

Los Angeles Asthma Coalition



Report to the Community on Asthma

Los Angeles Asthma Coalition (LAAC) is the partnership of St. John's Well Child & Family Center (SJWCFC), Esperanza Community Housing Corporation (ECHC), Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) and Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN).

This coalition is a unique alliance among health providers, community health workers/promotoras, tenant organizers, and affordable housing and civil rights advocates increasing knowledge of the dangerous connection between deteriorating health, chronic environmental health conditions, increasing health disparities and the slum housing conditions.

SJWCFC: A network of federally qualified health centers and school-based clinics providing medical, dental, and mental health services to more than 75,000 patient visits per year. St. John's provides a medical home to over 25,000 low income individuals in downtown and south Los Angeles.

ECHC: A community development organization with a unique health capacity for developing quality affordable housing for very low income families and health promotion training program that sets a standard for the county.

SAJE: An economic justice organization focusing on the education and organization of tenants about their rights and increasing capacity to combat slum housing conditions.

LA CAN: A grassroots organization focused primarily on housing and civil rights to prevent displacement, increase access to safe and affordable housing, and build a healthy and equitable downtown.

ASTHMA, AN INFLAMMATORY LUNG DISEASE, is one of the most common chronic diseases of children. Common symptoms include recurrent wheezing and coughing, difficulty breathing, and tightness of the chest. Asthma attacks can range in severity from inconvenient to life threatening. There is no known cure for asthma, but it can be controlled by following a medical management plan and by reducing exposure to environmental "triggers," such as air pollution, cockroaches, dust mites, furry pets, mold, tobacco smoke, and certain chemicals.

Asthma is a problem that needs to be addressed through policy change. Because the reduction of environmental triggers is an essential component of asthma control and prevention, individuals, communities, and policy makers must work together to find solutions. In this report card we will be focusing on the growing health disorders in Los Angeles children and the dangerous conditions created by slum housing. Slum housing induced health conditions include childhood asthma, lead poisoning, sinusitis, skin rashes, fungal and staph infections and more.

South Los Angeles falls within Los Angeles County's Service Planning Area (SPA) 6 which includes a broad swath of the city of Los Angeles including downtown and south central Los Angeles as well as the cities of Compton, Lynwood and Paramount. With tens of thousands of low-income children as patients of St. John's Well Child & Family Center, the Clinic has become a health advocate by questioning the long term value of: removing a cockroach from a child's infected ear, asthma treatment plans thwarted by the overwhelming presence of dust mites, cockroaches, and mold in the home or addressing eating problems or refusal to use the bathroom at home for fear of roaches in their food or another rat bite.

Asthma Prevalence

UNITED STATES

From 2003-2005, 14.2% (95% CI: 13.7-14.7) of children age 5-17 had been diagnosed with asthma at some point in their lives.{{326 CDC National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) 2005;}}

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

In 2005, 15.6% (95% CI: 13.4-17.7) of children age 5-17 had been diagnosed with asthma at some point in their lives.{{301 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS);}}

Emergency Room and Urgent Care Visits

South Los Angeles: In 2006, 657 children (or 78.3 per 10,000 residents) age 5-17 years visited an emergency room because of asthma {{302 California Office of State-wide Health Planning and Development (OSHPD);}}.

Hospitalization

South Los Angeles: In 2006, there were 98 hospitalizations (or 11.7 per 10,000 residents) among children age 5-17 years for asthma-related issues {{302 California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (OSHPD);}}

Ethnicity

SPA 6 has the highest percent of residents of color (70%), with 90% being African American and over 50% Hispanic. {Critical Condition: Examining the Scope of Medical Services in South Los Angeles, Oct 2007}

Socioeconomic Characteristics

56% of the SPA 6 population has an income of less than 200% of federal poverty level. {Critical Condition: Examining the Scope of Medical Services in South Los Angeles, Oct 2007}

Children age 1-18 Diagnosed with Asthma by Family Income (LA County) {{310 Children Now 2007;}}			
Less than 100% of FPL	100% to 199% of FPL	200% to 299% of FPL	300% of FPL and higher
10%	12%	19%	17%

Children age 0-18 with Regular Access to a Doctor		
Los Angeles County	Los Angeles Region	Statewide
87%	87%	89%

12% of children ages 0-17 years in SPA 6 have no regular source for health care. 21% of children ages 0-17 years in SPA 6 have difficulty accessing medical care. {Key Indicators of Health by SPA, April 2007}

In spite of the very significant health risks associated with housing conditions in SPA 6, 31.7% of the residents are uninsured. 43.9% of SPA 6 adults report difficulty accessing medical care and 26.9% has no regular source for health care. {Key Indicators of Health by SPA, April 2007}

Health Impacts of Slum Housing

The Los Angeles CAFA Collaborative has set the ground work for slum housing policy and advocacy efforts significantly impacting the health of families residing in south Los Angeles. The Shame of the City health report (Slum Housing and the Critical Threat to the Health of L.A. Children and Families, published in April 2007) illustrated the connection between slum housing conditions and a number of chronic and acute health conditions impacting children and families. The success and interest generated from the report has furthered our efforts towards improving the health of the communities we serve and increasing knowledge on the topic.

Slumlords are the criminal landlords who profit by collecting rent and by not maintaining their properties, even when they are repeatedly cited by building inspectors. They create neighborhood blight by borrowing against the equity of their buildings and not reinvesting in repairs. The lack of repairs, such as leaky pipes and poor ventilation, create unhealthy environments to the families who live in slum housing and costs the public billions of dollars in Medical costs for hospital visits and lost days in school and work.

Asthma Burden in the Home

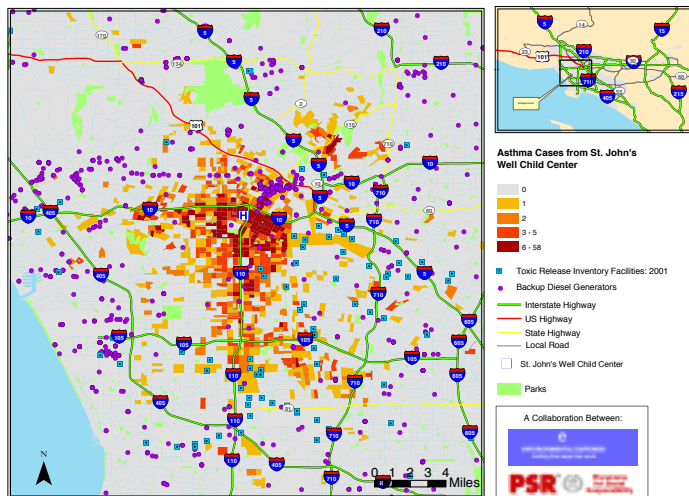
Case Study: Health & Housing Survey and Environmental Sampling

Esperanza health promotoras visited 254 homes to survey south Los Angeles residents and their housing conditions. Dust-wipe samples were also collected during the home assessments.

Demographic Information

- 24% of the residents were children under six years of age, the age of greatest vulnerability to lead hazards and other conditions of slum housing that are deleterious to childhood development and health.
- 63% of households reported cockroach infestations and 24% reported mice or rats.
- 55% of the dust wipes collected had above standard lead levels.
- 44% of the residents reported having mold in the home.

Asthma Cases from St. John's Well Child Center



Evaluation and Major Findings

Frustrated with the inability of official health and housing institutions and agencies to address the deleterious and escalating health impacts of slum housing conditions in our communities, our doctors and community-based medical practitioners, health promoters, researchers and tenant organizers joined forces, beginning in 1998. United across disciplines by the needs of our common constituents, together we built a community-based public health initiative.

The survey results were as follows:

- Every year, 48,000 people in the City of Los Angeles are living in extreme slum housing conditions and getting sick as a result. This exceeds the population of Culver City.
- Slum housing induced health conditions include, but are not limited to: asthma, lead poisoning, rashes, cockroach bites, rat bites, fungal infections, chronic colds, upper respiratory symptoms like sore throats and sinusitis, lower respiratory symptoms like bronchitis and asthma, ear infections, and staph infections.
- The total costs to prosecute slumlords, remediate slum-housing induced health conditions, and replace

personal property lost due to slum conditions in Los Angeles exceeds \$1 billion.

- The current system allows many slumlords to slip through the cracks and profit at the expense of people's health. Young children bear the highest burden of these costs. Decreased lung development and chronic health problems are generated in young children at a critical developmental stage from constant exposure to environmental hazards and asthma triggers in the home. Brain damage and developmental delays from lead poisoning robs young children of their potential as human beings. Missed school days result in poor performance. Rather than experiencing their home as a sanctuary, depression and anxiety are common among young children who live in the constant presence of rats and vermin.
- Children harmed by the health effects of slum housing are mostly Latino and African American.
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) of children treated at St. John's Well Child and Family Center have asthma and 54% have elevated levels of lead poisoning.
- The public costs to prosecute one typical slumlord took 149 city, county and non-profit staff, at a cost of \$232,000. Most "professional slumlords" are not prosecuted and continue to profit from human misery and damage to public health. The estimated costs for effective prosecution of all known criminal slumlords in Los Angeles would be between \$344 and \$462 million.
- Los Angeles residents living in slum housing lose more than \$10 million a year in damaged personal property, mostly in cost of food which is contaminated by cockroaches and vermin but also from collapsing ceilings and poor plumbing. Cockroaches harboring in warm appliances ruin televisions, DVD players, computers and other electronics.
- Case studies surveyed building conditions and tenant health conditions and found that the average unit cost to remediate the resulting slum housing induced health problems comes to approximately \$41,000 per apartment unit. Using this average cost, the total cost to remediate equivalent slum housing induced health conditions in the entire City of Los Angeles would cost over \$400 million.
- Slumlords are the criminal landlords who profit by collecting rent and by not maintaining their properties, even when they are repeatedly cited by city and county building inspectors. Although they only constitute 1-2% of the entire landlord population, they nevertheless have a major impact, particularly on economically disadvantaged areas like south Los Angeles. For example, one slumlord owns over 200 buildings in south L.A. which house over 8,000 people.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Criminalizing slumlord business practices is not an impossible task – it takes coordination with the appropriate governmental, community organizations and solidarity with the tenants. The goal is for tenants to live in a healthy environment and maintain their affordable units. Against isolated public agencies, slumlords can skirt the system and continue to create misery to economically disadvantaged Angelinos. However, when community clinics, the Los Angeles Housing Department, Los Angeles City Attorney, Los Angeles County Public Health, non-profit housing law firms, community based organizations and tenants are all aligned, slumlords' business practices are exposed and all of Los Angeles benefits.

The only way to correct the public health crisis created by our current slum housing problem is to change the behavior of slumlords, which is completely controlled by a business model that maximizes profits at the expense of human health and human rights.

Policies to improve health conditions and reduce asthma triggers in homes must include:

- 1 Reimbursement and funding of medical providers for environmental health services and chronic disease management and treatment.
- 2 Increased health testing by enforcing and ensuring compliance with California State regulations requiring that all children ages one and two are assessed for risk of lead poisoning, and given a blood test when risk is identified. Ensure that medical professionals inform families about environmental health risks to their children's health.
- 3 Unprecedented enforcement of health and housing laws and unprecedented levels of penalties for non-compliance, particularly in the case of criminal, repeat violators. It is essential that these slum property owners finally pay the costs of the

damage they inflict to the health of our children and families. These penalties, in turn, can help pay for the stepped up health enforcement program.

- 4 Alignment of government health and housing agencies, community health centers and community based organizations. This has been improving over the years, beginning with collaboration at the grassroots level, such as the Los Angeles Asthma Collaborative and the Better Neighborhoods, Same Neighbors coalition, and increased collaboration with public officials. In light of the current crisis, this process of alignment must be accelerated across public and non-profit, health and housing, organizing and legal sectors, in order to have a meaningful impact on the problem.
- 5 Engage and train tenants to be stronger advocates and spokespersons for indoor air quality improvement policies and tenant rights.
- 6 A vigilant criminal justice strategy that attacks the criminals, not the victims. With so many people's health at stake, we need to look at the health evidence, the business practices, and the resulting slum conditions and prevent the "strip-mining" of buildings that cause chronic health conditions and increase slumlord profit margins. Los Angeles can no longer afford its current booming slumlord industry.
- 7 Institutionalize environmental health, healthy housing, and asthma training for city code enforcement.
- 8 Protect and increase the affordable housing stock in Los Angeles. If there was an adequate supply of affordable housing in south Los Angeles, economically disadvantaged children and families would no longer provide a sheltered market for criminal slumlords.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about this fact sheet or to obtain a copy of *Shame of the City*, please contact the Los Angeles Asthma Coalition at (323) 541-1600, ext. 4000, email jimmangia@wellchild.org.

CAFA
Community Action to Fight Asthma

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