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## Preventable lead poisoning in central Brooklyn injures young

By David Mark Greaves, **Our Time Press**, 1 July 2003. English Language.

Enrique Modesto has lived in the neighborhood for ten years. In 1992, Mr. Modesto said he heard "the worst news someone can tell you: 'your kid is sick.'"

His daughter, presently thirteen years old, was diagnosed with a lead level of 45 micrograms/deciliter, a level which requires hospitalization.

"The biggest problem is that the houses are real bad and the families are afraid to complain to Housing & Preservation Department because they don't want trouble with the landlords," said Mr. Modesto.

"Everyone deserves to live in safe housing but they're scared. I'm not scared because I'm a Pratt Action Community Council member and they're behind me."

### HPD has done nothing

But the problem continues for Mr. Modesto and his family. He says, "HPD has over a hundred complaints in my building." Since nothing has been done to the housing stock, his two-year-old son is encountering the same problem as his daughter and, "HPD has done nothing."

Mr. Modesto's case and a recent study of lead poisoning in Bedford-Stuyvesant demonstrate the truth of the street which says that the wrong people are in jail.

The implications of this report are such that the officials and administrators at HPD and the Department of Health are examples of the right people to be incarcerated for the right reasons. They have cost the city hundreds of billions of dollars in expenses and in lost revenue, and injured thousands of people,

### Benjamin Banneker Students, PACC test Bed-Stuy buildings

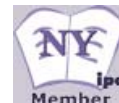
Part of the story started during January and February of this year, when community organizers from the Pratt Area Community Council (PACC), working with students from Benjamin Banneker Academy High School, visited every building within a twelve square-block target area of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The organizers and students had gone through an EPA-certified training to test homes for lead dust, which is how children generally become poisoned.

They tested 59 apartments in 35 separate buildings.

## PUBLICATION INFO

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Gabriel Thompson, director of organizing for PACC, said that the findings were more dramatic and frightening than they had expected. "We had apartments that exceeded five times the EPA guidelines, 15 times the guidelines and up to 100 times the EPA guidelines for lead."

Fully 89 percent of those homes with hazardous amounts of lead also had children under six present.

Although the study focused on this one area, Mr. Thompson said that the same housing stock and code violations can be found throughout central Brooklyn, East New York, Washington Heights, parts of Queens and other areas.

PACC member Daniel Dominguez lived in one of the apartments that was tested for lead in the project. The results showed levels more than 50 times more than considered safe for children. With that information, Mr. Dominguez took his daughter to the hospital to have her blood tested. They found her lead level was 22 micrograms/deciliter. "The doctor told me that the poisoning was very severe and that we should leave the building," Mr. Dominguez said. "It is not just that so many families are in danger from lead. We demand that the city change the laws to protect our children."

#### **Groundbreaking study**

Deputy Borough President Evonne Graham characterized PACC's work as a "groundbreaking study, the results of a grassroots project teaming neighborhood residents and high school students. The results cry out for immediate government action." Ms. Graham, a registered nurse, spoke with passion and authority about the most recent statistics in New York. "More than 6000 thousand new cases of lead poisoning are identified each year. It is appalling that one-third of the children in the area of study, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant community, are growing up in housing that severely threatens their cognitive development. Our knowledge of lead poisoning clearly indicates that even the lowest levels can cause irreversible damage."

Councilman Al Vann thanked PACC and the students of Benjamin Banneker Academy, "for bringing a focus and creating the urgency that we seem to have not understood." The councilman said that while lead was a citywide problem "We want a local, extreme response to a problem that is affecting the children of our community."

Councilman Vann promised to "work very closely with the Department of Health and the HPD to make sure that there be an immediate response to the Bedford- Stuyvesant problem that has been highlighted by this study." Speaking with Our Time Press after the conference, the councilman said "The most astonishing thing is that this is preventable. We allow it to happen through neglect."

Referring to the implications for education Councilman James Davis commented, "Everyone talks about education, these children are being stopped before they even get to the classroom."

#### **Councilman Perkins introduced Proactive Bill**

Councilman Bill Perkins said, "It is a shame that our city is allowing children to be poisoned. It's a shame that the city is allowing lead policy to be dictated by landlords and not by the well-being of our children." Speaking of the recent summonses issued to some landlords, Councilman Perkins said, "It's a shame that HPD is not being motivated by the disgraceful statistics that have been revealed in this report." Perkins has introduced 101A Bill, which he describes as a proactive bill. "It gets to the problem before it gets to the kids," as opposed to the current bill which he calls "reactive."

"Children have to be poisoned, sent home, poisoned again and sent home before the Department of Health pays attention to them. Ninety-five percent of these children are Black and Latino. Would this be allowed in the Silk Stocking district of Manhattan? Would this be allowed if these were someone else's children? I dare say not."

In an interview in June Councilman Perkins said "Bill 101A the Lead Bill, has a veto-proof 37 sponsors, including a majority of the members of the housing and buildings committee. We will have a second hearing in the early fall."

Listing a few of the co-sponsors, Perkins included, "The Borough Presidents of Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens and Manhattan, the Public Advocate Betsey Gotbaum, U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, the New York State NAACP, Andrew Cuomo and Robert Kennedy, Jr."

The councilman suggests that people interested in the hearing date, which has not been set can call his legislative director, Janice Minott at 212-788-7397. She will have copies of the bill and the hearing date when that becomes available.

The PACC report lists three corrective actions:

1. The Department of Health must lower the definition of lead poisoning to 5 micrograms per deciliter to reflect the newest medical research.
2. NYC must mount a massive effort to test children for lead poisoning .
3. HPD must use preventive measures targeting high-risk neighborhoods. They must end the complaint based actions of the past and move to testing the home environment before the children are exposed.

### **Department of Poisoning**

The second part of the story starts at The Center For Disease Control Guidelines which say, "Special attention is given to blood lead levels greater than 10 micrograms per deciliter." This is the level that concerns the New York City Department of Health. At 10 micrograms/dl they send a letter advising that parent to be careful with the child and instruct them to wash their hands frequently, etc.

PACC's Program Manager Gabriel Thompson told us that, "The New York City Department of Health counts a child as poisoned if they test one time at 20 micrograms/deciliter or above, or 15-19 micrograms/deciliter in 2 consecutive tests with a minimum of 90 days between tests." But research on the effects of lower levels of lead indicates that this

is not a health regimen.

And since 94.5% of children with lead poisoning are Black, Latino or Asian, it is a genocidal regimen as well.

### **Already lost IQ**

Recent research indicates that by the time the 10 micrograms/deciliter level is reached, the child had already lost seven to eleven IQ points.

A study in The New England Journal of Medicine, (vol. 348, no. 16, April 17, 2003 p.1522) using national data reported, greater possible effects on reading and math scores among children with blood lead concentrations below 5 micrograms per deciliter than among those with higher concentrations.

The study also found evidence indicating a "greater possible effect on reading and math scores among children with blood lead concentrations below 5 micrograms/deciliter than among those with higher concentrations."

### **Lead: What they show is the tip of the iceberg**

For the period of 1995 to 2000, the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) estimates the number of children between ages 6 months and 6 years who were at above 10 micrograms/deciliter was 136,404!

### **Nervous system damage**

But brain damage caused by ingesting lead dust, involves more than results on an IQ test. Another report notes that although IQ effects may be the easiest to put a number on, they may not be the most serious in terms of life and career outcomes. Tom Muir and Mike Zegarac, authors of "Societal Costs of Exposure to Toxic Substances," say that toxic substances such as lead also affect the ability to plan, organize and initiate ideas. These substances induce problems with attention spans and make people easily distracted. They cause impulsive behavior as well as an inability to handle stress, disappointment, and delayed gratification.

"These problems constitute to many a much more serious effect of toxicants with respect to success in school and in life, and with respect to possible anti-social behavior. This has obvious negative implications for excellence in the development of leaders such as chief executive officers, scientists, and management and administration officials, and thus may impact both our economy and society."

PACC's "Politics of Poison" report says that not only has lead poisoning been incontrovertibly linked to a serious decline in IQ but also to a rise in attention deficit disorder and the potential for violent behavior and drug addiction.

They quote a 1993 study that determined "lead poisoning was the strongest predictor of disciplinary problems in school, which also were among the strongest predictors of arrests of youth between the ages of 7 and 22...On the face of it, considering the cumulative costs of special education and long-term medical care, possible substance abuse treatment, incarceration and the likely loss of productivity and

wages, individuals, communities and the government assume a considerable burden of expense throughout the lifetime of each lead-poisoned individual."

### **Not just the children, but the parents**

But then it gets worse. Research done in Mexico City by the Harvard School of Public Health and the Harvard Medical School concluded that elevated maternal bone lead levels are linked to impaired cognitive development in infants.

The study, appearing in the July 2002 issue of the journal "Pediatrics," warns, "Given the lengthy amount of time lead can reside in maternal bone and that bone is demineralized in the blood during pregnancy, the findings highlight a potentially significant public health problem, linking the history of a mother's lead exposure to risk for the next generation."

African-Americans in central Brooklyn, raising children in housing built before 1973, living in economically deprived conditions for generations, may have taken on a lead load themselves and passed it on to their babies, who then brought their lead dusted hands to curious lips. And now grandparents look at young people and wonder "What is going on?" "We never behaved this way."

### **Damage is irreversible**

Lead-poisoning is a topic that has been extensively researched and ways out of it have been sought. Researchers had thought that chelation therapy to remove the lead from the body would have had a positive effect. Instead, they found that children with moderately elevated levels, that is below 10 micrograms, who received chelation treatment did not show improvement in IQ scores.

### **Need a figure?**

A study was done on the societal benefits of reducing lead in gasoline, and it was calculated that there was a 1.763% loss in lifetime earnings per 1-point IQ decrease for both men and women.

### **2003 Test Scores follow lead poisoning pattern**

The 2003 standardized test scores for English Language Arts and Math for New York City grades 3 to 8 are in and the results for the Bedford-Stuyvesant area are as dismal as ever.

In School District 16, a high lead area, 68% of the students are performing below standard for their grade.

Almost 22% are in Level 1, these are students whose performance shows minimal understanding of written and oral text and only 6.3% are at Level 4, where students exceed the learning standards.

Among New York city-wide reading and math scores the low-lead city council districts had far fewer Level 1 students and far more Level 4 students.

### **Health Dept. must change guidelines. What is happening is abominable**

This is only happening because these children are black and brown. Right now, the Department of Health and HPD should be holding daily briefings as their people fan out through high-lead areas designating buildings for immediate lead removal or abatement, to be paid by the city and recouped from lead manufacturers, building owners with violations, taxes and any other means necessary. Children and adults should be tested for lead as though it were a weapon of mass destruction, which many would argue it is.

Instead, this preventable disease is allowed to continue because of a Gordian knot of competing interests and bureaucratic ignorance, malevolence or benign neglect. That Dr. Thomas Frieden, the Commissioner of Health, can allow this to occur is amazing. The commissioner, responsible for overseeing the health of 8 million people, should be frightened by these numbers. And if the physicians first rule is to do no harm, he would be passionate and driven to see that this harm was halted.

The Department of Health has confirmed the findings of the PACC report, and has recommitted the agency to ending childhood lead poisoning about 10 micrograms by 2010. But that's not good enough. The definition of lead poisoning has to be lowered to 2.5 micrograms per deciliter to reflect the latest research.

We know that sometimes a people allow things that the individual knows to be wrong.

Imagine a scale from one-to-ten, of social issues that New Yorkers agree to be wrong, with insuring that traffic signals don't all show green simultaneously, being closer to one, and giving Indigenous people blankets with smallpox, or administering syphilis to unsuspecting African-Americans, being ten in the ascending order of social importance.

On this scale would be slavery, union organizing, giving the vote to women, giving the vote to African-Americans and all the things New Yorkers have come to change their minds on. The Rockefeller Drug Laws for example, would fall somewhere in there.

Now I don't know where the poisoning of African-American, Latino and Asian children would be, but I'd like to think it's pretty high up in terms of what most New Yorkers agree is wrong that must be corrected.

Lead poisoning in these children poses a clear and present danger to the future of this city as well as the affected races.

If we cannot draw the line here, at poisoning children because of societal indifference, then we are damned to live in a very dismal city.

**This article appeared in [Edition 74](#) of *Voices That Must Be Heard*.**

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