding is a big part of the answer, but it's not the only answer. The Michigan Network for Children's Environmental Health recommends finding resources to increase home inspection services, incentivizing landlords to remediate lead paint from their properties and reconvening the state's Lead Poisoning Prevention and Control Commission.

There are a lot of needs and interests jockeying for legislative attention and state tax dollars. But failing to finish this work ignores the state's poorest and most vulnerable kids.