

South side children found with high lead levels

Most families checked in project live in homes with high-risk factors

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Hundreds of children on the near south side may have elevated levels of lead in their blood, a pilot project on lead paint exposure suggests.

Of 88 families recently checked for elevated blood lead levels in a 16-block area, 83 were found to live in homes with higher than average lead poisoning risk factors, the study released this month by the 16th Street Community Health Center says.

And of 102 young children living in those homes, 41 were found to have elevated levels of lead in their blood, a fact that has renewed the call for vigilance against lead poisoning in the Walker's Point neighborhood.

"A lot of these kids are not being screened through the traditional system," said John Bartkowski, director of the center at 1032 S. 16th St. "We're finding them by going door to door."



JEFFREY PHELPS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Martha Rodriguez holds her son, Fidel Alec, as outreach workers Juanita Hernandez (right) and Khoua Xiong, from the 16th Street Community Health Center, work to get a blood sample from the youngster's finger while at the apartment of his baby sitter. The child was being screened for lead exposure as part of a pilot project.

The 10-week study, which focused on children ages 6 months to 6 years, is part of a two-year project financed through a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Milwaukee Foundation. Project workers will look for lead and asbestos hazards in homes as well as other environmental hazards that could be affect-

ing the health of residents in south side communities, Bartkowski said.

With training provided by the Milwaukee Health Department, three outreach workers surveyed homes in an area bounded by W. Scott

St. on the south, W. National Ave. on the north, S. 12th St. on the east and S. 16th St. on the west.

The survey covered half of one census tract, Bartkowski said. Amy Murphy, lead program manager for the city

Health Department, said 57 young children with high lead levels were reported to the city by doctors and clinics in 1994 in the entire census tract in question. The city does not have the financial resources to conduct door-to-door sur-

veys, she said.

Because the project eventually will look at five census tracts in the area, the indications of the first study are very telling, Bartkowski said.

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"Multiply these results by 10 and we'll probably find hundreds of kids (with elevated blood lead levels), which could have a huge social impact if they're not found," he said.

Lead poisoning can cause some forms of learning disabilities, behavioral problems and even serious health problems in children, said Sharon Fleischfresser, a pediatrician and medical director at the center.

"This has been called an invisible epidemic," Fleischfresser said. "In rare cases, it can lead to seizures and comas. But often, chronically exposed kids don't do as well in school, they are more irritable and more lethargic.

"These are things that are hard to pick up."

During the study, children were given finger-prick blood tests during home visits by the outreach workers. Among the findings:

■ Forty-one of the 102 children tested had blood lead levels exceeding 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter, a level that poses health risks, Bartkowski said.

■ About 83% of the 88 homes surveyed tested positive for one or more high-risk factors, such as peeling and chipping lead-based paint inside the home or paint flaking onto soil where children may play outside.

■ A Hepa-vac, a vacuum used to clean up paint chips without releasing lead particles into the air, was required in 32 of the homes.

■ Of the children involved in the study, 73 had no health insurance coverage and had never been tested for lead exposure. This number includes five with blood lead levels of more than 20 micrograms of lead per deciliter.

Children with levels exceeding 20 micrograms were referred to the city Health Depart-

ment for follow-up, the study says. The families of the remaining children with elevated levels will receive education from the center on lead poisoning prevention and will be rescreened every six months for the remainder of the project.