

Auto fumes are blamed for lead poisoning

By Bart Barnes

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WASHINGTON — A big champion for the National Institutes of Mental Health has suggested that lead from auto exhaust — instead of that from lead-based paint — may be the major source of lead poisoning among inner-city children.

"It has been estimated," Dr. Daniel B. Fisher said in a written report, "that one-third or more of the lead in (the systems of) city-dwelling Americans comes from inhalation of airborne lead from automobiles."

He said the conclusions of his report indicate that it "would be genocide to build another foot of freeways" in Washington.

City officials and medical authorities long have held that the principal cause of lead poisoning in children is the ingestion of chips and flakes of lead-based paint falling from the interior of inner-city dwellings.

If untreated, lead poisoning can cause severe mental retardation or even death.

In his report, Fisher said Washington has the highest density of automobile traffic of any American city. He argued that autos "probably account for one-half or more" of the lead levels of any resident here.

The average lead level in Washington is about 25 micrograms per 100 milliliters of blood, whereas a level of 40 is considered potentially dangerous. In rural areas, the average lead level in the blood is 10.

Fisher also said that black children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning than white children because of the incidence in black children of a genetic defect known as sickle cell anemia.

These cells have a low tolerance for lead and hence are more susceptible to poisoning than normal cells, Fisher said.

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