



¹Environmental Health and Racial Disparities in Buffalo

Excerpted from *Missing the Target: How Economic Development Programs Have Failed to Revive Buffalo's Most Challenged Neighborhoods*, by Sam Magavern et al, Partnership for the Public Good (2009)

Nationally, roughly one third of the adults living in poverty are disabled. In the city of Buffalo, the Census estimates that 21.1% of the population is disabled, compared to a national average of 15.1%.ⁱ In addition to working in low wage jobs, many of the residents of the East and West Side suffer from health problems and disabilities.

Buffalo's low-income residents suffer from a host of health problems exacerbated by the environmental problems in their housing and their overall environment. Asthma is the most common chronic disease among American children, and asthma attacks are often triggered by mold, dust, cockroaches, and other housing repair problems, as well as by air pollution.ⁱⁱ Buffalo's old housing stock suffers from severe repair problems that can aggravate asthma, and the Buffalo region receives a "failing" grade from the American Lung Association for ozone smog pollution.ⁱⁱⁱ

A New York state study that assessed 3,008 children in Buffalo found that 26% of them had asthma.^{iv} Among the risk factors identified were dampness in the home, frequent truck traffic in the neighborhood, and proximity to an active industrial facility emitting ammonia. A second study of 5,427 Buffalo children found a crude asthma incidence of 8.2% and an overall asthma prevalence of 22.3%. Among the factors identified were cockroaches in the home. According to a third study, focused on Buffalo's East Side, 11% of the children and 7% of the adults had asthma.^v

Lead poisoning is perhaps the most prominent environmental health hazard for children in the region. Lead poisoning usually comes from exposure to lead paint in older housing that is not well maintained. The Erie County the percentage of children tested who have elevated lead levels is 6.84%, compared with a New York State rate of 3.02%.^{vi} In 2002 Erie County reported 546 cases of lead poisoning; in 2003, it reported 420.^{vii} The county has roughly 20,000 housing units with a high risk of lead hazards.^{viii} Buffalo's old housing stock and high poverty levels give it the worst lead problems in the region and perhaps the state. Regionally, of the 25 local census tracts that are classified as high risk, 23 are in the city. The city accounts for 95% of all new cases with hazardous blood-lead levels.^{ix}

Buffalo's housing and environmental problems are not evenly distributed: they fall most heavily on people with low incomes and especially people of color. For example, the four zip codes with the highest rates of lead poisoning are on the predominantly African-American neighborhoods of Buffalo, with incidence rates between three and five times higher than Erie County's average.^x Hispanic residents have the highest asthma rates in Buffalo, roughly twice that of other residents; the problem is particularly severe close to the Peace Bridge complex and major roadways feeding into it.^{xi} Between 1991 and 1996, 158 people died of asthma in western New York. Of these deaths, 50% occurred in Buffalo (which has only 20% of the region's population). The two zip codes with the highest mortality were in African-American neighborhoods.^{xii}

ⁱ <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

ⁱⁱ The overall prevalence of asthma among U.S. children is estimated between 4.3% and 6.9%. See Jamson Lwebuga-Mukasa, "A school-based asthma intervention program in the Buffalo, New York schools," *Journal of School Health*, January 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ John F. Bonfatti, "Air Quality Improves in Region," *Buffalo News*, May 1, 2007.

^{iv} "Childhood Asthma and Environmental Risk Factors in the City of Buffalo, New York: Information Sheet," New York State Department of Health (January 2005).

^v "Results of Landmark Study of East Side Community Health Needs to be Released by Black Leadership Forum," www.kaleidahealth.org/news/archive/0501/052201.asp

^{vi} <http://leadconnections.org/DidYouKnow.php>

^{vii} New York State Department of Health, "A Report of Lead Exposure Status Among New York Children," 2002-2003 Supplement, Table 3, available at

http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/lead/exposure/report/docs/lead_exposure_status_among_new_york_children_2002-2003.pdf

^{viii} "Pollution rankings: lead hazards by county" at www.scorecard.org.

^{ix} "Healthy Homes," University at Buffalo Graduate Planning Studio,

http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/%7Eebmclean/lead/lead_context1.htm

^x "State of the Region: Lead Exposure in Children," available at <http://regional-institute.buffalo.edu/sotr/Indicator.cfm?Indicator=108e30d5-8253-4953-8fb2-ec7c1bc4fdf0>.

^{xi} Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa et al, "Risk factors for asthma prevalence and chronic respiratory illnesses among residents of different neighborhoods in Buffalo, New York," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*; 2004; 58:951-957; and James S. Lwebuga-Mukasa and Paulette M. Niewczyk, "Crude Asthma Incidence Rates Among Buffalo NY Children," *American College of Chest Physicians* (2006), available at <http://meeting.chestjournal.org/cgi/reprint/130/4/237S-b>

^{xii} John Patrick Almeida and Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa, "Geographic Variations in Asthma Mortality in Erie and Niagara Counties, Western New York, 1991-1996," *American Journal of Public Health*, September 2001, Vol. 91, No. 9, 1394-1395