



Poisonous Pastime Executive Summary

“We fired round after round, match after match, without realizing what lead could do to us.”
—Joseph P. Tartaro, Second Amendment Foundation news release, January 10, 1998

Choked by stagnant markets and growing social disapproval, the gun industry has made increasing the number of shooting ranges the keystone of its survival strategy. Introducing kids to guns is a key element of the industry plan.

But lead doesn't mix with children and the environment. Lead is one of the most deadly toxins on the planet. *Poisonous Pastime* documents in detail the ways in which the shooting range industry is poisoning children and heavily polluting the environment with lead and other toxins:

- ! Most ammunition used at ranges is made of lead...between 400 and 600 tons of lead are used each day to make bullets and “a high proportion of it is left to clutter up shooting ranges.” It is no wonder, then, that numerous studies—since at least the 1970s—have documented that *outdoor* shooting ranges are major sources of lead pollution in the environment, and that *indoor* shooting ranges are significant sources of lead poisoning among people who use them. (p. 3)

Poisoning Kids

Tragically, children—the gun industry's prime target—are most vulnerable to the toxic effects of lead:

- ! Lead is particularly harmful to the rapidly developing brains and nervous systems of fetuses and young children. This harm has been well-studied in actual human cases, not mere theoretical calculations, animal studies, or academic conjecture....Their protection hinges on vigilant parents and aggressive public health authorities....“It makes you stupid,” in the words of one lead testing expert, and the damage is irreversible. (p. 6)

Parents often put their own children at risk, because they do not know that their visits to the local range can result in lead poisoning of the kids at home:

- ! Because lead dust settles on clothing, shoes, and accessories worn or used at the range, the families of persons who work at or use firing ranges are also subject to “take-home” exposure to lead dust. This can

cause secondary lead poisoning, particularly in children....shooters can even contaminate their children's clothing by washing them together with the clothes they wore to the range. (p. 14)

National Rifle Association publications and other gun magazines aimed at children often encourage them to "get into" reloading their own ammunition, a process which sometimes includes the dangerous process of casting lead bullets:

- ! Melting lead produces a fume which can remain airborne for several hours, is easily inhaled, and can contaminate surfaces. The director of a New Hampshire occupational health center said some of the worst cases of lead poisoning he has seen have been in people who make their own bullets...."That's a wonderful way to poison not only yourself but members of your family," said another state health official. (p. 10)

Poisonous Pastime also documents the risk shooting ranges pose to other third parties, like range employees, construction workers on range facilities, and those who share buildings with ranges, live, or work near ranges:

- ! A day-care center in Clearwater, Florida, was forced to close and the children were required to have blood tests after it was discovered that a neighboring indoor shooting range was venting lead-contaminated air into the center's playground area....California health officials have seen "some serious lead poisoning cases among construction employees engaged in demolition of a firing range, as well as among these employees' children." (p. 15)

Wrecking the Environment

Besides poisoning kids and others, shooting ranges are wrecking the environment at a prodigious pace:

- ! According to *Sports Afield*, "the quantity of recreational lead deposited in the environment is enormous. For example, at some trap and skeet ranges, lead shot densities of 1.5 billion pellets per acre have been recorded. That's 334 pellets in every square foot." This massive pollution at shooting ranges is entirely separate from another question, posed by a U.S. Forest Service official at a gun industry shooting range symposium, of "where the lead is going for the millions of shooters who currently are not using established ranges," but are instead shooting on open public land. (p. 9)

This frightful record happens because the shooting range business operates "under the radar." These problems are no secret within the industry itself: *Poisonous Pastime* is based largely on records of internal industry meetings and gun industry publications. Although some newer shooting ranges incorporate state-of-the-art environmental and public-health controls, thousands of ranges all over America are operated on shoe-string budgets. Many are operated as informally as sandlot baseball diamonds, without even the most elementary protection for their users, the environment, and the public:

- ! The Boston-based Strategic Planning Institute found in a recent report outlining a gun industry survival strategy for the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) that "a large majority of shooting facilities in the country are not professionally managed, commercial operations." Similarly, a major supplier of shooting range equipment, Caswell International Corp., was reported in 1989 by the NRA's *American Rifleman* magazine to have found that "a lot of people trying to get in on a shoestring" in the shooting range market were "cutting corners on costs that resulted in substandard ranges in terms of safety, environmental concerns and cleanliness." An engineering consulting firm specializing in shooting ranges notes in its promotional materials that the increased attention to lead contamination and human health exposure "has put range owners and operators into areas outside of their expertise." (pp. 17-18)

The industry chooses to downplay the seriousness of its problems, hide them from the general public, and allow thousands of unregulated shooting sites to continue to operate without strict oversight.

What Can be Done?

Poisonous Pastime lists specific things that can be done by the vast majority of Americans who do not own guns and have no interest in allowing the shooting range industry's reckless rampage to continue. (pp. 43-46) Here are a few examples from among many others that activists can pursue to protect kids and the environment:

- ! *All children who have any direct or indirect exposure to a shooting range or to reloading should immediately have their blood lead levels tested.*
- ! *No children should be allowed at shooting ranges, nor should they participate in or be exposed to ammunition reloading, since there is no*

“safe” level of lead exposure for children.

- ! *Local activists can form coalitions with health and environmental groups to conduct “audits” of shooting ranges to check lead levels at ranges and ensure compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, including zoning, noise, environment, as well as health and safety.*
- ! *Congress can give first priority for tax funds that are now used to promote shooting ranges to cleaning up and repairing lead damage to public lands caused by the so-called “shooting sports.”*
- ! *Congress should forbid use of federal dollars for any range that permits use of assault weapons, high-capacity magazines, or machine guns.*
- ! *The lead hazard at shooting ranges calls into question the wisdom of encouraging or requiring firearm safety training as a mechanism to reduce firearm-related violence, and demonstrates the folly of supporting range development with public funds.*

The Violence Policy Center is a national educational organization working to stop gun death and injury in America through research, analysis, and advocacy for effective firearms policy. For more information and a full copy of the May 2001 study, [Poisonous Pastime: The Health Risks of Target Ranges and Lead to Children, Families, and the Environment](#), please contact Naomi Seligman at 202-822-8200 ext. 105 or nseligman@vpc.org.