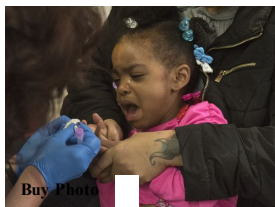


Kids' lead levels high in many Michigan cities

Mike Wilkinson, Bridge Magazine

12:27 p.m. EST January 28, 2016



(Photo: Daniel Mears/The Detroit News)

Across Michigan, in cities large and small, lead poisoning continues to plague children, limiting them in school and on the playground.

While much of the state's focus on lead has rightly been on poisoned water in Flint, the metal continues to turn up annually in the bodies of thousands of children across the state, at percentages well above the numbers that raised red flags in Flint.

Elevated blood-lead levels are seen in a higher percentage of children in parts of Grand Rapids, Jackson, Detroit, Saginaw, Muskegon, Holland and several other cities, proof that the scourge of lead has not been eradicated despite decades of public health campaigns and hundreds of millions of dollars spent to find and

eliminate it.



DETROIT NEWS

[Interactive map: Michigan cities with high lead levels](#)

[\(http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/01/27/interactive-map-michigan-cities-lead-levels/79427040/\)](http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/01/27/interactive-map-michigan-cities-lead-levels/79427040/)

"This is still an issue. It's not going away," said Dr. Eden Wells, chief medical executive of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Many in the state were shocked earlier this year by the findings in Flint: After a steady decline in lead levels, they began to rise in 2014 after the city switched its water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River. That change in water supply, experts say, triggered the increase in lead poisoning because the more corrosive river water may have stripped lead from older pipes and bled it into the drinking supply.



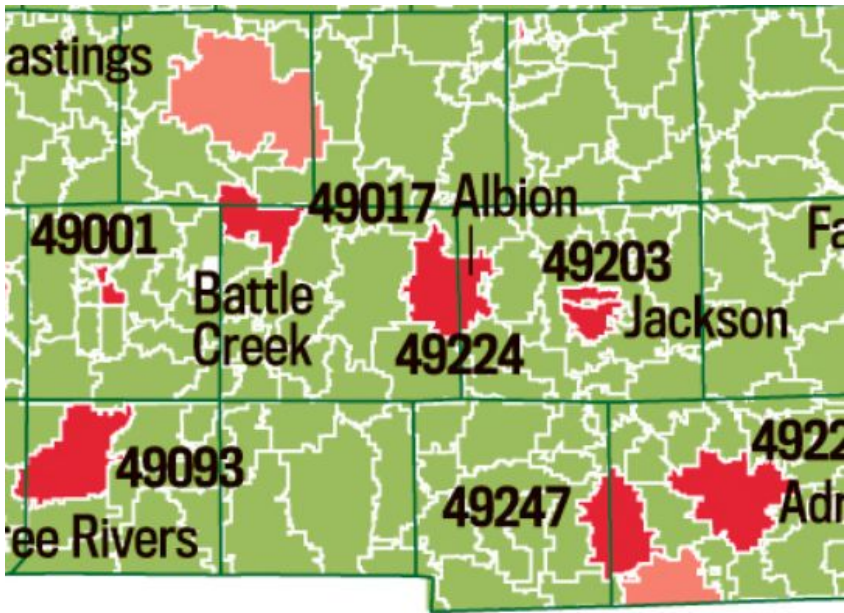
The Detroit News (Photo: Bridge Magazine)

That uptick in Flint, noted by researchers, is what finally forced state officials to confront the dangers in the city's water. Five percent of the Flint children tested had elevated levels of lead, though certain parts of the city had much higher percentages.

Now consider lead exposure rates in some other parts of Michigan:

- In Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park, 10 ZIP codes saw more than 10 percent of children tested have a positive test in 2014. That was nearly 1,000 of the 7,263 children tested, or 13.5 percent.
- In Grand Rapids, nearly 1 in 10 children of those tested in four ZIP codes tested positive in 2014.
- And in Adrian in south-central Michigan, more than 12 percent of the 640 children tested showed elevated levels of lead.

"We do have areas in our state and areas in our country where children are at risk," Wells said.



The Detroit News (Photo: Bridge Magazine)

In Flint, crisis pushed rise

Flint's unfolding water crisis once again brought to the fore a danger long known to rob children of cognitive and physiological function and impulse control. High levels of lead found in students in the Detroit Public Schools system have been linked to that city's notoriously low test scores.

The Detroit News

Subscribe and get your **first 3 months** for

50% OFF

Click below to unlock your offer

UNLOCK MY 50% OFF

In the 48206 ZIP code on the west side of Detroit, 20.8 percent of the 701 children tested had elevated levels in 2013, and 20.3 percent in 2014, the most recent year tested.

In much of the state where lead is a problem, the source of poisoning has been the traditional culprits: old lead paint on homes built before 1978 and lead residue in dust and soil. Young children are particularly susceptible because of their proximity — on the ground — to the most common sources of lead. They crawl on their hands, pick up dust and dirt and put their hands in their mouths.

Because of the well-documented dangers of lead, pediatricians are constantly testing children. "And every week there are more kids on" a weekly statewide report on elevated lead levels, said Paul Haan of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan, which works to eliminate household dangers to make children safer and healthier. Parts of Grand Rapids have some of the highest concentrations of children with lead, he said.

The most recent report had 90 children on it.



Corrosive water from the Flint River plays a role in the city's crisis, but kids can be exposed to lead from old paint in homes or residue in dirt. (Photo: The Detroit News)

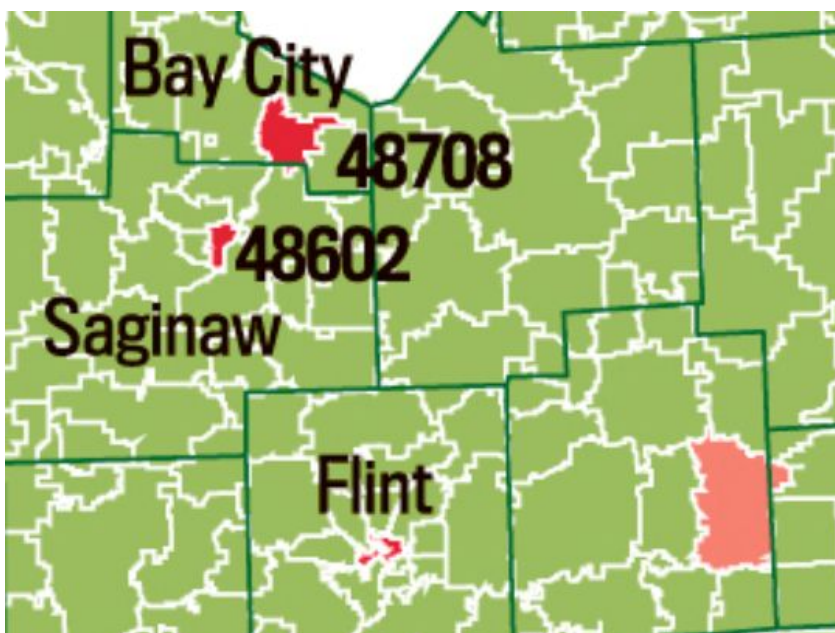
Constant struggle

Taking a broader, longer-term view, far fewer Michigan children are testing positive for lead poisoning in recent decades. In 2012, 4.5 percent of those tested in Michigan showed elevated lead levels, more than five times less than the 25.6 percent a decade earlier.

In 2013, that level sank to 3.9 percent and fell again to 3.5 percent in 2014. But that is still 5,053 children under age 6 who tested positive in 2014. Each had lead levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter. (Though no amount is considered safe, 5 micrograms is the threshold that experts say constitutes a “much higher” level than most children.)

The impact on children's nervous systems and brains are obvious to parents and teachers: children who cannot stay on task, retain information or progress academically and socially. Even low amounts of lead can steal points from a child's intelligence — cognition they cannot get back; lead poisoning is irreversible.

Some researchers have suggested the overall reduction of lead levels in recent decades, mainly from the elimination of lead in gasoline, explains the decline in violent crime in the United States and elsewhere. But those children who live where lead exposure is still found, the implications remain profound and heart-breaking.



Kieya Morrison is a preschool teacher in Detroit and a former veteran kindergarten teacher. Recently, she had a young girl in her class who had elevated levels of lead in her system (teachers are apprised of health issues with children).

Learning was difficult for the girl and Morrison often would go over and over simple shapes: This is a triangle, this is a square. But for this girl, it was a constant struggle.

“She had cognitive problems. She had trouble processing things,” Morrison said. “She could not retain any of the information.”

At her preschool in Detroit, where the teacher-student ratio was 1 to 8, Morrison was able to give the girl more attention and “catch her” when she fell behind.

Morrison said she feared what happened to the girl — her family moved out of the area after preschool — once she got to kindergarten and first grade, where there could be just one teacher for every 30 students.

“You really get lost,” Morrison said of the older grades. “There’s nothing to catch you.”

Solving the problem

In addition to federal and state money, foundations are pouring money into programs across Michigan that help pay for eliminating lead sources in older homes when a family cannot afford to pay for such work. Progress remains slow. In the last 10 years, those programs have paid for lead abatements in 1,500 homes across western Michigan. Yet an estimated 60,000 homes need lead abatement just in that region, said Haan of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan.

Even quantifying the extent of the problem is difficult. A 1998-2000 study estimated that 38 million homes in the United States had lead-based paint and 24 million had “significant lead-based hazards.” In many cases, homeowners eliminate the danger themselves when they repaint a home or replace older plumbing fixtures.

But in many places where the housing stock is the oldest and incomes the lowest, dangers persist; places such as Detroit and Muskegon. That’s where foundations and HUD have poured money into tackling a problem that continues to confound.

Though the state also has its own program to help pay for abatement, its budget is limited. Over the last year, 180 homes have qualified through the state program, said Wells, the state’s chief medical executive.

In addition to the discontinuation of lead in gas, much of the decline in lead levels in recent decades is attributed to changes in construction materials — lead paint was banned in 1978 — and public health activism. The state reaches out to parents and healthcare providers and provides information on where families can turn for help.

Pediatricians are encouraged to test all children ages 1 and 2 for lead, and it is required for Medicaid patients. If there is a positive test, the results are confirmed with another blood test. Family and home histories are taken — the source of lead could be from a parent’s workplace or from the home.

Haan said lead is treated as a medical problem yet the impact extends far beyond a blood test. Beyond cognitive and physiological scars, its toxicity has been correlated to long-term effects that impact society at large, from wages to higher incarceration rates and the welfare system. More needs to be done to eliminate the problem before a child tests positive.

“The problem is,” Haan said, “we’re still using kids as lead detectors.”

Mike Wilkinson is Bridge magazine’s computer-assisted reporting specialist. He previously held a similar role at The Detroit News. Bridge is convening partner for the Detroit Journalism Cooperative, composed of five nonprofit media outlets focused on the city’s future after bankruptcy.





Read or Share this story: <http://detne.ws/1VtvfOL>

Get **Identity Theft Protection** from LifeLock



 **LifeLock**

PROTECT NOW

TOP VIDEOS



DPS protest

02:13

[\(/videos/news/3736394984001/4721166365\)](/videos/news/3736394984001/4721166365)



Oak Park school uses puppets as teaching tools

01:22

[\(/videos/news/3736394984001/4712777171\)](/videos/news/3736394984001/4712777171)



Amir Hekmati arrives home to Flint

00:41

[\(/videos/news/3736394984001/4715656426\)](/videos/news/3736394984001/4715656426)



Flint Mayor Karen Weaver on assistance for her city

02:26

[\(/videos/news/3736394984001/4714049979\)](/videos/news/3736394984001/4714049979)



Excerpts from Gov. Snyder's

