



Lead poisoning is theme of legislative hearing in New Orleans

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By [Bruce Egglar, The Times-Picayune](#)

What was billed as a legislative hearing Thursday on [lead contamination at New Orleans parks and playgrounds](#) quickly turned into a wide-ranging examination of lead poisoning problems throughout New Orleans and the state.



Legislators heard both good news and bad. On the one hand, they were told, reported levels of lead poisoning decreased sharply in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. On the other hand, despite legal requirements, many pediatricians are not making sure that their young patients are tested for lead, and the city is doing little to enforce a law requiring homeowners and contractors to take safety precautions when removing lead-based paint.

State Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, called the Senate Environmental Affairs Committee hearing at New Orleans City Hall in the wake of recent publicity about the discovery of elevated lead levels in the soil at [Markey Park](#) in Bywater.

The park, closed since Jan. 28 for remediation, reopened to the public Saturday after contractors placed geotextile fabric over the old soil in areas where the lead level exceeded standards and covered those areas with six inches of "clean" soil.

The city also is testing 13 other parks and playgrounds in old neighborhoods where lead contamination is suspected.



Young children are most likely to be exposed to lead by inhaling contaminated dust or ingesting it off dusty hands. Their systems are also most susceptible to the neurotoxin's effects, which can include a lower IQ, a shorter attention span, hyperactivity and difficulty reading. There also have been studies correlating higher lead levels in children with higher crime rates among adolescents and young adults.

Dr. Luann White, senior associate dean at the Tulane University School of Public Health, said the percentage of children tested who showed elevated lead levels in their blood dropped from between 11 percent and 14 percent a year before Katrina to about 5 percent in the three years after the 2005 storm.

The primary reason for the drop, she said, was the demolition and gutting of substandard housing with leaded paint. In addition, she said, lead leached from the systems of children who spent long periods in other, less contaminated environments after the storm.

However, White said, the percentage of white children with elevated lead levels increased in 2007 and 2008 because of an increase in the number of renovations of older homes in their generally more affluent neighborhoods.

In 2001, the City Council passed a law requiring contractors and homeowners planning to remove lead-based paint to inform neighbors or tenants that the work is about to begin. Violators can be fined as much as \$500, the maximum for a misdemeanor under state law.

The contractor or homeowner also is required to erect "containment barriers" similar to the large tarpaulins used when homes are fumigated for termites, or to use sanders equipped with vacuum devices to prevent the spread of lead dust. In all cases, doors and windows must be sealed and the ground covered with plastic sheets that can be discarded easily after the work is done. Paint removal projects that affect less than 10 square feet are exempt.

A state environmental official told the committee that the ordinance is one of the best in the country. But White said there has been virtually no enforcement of the rules since Katrina.

Nabil Baddour of the citizens group NOLA Unleaded said there is a financial incentive for contractors not to obey the law, because following the proper procedures drives up the cost and can mean they will lose a job to less scrupulous competitors. Morrell said some contractors in fact charge customers for proper lead abatement and then don't do it.

Dr. Howard Mielke, a leading authority on lead poisoning, said the New Orleans neighborhoods with the highest soil contamination levels ring the Central Business District, including Bywater, St. Roch, Marigny, Central City and the Mid-City sites of two planned major hospitals. In the CBD itself, the lead level is very low because most ground is covered by concrete.

Mielke said parks and playgrounds often have much lower lead levels than the yards of surrounding homes, and he warned that the amount of lead in play areas at state-licensed child care centers can be extremely high. He said the replacement of old public housing complexes has led to tremendous improvement in those neighborhoods.

Several speakers said many doctors and pediatricians are not insisting children be tested for lead or at least are not reporting the results if they fall within supposedly safe levels. In 2008, only 38 percent of at-risk children in Orleans Parish and 20 percent statewide were screened, Baddour said.

"We are testing better but still not adequately," White said.

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