

I s s u e

5

May
1998

BERKELEY MEDIA STUDIES GROUP



Newspaper Frames of
Childhood Lead Poisoning

The leading environmental threat to children's health is lead poisoning. Both advocates and opponents develop frames that lend support to their positions. The frame is the ideological and practical boundary that guides the process of shaping bits of information into a news story. News articles that set the agenda on lead issues can reflect, reinforce, or challenge stakeholders' frames. We sampled stories in the popular press to identify the frames being put forth on childhood lead poisoning and to determine which frames were applied most often.

Stories on lead poisoning, especially lead abatement and screening, were identified through a search of files maintained by the Lexis/Nexis information service. The time period searched was approximately January 1993 through March 1994. The initial search identified nearly 800 stories. Ninety-seven of these stories were retrieved and reviewed in detail. Many were lengthy features, editorials, or op-eds. Those reviewed included all major stories from newspapers with national readership (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*) and a sampling of stories from newspapers in regions with ongoing abatement activity (including Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Hartford, and New Orleans.). A sample from specialty publications such as *In Health*, *Paint and Coatings Journal*, and *Real Estate Today* were also included. Finally, eleven stories published after the original search were identified and reviewed, for a total of 108 articles.

Themes in the stories were compiled and categorized. Many stories relied on one frame throughout. Some were dryly factual, while others related several frames and the people identified with them. The frames described below are those which appeared most often in the stories reviewed. Of course, any single story generally includes only a few elements of the frame, and these elements often appear subtly. Alternative interpretations could be made.

Major Frames

Details on the major frames are provided in the table on pages 4-5. General themes are summarized below, along with notes on how each frame fits into the overall public discourse about lead abatement and screening.

News articles that set the agenda on lead issues can reflect, reinforce, or challenge stakeholders' frames

Frames supporting a strong government role in lead abatement and screening

Responsibility to Future Generations

The most consistent and perhaps strongest frame is that of intergenerational responsibility: that we must make the world safe for children. The particular power of this frame is its limitlessness, drawing on unbounded feelings of parental love and responsibility. This limitlessness makes irrelevant the fact that today's children have far lower blood-lead levels than their parents because *any* amount is too much.

This frame may also draw on parental guilt. At a time when we seem unable to provide economic security or safe streets, perhaps lead abatement is one thing we can get right. All we need is money. In this sense, lead abatement also draws on an historical American preference for addressing problems that have technical solutions.

Environmental Justice

This frame emphasizes the importance of abatement as a means of redressing risk disparities that follow lines of race and class. The power of this frame is that it casts prevention as an individual right rather than a social good. This preempts much discussion about efficiency, competing resource demands, and other complications. This frame does not require demonstrating that lead exposure is among the most important or remediable manifestations of racism, but simply that it is a manifestation. Then any opponents can be subtly tarred as insensitive to racial and class concerns.

Relying primarily on this frame risks pigeonholing abatement as an issue only of poor or minority groups. As such it could face a developing backlash against related issues such as immigration or affirmative action.

Corporate Irresponsibility

Emphasis on the culpability of lead and paint manufacturers is lighter than what might be expected, given their record of suppressing scientific evidence and marketing a hazardous product. Key corporations and their executives seem to have been spared the public wrath now being directed towards the tobacco industry. Use of the corporate irresponsibility frame is mainly limited to problems resulting from current production, such as smelters polluting nearby homes and schools.

Stories on litigation against paint manufacturers could not avoid this frame, but even then the treatment is often light. Perhaps Americans' tendency to ignore history makes accountability fade over the years.

Sloppy lead abatement contractors are also included in this frame. In fact, contractors seem to be blamed for lead-related problems more often and more bitterly than are paint manufacturers.

Threatening Environment

This is the weakest and least political of the pro-abatement frames. Assigning no responsibility for the existence of current lead problems, the frame itself is not explicitly stated. Lead poisoning is treated as just one more in a long list of threats that our society (read: "government") must address.

Package	Core frame	Core position	Metaphor	Historical example
---------	------------	---------------	----------	--------------------

1 Frames supporting a **strong** government role in lead abatement and screening

1	<u>Responsibility to Future Generations</u>	Will we allow the irresponsibility of previous generations to be inflicted on current youth and future generations?	Government agencies should take whatever action is needed to eliminate risk to children.	Toxic wastes, global environmental problems (ozone depletion, global warming, etc.) (Also passing on enormous debt, etc.)	Decline of public education.
1	<u>Environmental Justice</u>	Will we allow poor minority Americans to be deprived of their right to equal protection from pollution?	Federal and state agencies must redress environmental disparities between whites and people of color.	"The environment is just a new lynch-post."	Hazardous waste sites and polluting industries are most often located near minority communities.
1	<u>Corporate Irresponsibility</u>	Will we, as a society, act on the basis of human need or corporate greed?	Corporations must be made to pay for their past transgressions, and must be tightly regulated in the future.	Asbestos.	Asbestos, cigarettes, other "corporate carcinogens."
1	<u>Threatening Environment</u>	Will we, as a society, be able to protect ourselves from this latest threat in our environment?	Government agencies should take whatever action is needed to eliminate risk.	Silent killer, silent crawler.	Asbestos, radon, EMF, pesticides in food. (This is an extension of society's role in protecting us from natural threats, such as earthquakes, wild animals.)

2 Frames supporting only a **limited** government role in lead abatement and screening

2	<u>Parental Responsibility</u>	What should individual parents do to protect their children from lead, since the problem is likely to persist indefinitely?	Parents need to be informed and trained to protect their children from lead.	Smoking, diet, other individual lifestyle-based health risks.	Campaigns against drug and alcohol abuse, campaigns to encourage immunization and child nutrition.
2	<u>Yuppie Disease</u>	Will "yuppies" (and their children) be protected from health damage that might arise from home remodeling?	Government should assist lead-safe remodeling by conducting research, regulating contractors, and subsidizing homeowners.	Radon, electro-magnetic fields.	Expensive homes built on former hazardous waste sites; suburban residents receiving inadequate fire protection.
2	<u>Bumbling, Indifferent Officialdom</u>	Can bureaucrats be trusted to carry out the (noble) intent of politicians, in abating lead hazards?	Government housing and health agencies must be scrutinized carefully (vs. funded adequately).	Dilapidated public infrastructure.	Nero. Housing officials "slumbered while lead poisoning became the scourge."

3 Frames **against** a strong government role in lead abatement and screening

3	<u>Overburdened Landlords</u>	Would lead abatement be better accomplished through market forces, rather than by burdensome government regulations and liability?	Abatement should be allowed to occur over time as the nation's housing stock is slowly upgraded. In the meantime, landlord liability should be limited.	Asbestos.	Access for people with disabilities. (Rent control? Designed to aid tenants but side effect is reduction of housing stock.)
3	<u>Cost-Benefit Calculus</u>	Do the benefits of lead screening and abatement outweigh the costs, or would the money be better spent on other public goods?	Screening should be done only in high-risk areas. Abatement efforts should be carefully targeted. Savings should be spent on primary care, education, or other services.	Federal government out of touch. Unfunded state and local mandates.	Superfund site cleanups that do not meet broad public needs. Educational mandates that fail to address core problems.

Catch-phrases	Depictions	Visual Images	Roots	Consequences	Appeals to Principle
“Number one environmental hazard to children.” “Children are being used as lead detectors.”	Children as victims, corporations and careless adults as negligent, government as social conscience.	Poisoned children who will never have a bright, productive, happy future.	Short-sighted economic and environmental planning. Creating future problems while fulfilling our immediate desires.	Without protection, tomorrow’s children will be burdened by lowered intelligence and a bevy of social problems.	Being good ancestors; continuing our responsibility to the future. Each generation’s most important task is to give its children a more livable world and a better life.
“People of color are the real endangered species.”	Mainstream society (white, corporate) as oppressive, even if by neglect; minority communities as victims.	Poor, minority children with neurologic impairment.	Racism. Classism.	Oppression mounts by depriving minority youth of health and intellect. Rage may eventually be expressed as violence.	Civil rights. Justice.
“The paint companies are saying it’s OK to put poison in people’s homes.”	Corporations as conspirators, public agencies as manipulated accomplices, victims as fighting for a better world.	Poisoned kids. Smelters or factories belching lead fumes into the community.	Corporate greed breeds irresponsibility.	Unchecked, corporate power and greed will contribute to failing public health and a fraying social fabric.	Individual rights to life, health, and the pursuit of happiness. Corporate responsibility.
“The environmental equivalent of a drive-by shooting.”	Environment as threatening, government as paternalistic, individuals as largely helpless and blameless.	Poisoned children. Dilapidated housing.	Environment is inherently threatening. Advancing civilization poses new risks, as well as new opportunities for collective action.	Without government action, our children will fall prey to this silent killer.	Collective security. Ecology.
Lead tastes sweet, so kids like to chew it. Immigrant folk remedies.	Kids as victims (but capable of being trained out of their dysfunctional behaviors), parents as ignorant, other parties as more or less blameless.	Children who were poisoned by chewing on windowsills, children poisoned by chewing objects their parents should have known to discard.	Plethora of environmental risks, breakdown of family ability to cope with risks.	Parental inattentiveness will allow many children to be poisoned, when they could have been protected by simple, cheap remedies.	Personal responsibility, personal liberty.
“Lead poisoning is becoming a yuppie disease.” “Chipping away at ‘home sweet home.’”	Remodelers as victims, paint companies and contractors as villains who are getting away with a crime.	Homeowners who can’t complete their renovations and move back into their homes.	No one has made sufficient information available about lead paint hazards and their control.	Without expanded information, regulation, and liability, renovation (and even lead abatement) will cause lead poisoning among non-poor children.	People have a right to be safe in their own homes. People have a right to know.
Indifference.	Housing agencies as miserly, health agencies as mismanaged, public housing tenants as deserving of better, politicians as champions.	Children poisoned in dilapidated public housing, especially those who have had a terrible time getting their problems addressed.	Poor public management. Lack of community control yields inadequate services, even in basic public health protections.	Poor housing conditions “kindle rage and resentment in the housing projects.”	Don’t trust the government to do an important job well, especially in the area of social services. Detached bureaucracy and government ineptitude.
“Doubly onerous regulations.” Fear of liability. Government regulation. “Tenants may be left homeless.”	Landlords as burdened, government as a pawn of environmentalists and a few affected tenants, litigation as a witchhunt seeking to pin responsibility on innocent parties.	Small—and perhaps nearly poor—landlords who have lost their property, so can no longer rent out affordable housing.	Slow economic development. Landlords would upgrade their housing on their own (including lead abatement) if only they had the resources to do so.	Burdensome regulation and liability will produce withdrawal of affordable housing by owners and lenders. May also produce discrimination against families with children.	Private enterprise; right to earn a living.
“Ultimate irony is seeing the government throwing millions of dollars at a problem the community says doesn’t exist and doesn’t want solved.”	Lead as a minor and declining problem, massive control efforts as misguided, education and health care as more worthy public goods, responsibility for lead as unimportant.	Communities (i.e. Aspen, Co.) forced to address lead over other local priorities. Poor state of public education and primary medical care.	Excessive focus on individual rights. Tendency to focus on problems that have technical rather than social solutions.	Huge expenditures on screening and abatement will undermine our ability to deliver other services that most people value more highly.	Cost-effectiveness, social utilitarianism, community (vs. individual) priority-setting, risk-based resource allocation.

Frames supporting only a *limited* government role

Parental Responsibility

This frame, too, is rarely stated explicitly. It emerges through graphic stories in which parents of poisoned kids express remorse for some preventive measure they wish they had taken, and in extensive “how-to” descriptions of short-term preventive measures. In fact, most individual poisoning stories are cast more or less in this frame. Rarely is the feasibility of the “how-to” measures questioned. (How many parents *really* wash all their windowsills with TSP every two weeks?) The responsibility of parties other than parents is generally omitted rather than discounted.

Yuppie Disease

Stories drawing on this frame generally begin with accounts of rich kids poisoned unwittingly while their parents remodeled their older home, then lament the vast sums the family had to spend addressing lead problems. One key link to broader corporate responsibility emerges in a faint claim that the homeowners should have been warned about the imminent hazard they faced—by the government, their contractor, or someone.

Interestingly, many stories reference this frame with a statement such as, “lead poisoning is becoming a yuppie disease.” Many other stories point out that risk is highest among the inner city poor. While both are true, they may at first seem contradictory. Rarely were both mentioned in the same story. Instead, stories usually focused on one element or the other.

Bumbling, Indifferent Officialdom

The stories reviewed were notable in that much more animosity was directed toward government agencies, especially housing agencies, than towards lead or paint manufacturers. This frame is most common in areas where abatement has begun in public housing. While HUD receives substantial criticism, regional stories often direct far stronger barbs toward local housing authorities.

The message of this frame seems oddly mixed: the government should take care of lead problems, but you can never trust the government to do things right. This combination lets both community-based organizations and elected officials vent their wrath on bureaucrats.

The responsibility of
parties other than parents
is generally omitted

Frames used to argue against a strong government role

Overburdened Landlords

This frame is used in some of the strongest attacks against abatement. It carries the implicit threat that the expense of abatement will squeeze many affordable housing units out of the market, and those typically affected by lead poisoning will end up worse off rather than better. This frame appeared frequently in areas where large-scale abatement has begun (such as Massachusetts and Maryland), but was absent in other areas. As nationwide abatement efforts escalate, it would be reasonable to expect wider play for this frame. An interesting twist is that stories using this frame often chronicle the plight of poor landlords facing unaffordable abatement. The image of the poor landlord may undermine portrayal of lead abatement as a class or race issue.

Cost-Benefit Calculus

This frame portrays screening and abatement as good but naive ideas, suggesting that resources would in fact be better spent on more important problems. The preferred programs are usually education or primary health care. Cost-benefit concerns are among the key points raised by some opponents of large-scale screening and abatement, particularly by a number of practicing pediatricians throughout the country. This frame also underlies the widely covered story of Aspen, Colorado. There, the EPA tried to force the city to spend money on a lead clean-up, when local politicians and physicians were convinced that no problem existed.

While this frame is prominent in scientific and professional journals, and in analytic magazines, it rarely appears in newspaper stories. Perhaps this is because it is typically constructed to appeal to rationalists, but carries little graphic imagery.

That lead poisoning prevention should be abandoned in the interest of primary health care is an ironic twist. Why should health care providers be trying to secure their funding at the expense of a community-based prevention program, rather than—say—supercolliders or prisons? Why are they opposing payment for community-based prevention but not clinical preventive services?

Elements Notably Absent from Current Framing

Many points which have been prominent in scholarly debate on lead poisoning prevention are conspicuously absent from popular coverage. Most notable of these is the effect of elevated blood-lead on the population as a whole, in contrast to the effects on a small number of clinically poisoned children. Dr. Herbert Needleman, a leading researcher in the area of childhood lead poisoning, and his successors, have made much of the impact of a five point shift in the IQ of the entire population. Perhaps this is harder to convey than an acute poisoning case, but some would argue that it is more important.

The stories reviewed also gave scant attention to some of the key points raised by some physicians and researchers such as: sharply falling population average blood lead levels, international comparisons (US levels are substantially higher than European), and the extremely low prevalence of lead poisoning in some communities. Also not much covered were key elements of the cost-benefit calculus, such as: which government programs have been cut to provide funding for abatement, or who would ultimately pay any new taxes on lead use. Surprisingly, even the estimated total cost of abatement was rarely mentioned.

Finally, none of the stories mentioned the ambiguities of blood-lead testing, and the potential for kids with moderately elevated blood-lead levels to be labeled or stigmatized. For kids in the 10–25 µg/dl range, test results provide little definitive information. One could expect that, on average, kids in this range have lost 3–5 IQ points, but there is nothing to be done about it. The parents' alternatives are few, except to feel guilty. Ignoring this, the stories portray blood-lead testing as a simple, infallible measure. The ambiguities of home testing also received little coverage.

Elements of a Public Health Frame

An ideal public health presentation of lead abatement and screening would benefit by being mindful of three issues. First, it would be more clearly constructed around preventing lead problems in the population as a whole, not just clinical poisoning in a small number of children. Second, it would deal more explicitly with the relationship between lead and problems of race and poverty. And third, it would be mindful that lead abatement will require sustained effort over many years, so a portrayal of crisis may not be appropriate.

Focusing on a few symptomatic children gives good graphic images. It also leaves proponents vulnerable to attack, since the number of such children has in fact declined sharply over several decades. Needleman's research on low-level lead poisoning has shown its effects on populations, not individuals. Consistent with a public health approach, abatement proponents should keep the focus on population exposures. While blood-lead levels in the entire US population have dropped sharply, there remain distinct sub-populations whose levels remain high. Efforts should focus on identifying and protecting these sub-populations, rather than individual children.

Abatement proponents seem to be of mixed mind in linking lead poisoning with problems of race and poverty. The environmental justice frame focuses heavily on it, while the yuppie disease frame goes the other way. Regardless of how responsibility for the problem is assigned, lead abatement will only bring a net benefit to inner-city communities if it is accomplished in ways that support solutions to related problems of race and poverty. That suggests linking abatement more strongly with long-term improvement of housing stock, and linking screening with provision of decent health care. Perhaps links could also be made with education and related social issues. Splitting out lead abatement as yet another categorical program will likely be less than helpful in many cases.

Issue 5 was researched and written by Jim Bellows, MPH, CIH, CSP for the Berkeley Media Studies Group. Edited by Lori Dorfman, DrPH, and Lawrence Wallack, DrPH.

Issue 5 was produced with support from the Alliance to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, Washington, D.C.

Issue is published by
Berkeley Media Studies Group
2140 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 804
Berkeley, CA 94704
510.204.9700
fax 510.204.9710
bmsg@bmsg.org