



Flint: The Lead Contamination Case That Wasn't

In a 2016 presidential debate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [said](#) that “every single American should be outraged” that the people of Flint, Michigan, were being forced to use contaminated drinking water. With that, the news about the alleged water crisis in Flint exploded, generating action from Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and President Barack Obama and lawsuits against Snyder and other state officials.



In reality, reported the [Daily Caller](#), there was no crisis, at least when it came to lead contamination. Yes, the lead level in Flint's water supply increased significantly, but the city's children experienced only a tiny increase in their blood lead levels that cannot even be definitively tied to the water contamination. No one was poisoned.

But the story made an outstanding political prop. “We've had a city in the United States of America where the population which is poor in many ways, and majority African-American has been drinking and bathing in lead contaminated water and the governor of that state acted as though he didn't really care,” charged Clinton, painting herself as the champion of downtrodden blacks being ignored by a heartless Republican governor.

The Daily Caller summarized the situation thus:

Most of the alleged crisis transpired after officials switched the small eastern Michigan city's water supply from Lake Huron in 2014 to the Flint River. The state applied the wrong regulations and standards for drinking water during the switch. The mistake resulted in corroded pipes, which leached lead into the town's drinking water. Flint's lead levels went unnoticed until a pair of scientific studies in late 2015 showed significant levels of contamination were present.

That lead contamination is what led politicians and commentators to refer to the “poisoning” of the people, and especially the children, of Flint. In fact, medical toxicologist Hernán Gómez told the Daily Caller, “The numbers in Flint didn't compute. They were being horribly exaggerated.”

Gómez, who is also an associate professor at the University of Michigan, and Kim Dietrich, a professor of epidemiology and environmental health at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, penned a July [New York Times op-ed](#) in which they made the case that “the casual use of the word ‘poisoned,’ which suggests that the affected children are irreparably brain-damaged, is grossly inaccurate.”

They first pointed out that children's blood lead levels are usually compared to the “reference level” of five micrograms per deciliter established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A blood lead level exceeding the reference level suggests that there may be a problem, but it does not necessarily mean the child needs medical treatment. The CDC only recommends treatment for children with levels at or above 45 micrograms per deciliter. “Not a single child in Flint tested this high,” they wrote.

As a matter of fact, the percentage of children whose levels surpassed the reference level during the



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“crisis” only increased from 2.2 percent to 3.7 percent. Furthermore, children’s blood lead levels increased by just 0.11 micrograms per deciliter, roughly the same as occurred randomly during 2010 and 2011. “It is not possible, statistically speaking, to distinguish the increase that occurred at the height of the contamination crisis from other random variations over the previous decade,” they averred.

Moreover, the blood lead levels in Flint — along with the rest of the nation — have continued to decline significantly over the last several decades. According to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), in the 1970s, the average American toddler had a blood lead level of 14 micrograms per deciliter; by 2014, that number had fallen to [0.84 micrograms per deciliter](#). The percentage of Flint children with blood lead levels above the reference level has also declined, going from 11.8 percent in 2006 to 3.2 percent in 2016 despite the water contamination.

On top of that, other Michigan cities have higher percentages of children with elevated blood lead levels than Flint, and there are “at least eight states with blood lead levels higher than Flint’s were during the water switch,” observed Gómez and Dietrich.

Therefore, while Flint certainly experienced some serious problems with its water supply, lead poisoning — the crisis cited by Clinton for political gain — was not one of them.

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