

Freddie Gray's life a study on the effects of lead paint on poor blacks

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The death of 25-year-old Baltimore resident Freddie Gray is sparking demonstrations and riots in the city. Take a look at [this video of Gray's past and at his arrest](#) just days before his death.

BALTIMORE — The house where Freddie Gray's life changed forever sits at the end of a long line of abandoned rowhouses in one of this city's poorest neighborhoods. The interior of that North Carey Street house, cluttered with couches and potted plants, is lacquered in a fresh coat of paint that makes the living room glow.

But it wasn't always this way. When Gray lived here between 1992 and 1996, paint chips flaked off the walls and littered the hardwood floor, according to a 2008 lawsuit filed in Baltimore City Circuit Court. The front windowsills shed white strips of paint.

It was worst in the front room, where Gray bedded down most nights with his mother, he recalled years later in a deposition.

"There was a big hole when you go up the steps," Gray recalled in 2009. "There was a couple of walls that wasn't painted all the way, peeled. . . . And like the windows, paint was peeling off the windows."

Before Freddie Gray was injured in police custody last month, before he died and this city was plunged into rioting, his life was defined by failures in the classroom, run-ins with the law and an inability to focus on anything for very long.



A family photo of Freddie Gray from a court filing for a lawsuit in 2008 against a former landlord. Gray and his two sisters were found to have damaging lead levels in their blood. (Family Photo from court filings)

Many of those problems began when he was a child and living in this house, according to a 2008 lead-poisoning lawsuit filed by Gray and his siblings against the property owner. The suit resulted in an undisclosed settlement.

Reports of Gray's history with lead come at a time when the city and nation are still trying to understand the full ramifications of lead poisoning. Advocates and studies say it can diminish cognitive function, increase aggression and ultimately exacerbate the cycle of poverty that is already exceedingly difficult to break.

It is nonetheless hard to know whether Gray's problems were exclusively borne of lead poisoning or were the result of other socioeconomic factors as well. From birth, his was a life of intractable poverty that would have been challenging to overcome.

Equally difficult to know is the total number of children lead has poisoned. That's because the declared threshold for how much lead a body can safely tolerate has shifted dramatically over the years as researchers have come to better understand its dangers. Decades ago, city health officials tested for blood lead levels that were higher than 20 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. Now, it is believed that anything higher than 5 micrograms can cripple a child's cognitive development.

"In 1993, we found that 13,000 kids in Baltimore had been poisoned with lead, but we weren't collecting at the levels that we are today," said Ruth Ann Norton, the executive director of the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning. "If we had, we would have found 30,000 poisoned kids."

Overall, more than 93,000 children with lead poisoning have been added to the state's Department of the Environment lead registries over the past two decades, a time frame in which Baltimore and other cities have substantially reduced the number of houses with paint containing lead.

"A child who was poisoned with lead is seven times more likely to drop out of school and six times more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system," Norton said. She called lead poisoning Baltimore's "toxic legacy" — a still-unfolding tragedy with which she says the city has yet to come to terms. Those kids who were poisoned decades ago are now adults. And the trauma associated with lead poisoning "creates too much of a burden on a community," she said.

The burden weighs heaviest on the poorest communities, such as the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood in West Baltimore where Freddie Gray lived. Here, most houses were built decades ago, at a time when paint manufacturers hailed lead as a cheap additive. The effect of that lead, which Congress effectively banned in 1978, has been profound on Gray's neighborhood. Statistics between 2009 and 2013 showed that more than 3 percent of children younger than 6 had possibly dangerous levels of lead in their blood, more than double the figure for the entire city.

Lead poisoning has been an especially cruel scourge on African American communities. "Nearly 99.9 percent of my clients were black," said Saul E. Kerpelman, a Baltimore lawyer who said he has litigated more than 4,000 lead-poisoning lawsuits over three decades. "That's the sad fact to life in the ghetto that the only living conditions people can afford will likely poison their kids. . . . If you only have \$250 per month, you're going to get a run-down, dilapidated house where the landlord hasn't inspected it the entire time they've owned it."

Residents of Sandtown and other poor pockets of Baltimore now reflect on whether their lives would have turned out differently if they hadn't grown up inside houses with lead paint.

"All these kids that grew up in those houses, they all have ADHD," said Rosalyn Brown, referring to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Brown has lived in Gray's neighborhood for decades and now occupies the house he once lived in. "They have mood swings. They have anxiety." Like her son, she said. She raised him in a house peppered with shards of paint. He must have eaten some, Brown said. She wonders whether she, too, should pursue litigation and try to collect a "lead check."

Freddie Gray's path toward such litigation began months after his birth in August 1989. He and his twin sister, Fredericka, were born two months prematurely to a mother, Gloria Darden, who said in a deposition she began using heroin when she was 23. Freddie lived in the hospital his first months of life until he gained five pounds.

It wasn't long after that he was given the first of many blood tests, court records show. The test came in May of 1990, when the family was living in a home on Fulton Avenue in West Baltimore. Even at such a

young age, his blood contained more than 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood — double the level at which the Center for Disease Control urges additional testing. Three months later, his blood had nearly 30 micrograms. In June 1991, when Gray was 22 months old, his blood carried 37 micrograms.

“Jesus,” Dan Levy, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University who has studied the effects of lead poisoning on youths, gasped when told of Gray’s levels. “The fact that Mr. Gray had these high levels of lead in all likelihood affected his ability to think and to self-regulate and profoundly affected his cognitive ability to process information.”

Levy added, “And the real tragedy of lead is that the damage it does is irreparable.”

By the time Gray and his family moved into the hovel on North Carey Street, which became the subject of the subsequent litigation, the amount of lead in his system had fallen. But he and his sisters began developing problems.

His sister, Fredericka, developed issues with aggression, Gray said in a 2009 deposition. “She still got problems like that,” he said. “She still do. She always was the aggressive one. She liked to fight all the time and all of that.”

Equally troubling was the children’s performance in the classroom. The twins and an older sister were diagnosed with either ADHD or attention-deficit disorder ADD, and Fredericka’s academic career was “riddled with suspensions,” court records say.

It wasn’t any better for Freddie, who never graduated high school and was often absent from his studies because of truancy or suspensions. “All the schools that I went to, I was in special education,” Gray said. He ultimately got arrested more than a dozen times, with convictions involving the sale or possession of heroin or marijuana. He eventually served two years behind bars. There, he learned brick masonry and harbored ambitions of getting into the trade.

But even that seemed a stretch to some. “I don’t know much about brick masonry because I am not very handy myself, but, you know, is he someone that I would want to plan my walkway?” said psychologist Neil Hoffman, who interviewed Gray as part of the lead-poisoning lawsuit. “No.”

The compounding setbacks didn’t come as a surprise to Levy, who said he has seen numerous children in Baltimore’s ghettos — sometimes called “lead kids” — whose lives have followed a similar trajectory.

Still, the relationship between poverty and lead poisoning remains difficult to parse. Was it the lead poisoning that resigned Gray and his family to a life on the margins? Or would they have ended up there anyway?

Those were questions that Brown, who now lives in Gray’s old house, mulled over Wednesday afternoon. An attorney sends her weekly notices alerting her to the dangers of lead poisoning and asking whether she or other residents want to sue over the alleged damage they experienced years ago.

“I can see it,” she said, recalling the houses she once inhabited. “I was sweeping and mopping up chips of paint all the time. I believe my anxiety comes from that. We got poisoned.”

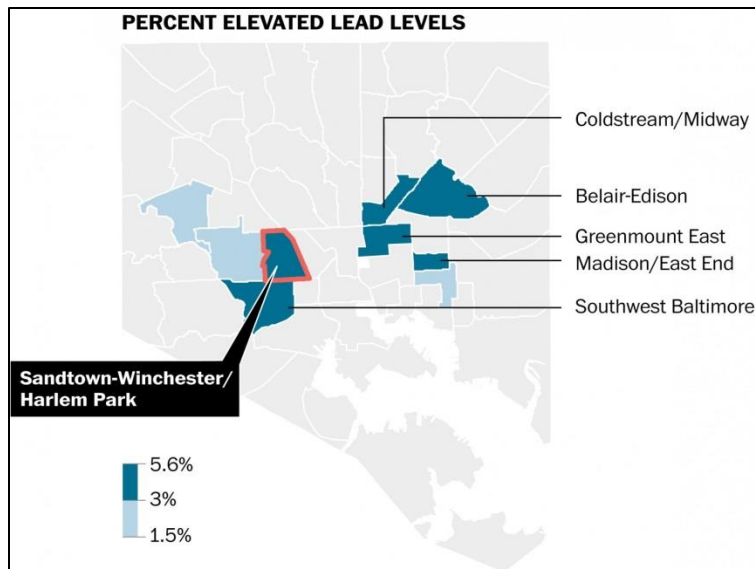
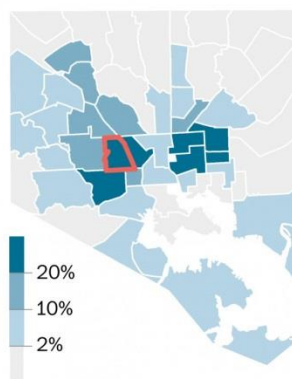


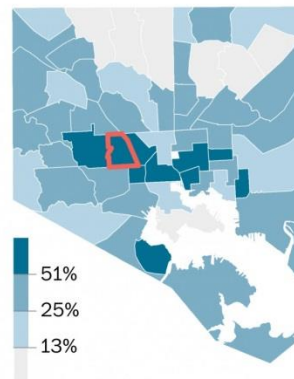
Figure 1. The map shows Baltimore neighborhoods where there were at least 400 lead tests for children under 7 between 2010 and 2013, and at least 1.5 percent showed an elevated level of lead. Sandtown-Winchester/Harlem Park, Freddie Gray's neighborhood, has among the highest levels in the city.

Sources: Maryland Department of the Environment, Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance / Ted Mellnik and Denise Lu/The Washington Post April 30

**PERCENT VACANT/ABANDONED
RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY**

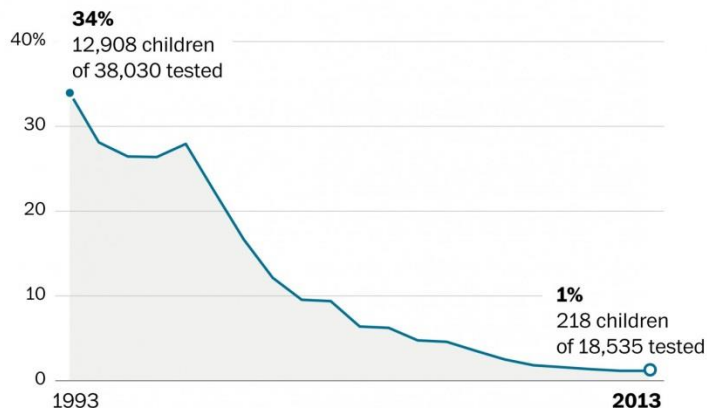


**PERCENT CHILDREN
IN POVERTY**



Harmful lead levels in Baltimore, 1993 to 2013

More than 456,000 child tests for lead poisoning have been given in Baltimore over the past 20 years. Fewer are turning up harmful levels. But that may change this year as testing is expanded to more homes and neighborhoods.



Elevated lead level is at least 0.1 part per million.