Lead Exposure

A summary of the scientific literature on lead and policies for reducing exposure.



How This Impacts Children's Development

Children are being exposed to unacceptable levels of lead daily; even low levels that were once considered safe can cause damage. In the United States, 25% of all preschoolers may have been exposed to lead levels

high enough to impair their development. Lead poisoning affects children biologically, leading to long-term developmental deficits that adversely impact cognitive functioning, behavior, school performance, and even criminal behavior in adulthood.

Read the brief: Protecting Children from Lead Exposure, 2010

Talking Points from the SRCD Brief

- Although lead exposure is harmful at any age, children are particularly sensitive to its negative effects because of their early stage of development.
- Children from low-income families are more likely to be exposed to lead than their peers and tend to be more sensitive to its effects, showing greater deficits even at lower levels of exposure.
- Blood lead levels typically peak around age two.
- Water is just one of many sources of lead exposure—42.8 percent of lead in the air comes from industrial processes.
- Lead exposure is costly, with one study estimating that it incurs $192 to $270 billion in health care and economic losses over six years for children under six. Additionally, reducing children's blood lead levels by just 1 μg/dL could save $7.56 billion annually.

Policy Considerations in the Brief

1. Federal agencies could lower the allowable lead level—the threshold over which certain treatment requirements must be enacted—from 10 μg/dL to 5 μg/dL.
2. Policymakers could create federally mandated screening guidelines for annual screening of all children under six (with Medicaid paying for low-income children) and pregnant women, and a national verification system so states comply with testing requirements (while most states have screening plans for children under six, plans vary greatly and are not always followed)
3. Federal agencies could increase regulation to reduce exposure, such as: reduce lead in pipes, ban imported toys or children’s products with lead, curb industry pollution, require factories to disclose lead emission levels, and promote lead-free jet fuel.
4. State governments and federal agencies could further limit lead exposure by creating programs to test lead levels in homes, mandate removal, and provide support to do so for low-income communities.

5. Encourage better collaboration among government agencies and better use of the National Lead Information Center as the central information-gathering point.

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