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Preventing lead poisoning at the source

Case Western Reserve University researchers examine implications for lead safe housing in Cleveland through lens of rental properties and their landlords

More than 103,000 rental units spread across the city proper are potentially vulnerable to lead contamination because they were built before 1978 when lead paint was outlawed. According to a new study from the university's [Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development](#) at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, over one-third of these units are in poor condition and of very low market value. This can present the dual challenge of requiring potentially costly repairs in buildings where there is little equity to leverage financing, and results in potential risk of lead poisoning to children who may live in them.

Using a variety of public records—including assessed market value, sales, foreclosure and tax history, code violations, building permits and rental registry data—the researchers examined every rental property in the city over a three-year period from 2016 to 2018 on factors related to the likelihood that the property could have lead safety problems. Property owners were categorized according to whether they were companies or individuals, the number and types of properties they held and the property values and conditions represented in their portfolios.

“The issue is that the majority of families with young children in Cleveland rent homes in the private rental market,” said [Claudia Coulton](#), the study’s co-author, a Distinguished University Professor and co-director of the poverty center. “Improving these properties—and working with these property owners—is a key element in moving toward a lead safe Cleveland.”

“The majority of the city’s rental housing stock carries a significant risk of lead exposure to children because of age, deferred maintenance and low-market value, so understanding the rental landscape is crucial.” said [Rob Fischer](#), an associate professor at the Mandel School and study co-author.

Key findings:

- Single-family homes make up most of the city’s rental properties, accounting for nearly half of all rental units. Another 24% of properties are two-family homes; 21% are small buildings (with three to 20 units); and 12% are large buildings (with more than 20 units).

- Nearly two-thirds of Cleveland’s rental properties are maintained in above average or good condition and have average market values, but the remainder are of relatively low value and in rather poor condition.
- Among Cleveland landlords in 2018, the majority (i.e. over 80%) were listed as individual owners, owned only one property in the city of Cleveland and either lived or had a business address within Cuyahoga County. A significant proportion of the landlords (43%) had property that was classified as being in “bad condition” and/or of “very low market value” (29%).
- Based on a combination over a dozen landlord characteristics, researchers divided the city’s landlords into three categories: Type 1 were owners of single- or two-family homes in good condition and of average or above-average market value; Type 2 landlords owned mostly doubles in bad condition with low market value; and Type 3 landlords were larger operators, often corporate, holding properties of varying sizes and condition. These categories inform how best to engage and support different landlords.

Partnering with [Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition](#), the research helps inform the continued implementation of the Lead Safe Home Fund, a first-of-its-kind, public-private partnership aimed at assisting landlords and tenants with accessing the resources they need to make housing lead safe throughout Cleveland, Fischer said.

The Lead Safe Home Fund will provide property owners and families with effective and equitable support for home repair and lead poisoning prevention. The Fund is structured to be flexible and nimble, with a five-year, \$99.4 million target budget. CHN Housing Partners, a lender and the region’s largest provider of affordable housing, will administer the Home Loans and Grants.

“Our role is to help property owners—especially those ‘mom-and-pop’ landlords—improve the quality of the units they rent and get their Lead Safe Certification,” said Kevin J. Nowak, Executive Director of CHN Housing Partners. “This research helps us better understand their assets and challenges. We are tailoring our grants, loans, and incentives to meet property owners where they are, so that they can access the resources they need in a comprehensive, straight-forward way.”

“Landlords and property owners are crucial partners in ensuring safe, decent, and healthy housing. Together, we will not only help make Cleveland lead safe, but we will reinvest millions of dollars directly into our neighborhoods, our homes,” Nowak said.

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Case Western Reserve University is one of the country's leading private research institutions. Located in Cleveland, we offer a unique combination of forward-thinking educational opportunities in an inspiring cultural setting. Our leading-edge faculty engage in teaching and research in a collaborative, hands-on environment. Our nationally recognized programs include arts and sciences, dental medicine, engineering, law, management, medicine, nursing and social work. About 5,100 undergraduate and 6,200 graduate students comprise our student body. Visit case.edu to see how Case Western Reserve thinks beyond the possible.

The Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition is an inclusive, public-private partnership founded to address lead poisoning through a comprehensive, preventive, and long-term approach. With community voice embedded in all aspects, the Coalition is working on: 1) Supporting and measuring the City of Cleveland’s Lead Safe Certification system, 2) Developing a lead safe workforce, 3) Rolling out a public awareness campaign, 4) Advocating for state and federal lead safe policies and resources, 5) Securing investments into the Lead Safe Home Fund, and 6) Launching the Lead Safe Resource Center and Home Loans and Grants. Initial support for the Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition came from the City of Cleveland, the Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, the Saint Luke’s Foundation, The Cleveland Foundation, the Bruening Foundation, the Sisters of Charity Foundation, the Third Federal Foundation, and United Way of Greater Cleveland. Today, the Coalition has over 425 members and seven working committees and continues to grow. Website: www.leadSAFEcle.org. Email: info@leadSAFEcle.org. Twitter: [@LeadSafeCLE](https://twitter.com/LeadSafeCLE)