Lead is a soft gray metal that improves the protective power of paint. Throughout the 19th century and up until about 1950, lead was added to most paint to improve its covering power and durability. Unfortunately, lead is a powerful poison. At low levels, it reduces a person's intelligence, makes it difficult to concentrate or pay attention, and harms hearing. These effects are permanent. Naturally, in children, these effects reduce performance in school. (At higher levels, lead has many additional severe effects including kidney disease, blindness, seizures, and death.)

Kids eat peeling paint; it tastes like lemon drops. Starting in the 1930s, public health authorities began to realize that lead in paint was poisoning children, particularly children in dilapidated housing in inner cities. Baltimore began a lead screening program in 1931. After 20 years observing the lead problem, the head of the Baltimore health department published an evaluation in a public health journal:

In Baltimore, he said, the rate of poisoning among children was "7.5 times as high among the Negro population as it was among the white population.... The high rates among Negro children are a problem of considerable public health significance since 30 percent of Baltimore's pre-school population is Negro. The racial difference in incidence is believed to be due to environmental factors probably resulting chiefly from economic disadvantage." This was written 40 years ago, in 1952.[1]

By 1969, the best estimate was that 200,000 children each year were being added to the thousands already poisoned by lead, according to researchers at the New Jersey College of Medicine. "These children are almost entirely black and Puerto Rican because it is they who are stuck in run-down housing," they said. They went on, "At present, Boards of Health in most cities would admit to the magnitude of the problem but do little to solve it. Some small-scale screening programs are carried out intermittently, but of course, they do not reach the majority of the hundreds of thousands of affected children."[2]

In 1970, publications of the U.S. Public Health Service [USPHS] acknowledged that lead poisoning was disproportionately affecting black and Puerto Rican children. For example, one publication said, "A high incidence is reported among Negroses and Puerto Ricans, probably because such a large proportion of these ethnic groups live in 'lead belts.'"[3]

There can be absolutely no doubt that by 1970 the medical and public health communities, inside and outside government, fully understood and acknowledged that lead was selectively killing and maiming black and Puerto Rican children trapped by poverty in poisoned housing.

The selective poisoning of non-white children was the subject of many studies and front-page newspaper stories 20 years ago. For example, the U.S. Public Health Service's Bureau of Community Environmental Management surveyed housing in 27 U.S. cities in 1971. Dr. Roger Challop, who coordinated the survey, told the WASHINGTON POST that "33 percent of the black children tested had elevated levels of lead in their blood while the figure for white children was 11%."[4]

In Washington, D.C., a city with a large black population, the situation was acknowledged to be particularly bad: "Thirty to 50% of District of Columbia babies may be expected to have an undue body burden of lead before school age, a 1971 survey by Georgetown University doctors reported. Damage may range from nervous disorders to severe mental retardation."[5]

A 1971 study of 79,199 children by the Health Services Administration of New York City found lead poisoning three times more common among black children than among a population called "white and Puerto Rican."[6]

A 1973 editorial in the WASHINGTON POST described the situation in unusually plain language: "As the late Rep. William F. Ryan said last year in Senate hearings, 'lead poisoning is not some rare malady waiting for a miracle cure. It is totally man-made and a totally preventable disease. It exists only because we let it exist. Lead poisoning has sentenced thousands of young children to lives of misery, disease and even death.' The POST went on to say, 'One reason the nation has never mounted a public health campaign against lead paint poisoning is that it affects mostly the poor, the black, the Spanish speaking and others who often must endure miserable housing.'[7]

The tone and style of the federal government's response to the poisoning of non-white children was set by Richard Nixon. In 1970 Congress authorized $30 million to solve the problem. However, in his 1971 budget sent to Congress, Mr. Nixon include zero dollars to combat lead poisoning. After 45 members of Congress, led by Senator Ted Kennedy, complained loudly, the Nixon administration grudgingly put in $2 million for three demonstration projects.[8] Reporting these events, the TIMES printed the current best estimate, which was that 400,000 children were then being poisoned by lead each year.

For the next 20 years, Congress and the nation's medical and public health establishments waffled, procrastinated, and shuffled paper while the problem steadily grew worse. Sometimes funding would reach as high as $50 million per year. During the years of Mr. Reagan's policy of "benign neglect," funding dropped much lower, but even in the best years funding never reached levels that would make a real dent in the problem. Meanwhile new research year after year revealed that effects of lead poisoning were worse than previously understood. In 1971 a child wasn't considered "at risk" unless he or she had 400 micrograms of lead in a liter of blood (or 40 micrograms per deciliter [mcg/dl]). Since that time, the amount of lead that is considered "safe" has continually dropped. In 1991 the U.S. Public Health Service changed the official definition of an "unsafe" level to 10 u/dl.
Even at that level, a child's IQ can be slightly diminished and physical growth stunted.

In a particularly blunt assessment of the problem, Professor Marianne C. Fahs of Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City said in 1991, "Lead poisoning is the most common and socially devastating disease of young American children, resulting in lifelong stupidity for at least 3 to 4 million future citizens."[9] Dr. Fahs pointed to a recent study showing that a $32 billion investment to clean up lead in dilapidated housing would save more than $60 billion in medical costs for poisoned children.

In the spring of 1991, the Bush administration announced an ambitious program to reduce lead exposure of American children, including widespread testing of homes, certification of those who remove lead from homes, and medical treatment for affected children. At last it seemed our leaders were coming to grips with the lead-poisoning problem. At that time, Dr. William Roper, director of the federal Centers for Disease Control [CDC] said--echoing words that had been common among politicians in 1970--"We believe that lead poisoning is the No. 1 environmental problem facing America's children. Therefore it will take a major societal effort to eliminate it."[10]

Six months later, President Bush turned his back on the lead problem. CDC officials announced that the administration "does not see this as a necessary federal role" to legislate or regulate the cleanup of lead poisoning or to require that homes be tested, or to require home owners to disclose results once they are known, or to establish standards for those who test or clean up lead hazards. It was a total collapse. According to the NEW YORK TIMES, the National Association of Realtors had pressured Mr. Bush to drop his lead initiative because they feared that forcing homeowners to eliminate lead hazards would add $5,000 to $10,000 to the price of those homes, further harming a real estate market that had been devastated by the aftershocks of Reaganomics.

The lead problem now affects almost all American children, though black and Hispanic kids are still more poisoned than whites. A 1990 report by the Environmental Defense Fund [EDF], a Washington-based environmental group, revealed that, judged by the new 1991 standard (10 u/dl), 96% of black children and 80% of white children of poor families in inner cities have unsafe amounts of lead in their blood, amounts sufficient to reduce IQ somewhat, probably harm hearing, reduce the ability to concentrate, and stunt physical growth. Even in families with annual incomes greater than $15,000, among black children in cities, 85% have unsafe lead levels, compared to 47% of white children.[11] Never before in the history of the world has a nation poisoned its children on such a scale. --Peter Montague


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