

# Determination of Numbers of Lead-Exposed Women of Childbearing Age and Pregnant Women: An Integrated Summary of a Report to the U.S. Congress on Childhood Lead Poisoning

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In a Congressionally mandated study carried out under the aegis of the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) and summarized in this article, the authors have provided estimates of the numbers of American women of childbearing age and the numbers of American pregnant women whose lead exposure is sufficiently elevated to pose an intrauterine toxicity risk. Exposures associated with such risk were defined as blood lead (PbB) levels  $> 10$ ,  $> 15$ ,  $> 20$ , and  $> 25 \mu\text{g/dL}$ . Using PbB prevalence projection techniques based on the Second National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES II), we first generated projected 1984 prevalences of these PbB levels in white and black women of childbearing age, ages 15 to 19 and 20 to 44. White women in the two age bands had rates of PbBs  $> 10 \mu\text{g/dL}$  of 9.2 and 9.7%, respectively. For black women, the corresponding rates were 8.2 and 19.7%, respectively. Combining these rates with standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs) based 1980 Census and other population enumerations show, for example, that 4.4 million U.S. women of childbearing age are estimated to have had PbBs  $> 10 \mu\text{g/dL}$ .

Pregnant black and white women in U.S. SMSAs are approximately 9% of the U.S. black and white childbearing age total, i.e., 3.6 million out of a 41.3 million SMSA total. Of these, 493,200 pregnant women were estimated to have PbB levels  $> 10 \mu\text{g/dL}$ . Cumulative totals of exposed fetuses with persisting long-term exposure will be greater, in as much as a given fetus is never counted more than once in this type of survey. Over 10 years, the number would be over 4 million fetuses at elevated risk of health effects.

## Introduction

In pregnant women, lead readily crosses the placental barrier early in gestation (1-4). *In utero* exposure therefore occurs at periods of embryological development when important organ and system elaboration can be affected adversely by lead uptake. Severe, clinically manifested *in utero* effects had been known for many years (4) in pregnant women who were occupationally exposed. Currently, it is the intrauterine effects of low-level lead exposure that command the attention of the public health communities (4-8).

Two important points can be noted concerning *in utero* lead exposure: *in utero* impact can be irreversible based on

current data, and the adverse impacts of maternal blood lead have been found at low levels, as low as  $10 \mu\text{g/dL}$  and somewhat lower, based on current studies. While pregnant women are recognized as a high risk population segment because of intrauterine exposure of the fetus (4), they were not specifically identified for consideration in recent Federal legislation mandating a report to Congress on U.S. childhood lead poisoning. This report, prepared under the sponsorship of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), did take account of the fact that intrauterine lead exposure is a component in developmental lead toxicity, and the ensuing assessment is the basis of this article.

In this article, the authors of this section of the Congressional report analyze the quantitative aspects of the impact of low-level lead exposure on the developing fetus (9). We used various blood lead (PbB) toxicity criterion levels and 1980 Census data to arrive at relevantly stratified U.S. female population exposure numbers. Risk assessment factors in the current analyses imply that every pregnancy potentially represents a fetus at risk if the mother has a blood lead

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# Report To Congress On Out Of Wedlock Childbearing

**JS Bruner**



## **Report To Congress On Out Of Wedlock Childbearing:**

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