

Leif Fredrickson
University of Virginia

**The Age of Lead:
Suburbanization, Environmental Health, and Urban Underdevelopment**

Post-war American suburbanization negatively affected the development of the inner city in many ways. One way was worsening the physical environment of the inner city. This has received little attention from historians of metropolitan America who have usually focused on the fiscal, social service, and employment consequences of suburbanization. In this article, I argue that the suburbs contributed to a worsening inner city environment, and that this degraded environment was an important contributor to the “urban crisis” and to intergenerational inequality. I make this argument by telling the story of lead pollution in Baltimore. I focus on lead for two reasons. One reason is that lead hazards were deeply entangled with virtually all the key aspects of post-war metropolitan development: traffic congestion, highway building, urban renewal, housing discrimination, and deindustrialization. While suburbanites benefited from greater automobility after World War II, the environmental health consequences of commuter car traffic was borne disproportionately by inner city residents who often could not afford cars. Government policies helped make this suburban automobility possible. They also helped make suburban housing possible. National policies subsidized the cost, and shored up the risk, of home ownership in the post-war era. But not all homes. These policies favored low-density home ownership outside of the city center. In addition, these policies, along with many other housing practices, were racially discriminatory. The upshot was that the housing stock in the inner city deteriorated, as did the lead paint on the surfaces in these houses, creating an incredibly hazardous environment. Moreover, much, perhaps most, of this dilapidated inner city housing stock was owned by people living in the suburbs. Suburban landlords drew down the physical capital of the inner city, letting their rentals deteriorate so that they could make money off them. But this deterioration had serious effects on the lives (or “human capital”) of inner city people. This brings me to my second reason for focusing on lead: Lead was the most important chemical pollutant of the twentieth-century in terms of its effects on human development. Although Baltimore has the best records on

lead poisoning of any city, the historical reconstructing lead hazards, exposure and effects is far from perfect. But the data do allow us to get a general sense of the magnitude of the problem. It was huge. The period of greatest exposure happened from the 1950s to the early 1970s, overlapping considerably with the putative Golden Age of America. But since vulnerability to lead is most pronounced in young children, the strongest effects of lead in adults came to fruition in the period from the 1970s to the early 1990s, a period we might call the Age of Lead. The chronic exposure of many Baltimoreans to lead had widespread effects on learning, schooling, work opportunities, and other aspects of individual's life chances – and the life chances of the communities they lived in. As this case study shows, there was a critical environmental health component to suburban-inner city dynamics in the postwar period. Benefits generally flowed to the suburbs, while environmental health costs were borne by the inner city. These costs were serious and long-lasting, and they combined with other inner city problems in synergistic ways. In a broader sense, this article suggests that our tendency to think about human brains/minds, unlike our bodies, as being separate from the physical environment is wrong.