

LETTERS

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The Social Costs Of Lead Poisonings

The lead poisoning of children in Flint, Michigan, discussed by David Rosner (May 2016), has created a new awareness of a public health crisis that has never left us because the investment needed to remove lead from pipes in high-risk areas was never made. But what is the cost of inaction?

Each year in America there are roughly 90,000 low-level exposures (5–9 micrograms per deciliter), which commonly result from sources such as drinking water.¹ These exposures rob children of IQ points, leading to lower economic productivity, higher welfare use, and additional criminal justice system costs.² The lifelong bill for these exposures is about \$50,000 and 0.2 year of perfect health per child (discounted at a rate of 3 percent).²

In Flint there were more than 8,000 documented exposures,³ with the costs amounting to about \$400 million and 1,760 quality-adjusted life-years lost.

Thus, in an effort that would have saved approximately \$5 million from switching the water source from April 2014 to the present date, the city of Flint will suffer net present losses of \$395 million—even before accounting for the \$58 million already spent by the state on medical care and water provisions or its toll on health.

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NOTES

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Number of children tested and confirmed BLL's ≥ 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ by state, year, and BLL group, dchildren < 72 months old [Internet]. Atlanta (GA): CDC; [cited 2016 May 6]. Available from: http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/data/Website_State_ConfirmedByYear_1997_2014_01112016.htm
- 2 Muennig P. The social costs of childhood lead exposure in the post-lead regulation era. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2009;163(9):844–9.
- 3 Hanna-Attisha M, LaChance J, Sadler RC, Champney Schnepf A. Elevated blood lead levels in children associated with the Flint drinking water crisis: a spatial analysis of risk and public health response. *Am J Public Health.* 2016; 106(2):283–90.