



Toxic Toys and the Death of Oversight

Plagues, Pollution & Poverty Substack



[BRUCE LANPHEAR](#), Exposing Hidden Threats to Human Health



A Compelling Case for Stronger Public Health, Apr 30, 2025

<https://blanphear.substack.com/p/a-case-for-bigger-public-health>



The Shocking Truth About Lead in Toys

In the fall of 2007, I found myself in a Senate hearing room in Washington, D.C., testifying about something most Americans assumed was already under control: keeping dangerous levels of lead out of children's toys.

It wasn't.

The topic was lead poisoning and the torrent of imported toys flooding into American homes—many laced with lead paint or soft plastics containing toxic metals. Millions of toys. Thousands of brands. And, as it turns out, just one guy checking them.

His name was Bob. He worked at the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), and he was the



only staff member regularly testing toys for lead. One guy. For the entire country. And he was about to retire.

I wish I were making this up.

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What the Science Tells Us

I was there to testify as a scientist about [research](#) showing—repeatedly—that even tiny amounts of lead can permanently alter children’s brains. Lower IQ. Impulse control problems. Learning disabilities. You name it. And no safe level of exposure has been identified. None.

But this hearing wasn’t just about science. It was about what happens when a government decides to shrink itself into irrelevance.

Senator Amy Klobuchar, a freshman senator at the time, came prepared. She asked Nancy Nord, the acting chair of the CPSC, how many staff were assigned to oversee the 60 toy recalls that year—covering 9.5 million toys.

Nord hesitated. “I’m not sure,” she said.

“So there could be one person assigned to those recalls?” Klobuchar asked.

“That is possible.”

It wasn’t just possible. It was only one person, and his name was Bob.

The Free-Market Fantasy

Klobuchar kept going. She asked if the CPSC had accepted the emergency funding Congress had offered to hire more inspectors.

“We declined it,” Nord said.

Let me say that again: the head of the agency responsible for keeping toxic toys off the market turned down funding that would have helped her... keep toxic toys off the market.

Why? Because expanding the agency didn’t fit the free-market fantasy playbook that’s ruled Washington for decades—the idea that government should be small enough to drown in a bathtub, or at least small enough that Bob could handle it alone.

Regulatory Neglect with Real Consequences

You couldn’t script this level of dysfunction.

I sat there thinking about the irony. For years, we’d been warning anyone who would listen that lead was harming children—not just in toys, but in old paint, drinking water, dust, and soil. But again and again, we were told the same thing: “There’s not enough money.” “There’s not enough staff.” “We have to be strategic.”



Translation: We're not going to do anything.

Senator Klobuchar, to her credit, wasn't having it. She cut through the bureaucratic fog like a Midwestern mom with an agenda. "We're talking about children's lives," she said.

And that, really, is the point.

Lead poisoning isn't some abstract policy issue. It's not a left vs. right debate. It's about kids getting poisoned—and it's about who we expect to stop it. Spoiler: it's not going to be private industry. They had decades to do the right thing and chose profit every time. It's going to be government. Or no one.

A Rare Victory for Public Health

In 2009, the CPSC did something historic. Under mounting pressure, and with new legislation behind it, the agency reduced the allowable level of lead in paint for children's products from 600 parts per million to [90 ppm](#). That was a massive step forward—one that aligned U.S. standards with what public health experts had been recommending for years.

Did the private sector volunteer to make that change? Of course not. Industry lobbyists fought it. But government scientists, regulators, and staff pushed it through anyway—because it was the right thing to do.

This story, ridiculous as it sometimes feels, gives us a glimpse into the hundreds of invisible ways government protects us every day. Not just from lead—but from an onslaught of toxic products, dangerous shortcuts, and corner-cutting corporations. That's why the private sector has spent decades trying to dismantle the system. They don't want oversight. They want loopholes and shrink-wrapped liability shields.

Enter the Wrecking Ball

Fast forward. Bob has retired. The CPSC is still underfunded. And then came the Trump administration, which didn't just ignore public servants—it went after them like a demolition crew with a wrecking ball.

They hollowed out the CDC. Guttled the EPA. Purged the FDA. If there was an agency that used science to protect people, they either fired the staff, defunded the programs, or replaced the experts with donors and ideologues.

They weren't downsizing government—they were sabotaging it.

Consider a recent example you may have missed.

New Crisis, Same Story

In April 2025, the CDC released a [report](#) on a national lead poisoning outbreak tied to cinnamon applesauce pouches. The cinnamon, imported from Ecuador, was laced with lead chromate—a vivid yellow compound banned in food but sometimes added to boost color. More than 500 children across 44 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico were poisoned. Many had stomach pain, fatigue, or behavior changes. All had one thing in common: they were exposed to a neurotoxin in a snack marketed as safe.



The kicker? This report came just days after the CDC's Lead Poisoning Prevention Branch was officially dissolved.

This crisis wasn't uncovered by luck. It took sharp-eyed doctors, fast coordination among states, and decisive action from the CDC, FDA, and Consumer Product Safety Commission. Their work led to recalls, testing, and tighter import controls.

This is what government does at its best: protecting children from hidden harm. No private company would've found this. Few parents could've connected the dots. It took a system built for prevention.

Dismantling that system in the name of "efficiency" wasn't cost-cutting. It was sabotage.

In Praise of Public Servants

But here's what I've learned: the people who work in these agencies are the last line of defense between you and a very dangerous kind of freedom. The freedom to sell anything, no matter how toxic. The freedom to ignore evidence. The freedom to look the other way.

Bob wasn't a faceless bureaucrat. He did the work no one saw, no one praised, and too many dismissed. But without him—and the thousands of other people in public service—we don't get clean water, safe food, inspected toys, or breathable air.

And we get hearings where the head of a safety agency admits she doesn't know how many people are assigned to stop millions of toxic toys from reaching children.

Government Isn't "Them"—It's Us

There's a strange comfort in blaming government. It's easy. Vague. Popular. But the truth is, government isn't "them." It's us. It's the scientists, analysts, inspectors, and public health officers who still show up every day, trying to protect people despite everything.

What we need is not just a bigger commitment to public health—but the courage to back it up with power, people, and purpose.

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