Study: More than 80% of Missouri, 60% of Kansas kids have lead in their blood

The findings of a massive national study were published in JAMA Pediatrics this week.

A new study finds that children in Kansas and Missouri have lead in their blood at higher rates than the national average. (Getty Images)

Children in Missouri had elevated levels of lead in their blood at a greater rate than almost any other state, according to a massive national study published this week. And more than 80% of Missouri children had some level of lead in their blood.

The study, authored by doctors at Boston Children’s Hospital and Quest Diagnostics, was published this week in JAMA Pediatrics, a peer-reviewed journal published by the American Medical Association. It included 1.1 million tests conducted by Quest Diagnostics nationwide between 2018 and 2020.

There is no safe level of lead in a child’s blood. Exposure to the metal can cause brain and nervous system damage, slow a child’s growth and development and lead to learning, behavior, hearing and speech problems.

But the study focused on both detectable blood lead levels, one microgram per deciliter, as well as elevated levels, 5 micrograms per deciliter.

In Missouri, 4.5% of children had elevated levels of lead in their blood. In Kansas, that figure was 2.6% of children, both far ahead of the 1.9% national average.

And the proportion of children with any detectable level of blood lead was higher in both states than the national average of about 50%. In Kansas 65% of kids had detectable levels of blood lead compared to 82% in Missouri.
According to the study, elevated blood levels were once ubiquitous but had fallen over the last 40 years because of policies limiting lead and eliminating it from gasoline, paint, plumbing pipes and consumer products.

But exposure is still possible and disproportionately affects children in families living at or below the poverty line, in older housing or communities with high concentrations of poverty.

“There has been significant progress in reducing lead exposure throughout the country,” the study says. “This study demonstrates, however, that there are still substantial individual-and community-level disparities that have important implications for addressing childhood lead exposure.”

Missouri and Kansas also have some of the highest numbers of lead service lines, the pipes running from water mains into homes and buildings, of any state. Missouri ranked 6th for the most lead service lines — 4th if calculated per 100,000 residents. Kansas had the third most per capita.