

BROWN UNIVERSITY

RE-CREATING PROVIDENCE:
PREVENTING CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING
IN LOW-INCOME RENTAL PROPERTIES

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

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MAY, 1994

Abstract

"Targeting high risk homes and rental properties will provide not only immediate benefits by reducing exposures for current occupants, but also long term benefits by reducing exposures for future occupants."¹

Lead is an environmental hazard causing problems with children's neurological development. Lead was used legally in paint until it was banned in 1978. Lead in paint is extremely durable and is the most frequent source of exposure for children in Providence. The Lead Poisoning Prevention Act of 1991 created a comprehensive environmental lead program (CELP) for Rhode Island to address lead poisoning. While resources were allocated to prevent lead poisoning, priority is given to treating children who are already poisoned: primary prevention of childhood lead poisoning is extremely limited.

CELP created a number of programs which target lead poisoning, including creating an effective infrastructure of trained lead abaters, inspectors, and educators. The problem lies within the limited resources; the abaters, inspectors, and educators only visit the homes of significantly lead poisoned children. After a child is poisoned, property owners must clean up their properties; this thesis identifies how to make property owners remediate lead hazards before a child is exposed. The costs of inspection and abatement cost the same whether there is a poisoned child on the property or not.

Housing inspection and abatement are expensive. However, there are ways to minimize the costs while still reducing lead hazards. Inspections and licensed abaters, while worthwhile, are not always necessary. 95% of the properties in Providence were painted prior to 1978, therefore containing lead paint. Rather than do a complete and expensive lead inspection, a landlord could have a less costly lead determination inspection that only identifies the immediate hazards. Also, the Lead Regulations allow the property owner to do the abatement work themselves. While getting the lead out is expensive, there are ways to minimize the costs and in the long run, the landlord would have to pay for it anyway.

I studied insurance and mortgage requirements and found that while they could provide incentives for lead poisoning prevention, there is low political feasibility of this occurring. Additional costs are added to homeownership which make such solutions less practical. For efficient and equitable lead poisoning prevention, housing code inspectors should inspect rental units prior to property transfer to prevent childhood exposure to lead.

¹Environmental Lead Task Force, Briefing Paper: A Comprehensive Plan to Eliminate Childhood Lead Poisoning in Rhode Island: Final Report (Providence: Department of Health, March 12, 1993), 3.