

Lead is poisoning children on U.S. military bases, says report

August 22 2018, by Kevin Krajick



A new report shows that family housing on some U.S military bases may potentially expose children to high levels of lead. Here, a house pictured on the Army's Ft. Benning housing site. Credit: Columbia University

An extensive investigation by the Reuters news agency has found that many children living on U.S. military bases may be exposed to hazardous levels of lead in decaying family housing. The investigation included tests done at Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory on samples of water, soil, and paint, from homes on seven bases. As a result of the report, a bipartisan group of four U.S. senators, in part citing the tests, has asked the Army for its own report on the problem, and immediate strategies to address it.

Reuters collaborated with Lamont last year in a separate [report](#) that cited high levels of lead in the soil of Brooklyn backyards and parks. After that, geochemist Alexander van Geen agreed to supply compact

sampling kits for the military investigation. Reuters distributed the kits to selected families on bases in Georgia, Texas, Kentucky and New York. The families or reporters collected the samples and shipped them back to Lamont. Van Geen arranged for samples to be shipped back without return addresses so that he would be blind to their origins.

Analyses revealed no problems with water or soil, but the results on paint were alarming. At Georgia's Ft. Benning, exposed paint chips in reach of children in from five homes all held hazardous levels of lead—in one case, 58 times the permissible limit. At New York's West Point, chips falling from one family's front door was 19 times the federal safety limit. At Kentucky's Ft. Knox, paint peeling off a covered porch where children played was 100 times the threshold.

"The paint results were a big surprise—I didn't think it would be that bad," said van Geen.

Through Freedom of Information requests, reporters Joshua Schneyer and Andrea Januta also uncovered documents showing that blood tests on more than 1,100 children on six bases in recent years have shown they carried high levels of lead. In some cases, the Army failed to report the tests to state authorities, as required by law. The report detailed the story of one boy who was apparently poisoned by lead at Ft. Benning at age two; now at eight, he is still suffering developmental problems. Reuters estimated that some 100,000 children under the age of 5 live on military bases nationwide, but there is no way to know the total number who have been exposed to lead or suffered its effects.

The report says that the Army and private contractors, who maintain much of the on-base housing, have already started taking action in some places, overhauling medical reporting procedures, and undertaking a lead-abatement program on at least one base. But van Geen was taken aback by the initial reaction at one base. After Ft. Benning's commander heard

that hazards had been found there, but before the report's publication, he wrote a letter to residents that "unknown persons" were seeking to test homes, and advised them not to cooperate. "I didn't think the military would respond so callously," said van Geen.

Provided by Columbia University

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