GiveWell Turns Its Effective Altruism Lens to an Underlooked Issue—Eliminating Lead Poisoning

Liz Longley  |  February 10, 2022

GiveWell is a popular nonprofit rating service that recommends philanthropic opportunities that align with a specific set of criteria: evidence of program and cost effectiveness, funding capacity, and transparency. It’s become a standard bearer of sorts for the effective altruism movement, which emphasizes the amount of measurable good philanthropy can accomplish per dollar spent.

The group also recommends grants for promising and emerging causes. That process recently directed funding toward a niche that hasn’t drawn much attention: the effects of lead exposure on economic and educational outcomes for children.

Funded by Effective Altruism Funds’ Global Health and Development Fund, the two-year, $1.2 million GiveWell Incubation Grant will fund work with a longtime partner, the Center for Global Development (CGD). In keeping with GiveWell’s commitment to information sharing, funding will support a working group that’s expected to produce evidence to engage global policymakers.

The grant builds upon an earlier GiveWell investigation that identified eliminating lead poisoning as an issue that currently has a low profile, but offers promising upsides for children. The cost basis is also understood to be low, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

The commitment comes at a time when the U.S. government and other agencies have taken an interest in the subject. Recent research by UNICEF and Pure Earth reported that toxins pose a much greater threat than currently understood, and that increased neurotoxins may harm 1 in 3 children globally. Children under five are particularly vulnerable to lifelong neurological, cognitive and physical ramifications. And as they grow, exposure has been linked to mental and behavioral problems, cardiovascular disease and kidney damage.
The Center for Global Development is an independent “think and do” tank and research institution that focuses on reducing global poverty through economic research. GiveWell has turned to CGD many times in the past.

The funding came through GiveWell’s Incubation Grants program, which primarily recommends grants made by Open Philanthropy—the Cari Tuna and Dustin Moskovitz-backed funder with close ties to GiveWell. In this case, however, the funder was Effective Altruism Funds, a platform that allows individual donors to give to pooled funds in support of specific causes like global health and development, or animal welfare.

Here’s how Rachel Silverman, a CGD policy fellow co-leading the work, expects the project to progress, and the center’s plans to build a “big tent” collaboration to put research to action.

**Preventable deaths**

Silverman said that, like tobacco control, reducing lead contamination needs to happen at least in part through government regulation—and that they have the same potentially “enormous” public health benefits.

She pointed to one paper suggesting that the benefits of a global phase-out of leaded petrol may equal about $2.5 trillion every year, and other research that names it as the cause of 900,000 deaths annually, and about $1.2 trillion.

Silverman cautioned that the findings are from big, modeled studies with “heroic” assumptions, that should rightfully be “taken with a grain of salt.” Still, Silverman said, “If you believe these numbers are within an order of magnitude of being correct, that means that lead poisoning is one of the largest preventable sources of death, disease and productivity loss in the world, that phasing out leaded petrol was one of the most cost-effective health and regulatory interventions of all time, and that addressing current sources of poisoning could be extraordinarily cost-effective, depending on the costs of effective intervention and mitigation.”

**Potential for impact**

Silverman said lead pollution is “really a global challenge.” While the center’s geographical research focus will be influenced by data availability and opportunities for natural experimentation, “it seems like South and Central Asia have very high levels of lead contamination and may be natural targets for research and advocacy.”

Working in those arenas will also improve evidence that’s currently on based “almost entirely on studies from high-income countries.” The actual social and economic impacts could change materially in low- and middle-income countries, depending on contextual factors like complex biological interactions, nutritional status, and the general state of educational and economic opportunity.

Silverman named several ways success will be measured, including the development of new and robust evidence on the magnitude of lead poisoning harms in LMICs.

**A big tent**

Coalition-building will also be central to the work. CDG’s planned activities include organizing an advocacy group among global policymakers to generate support across LMCIs. The program is expected to reveal the size and scope of the governments, philanthropists and other actors that see lead poisoning as a global crisis, are motivated to take remedial action, and willing to make concrete policy and funding commitments to reduce contamination at the source.

Silverman characterized current funding as “quite small-scale, mostly from GiveWell/Open Philanthropy and a bit from USAID, with a few small-scale, dedicated organizations working on the ground and advocacy levels.”

But CGD believes that landscape can change, and that there’s “a lot of latent enthusiasm for the issue that can be activated with the right evidence.”

All are welcome. “We want to build a big-tent coalition here of people with different perspectives and skills who can help attack lead poisoning from different angles,” said Silverman. At least for now, they are not creating a formal, organized membership body. Instead, there’s a concerted effort to “engage a broad swath of the education, health, and development communities to address this issue.”

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