

Ignoring the link between lead poisoning and crime imperils black Americans



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BY ROCHELLE RITCHIE, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 03/21/19 07:00 AM EDT

Violence in the black community often is blamed on a lack of police accountability, broken trust between officers and citizens, and failure to provide stable jobs for inner-city residents. A [recent article](#) in the New York Times sheds light on the violence that has grown increasingly worse in cities such as Baltimore since Freddie Gray's 2015 death in police custody. Yet the article's assertions about crime and violence exclude one important aspect that should not be ignored: Baltimore's alarming lead poisoning crisis.

Gray, whose death sparked days of unrest, was diagnosed with [lead poisoning](#) as a child. His death became one of the most high-profile cases of police brutality in the country, and revealed that Charm City might not be so charming. Yet Gray is just one of scores of young black men in U.S. cities whose chances for better education, employment and life were cut short, likely in part because of this deadly neurotoxin.

For more than a decade, Baltimore, which is [63 percent black](#), consistently has reported thousands of black children testing positive for lead poisoning, more than any other city in the state. Between 1993 and 2013, more than [65,000 children](#) in Baltimore tested positive for dangerously high blood-lead levels.

Lack of funding from the federal government to address the threat of lead continues to have a detrimental impact on the safety of black residents. In 2015, the federal government slashed [\\$35 million](#) from the Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes budget, which provides funding to state and local governments to help reduce the risk of lead poisoning. The cuts had a crippling effect in Baltimore's ability to help its residents. As a result, Maryland's Department of Environment and the federal Environmental Protection Agency found homes previously certified as "[free of lead](#)" were still contaminated or not tested at all. During that time, with less federal funding for lead prevention, Baltimore was left with just enough money to renovate only [230 homes](#) out of thousands left as death traps.

According to the [National Bureau of Economics](#), high levels of lead can cause increased school suspensions, juvenile incarcerations and criminal behavior as adults, and the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) found a link between lead and criminal and antisocial behavior. The [research concluded](#): "With the exception of rape, aggregate blood-lead levels were statistically significant predictors of violent crime."

The [Mayo Clinic](#) reports that lead poisoning in children causes numerous symptoms, including developmental delay, learning difficulties and irritability. Lead testing in Chicago, another city plagued by violence in black neighborhoods, revealed during a three-year period that [75 percent](#) of Chicago's elementary school students had high levels of lead.

To a large extent, the government has ignored the [correlation between violent crime and lead poisoning](#). This negligence likely has contributed to the poor academic performance of black students, high rates of crime and ramped drug use. Federal, state and local governments must take a stronger, more definitive approach to eliminating the risks associated with high levels of lead in children living in inner-city neighborhoods.

If politicians are genuinely outraged by the saturation of criminal activity in black communities, they cannot simply "mentor" or incarcerate their way to building safer communities. Instead, it is without question a necessity to address the environmental threats that feed the stereotype of black people living in struggling communities as poor, violent and uneducated. Lead poisoning is [just as much a crisis](#) as the nation's opioid crisis that is [now getting response](#) from the Oval Office.

Pointing out the "usual suspects" and triggers of violence in poor black neighborhoods is ill-served when we ignore environmental hazards that can have a negative impact on generations of families.

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