# Evaluation of Occupational Lead Exposure in Informal Work Environment in Kenya

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***Authors' contributions***

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

*Original Research Article*

## ABSTRACT

Lead (Pb) is widely used in the informal sector and much of the exposure levels is through handling, processing, fabrications, burning and disposal of materials containing Pb. Furthermore, Pb bio-accumulate and is highly toxic to human health and is persistent in the environment. This study was therefore designed to evaluate levels of exposure to airborne Pb among workers in the informal sector. Airborne Pb was collected using air sampler in 34 production areas (sheds) and two control areas. The concentration of airborne Pb was determined using an Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer (AAS). An empirical survey using questionnaires also assessed the knowledge about airborne Pb and occupational safety, and health strategies in place. Nearly 56.0% of the sheds had airborne Pb concentration ranging from 1.4 µg/m$^3$ to 126.9 µg/m$^3$. On the contrary, 44.1% of the production areas and control sites had airborne Pb levels below the detectable limit (BDL). The welding works in sheds 11 and 27, and painting activities in shed 6 and 16 had significantly (p <0.05) higher levels of airborne Pb with a mean ± standard deviation (sd) of 126.9 ± 20.1µg/m$^3$, 117.4 ± 5.2 µg/m$^3$ and 56.4 ± 3.1 µg/m$^3$, and 53.6 ± 0.6 µg/m$^3$, respectively than other operations within the sheds, and the controls areas. These levels in the welding and painting areas also exceeded the USA. Occupational Safety Health Act (OSHA) Permissive Exposure Limit (PEL) Time Weighted Average (TWA) of 50 µg/m$^3$. The study further found that the informal sector

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workers had limited information about Pb exposure despite the fact that 50.0% of them had secondary education and 9.4% had primary education. About 62.0% of these workers were unaware of Pb exposure and related adverse effects. 70.6% of the workers had not taken annual medical check-ups. In addition, the workers did not have appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) that would reduce their exposure to Pb. The study recommends comprehensive awareness and training programs on Pb exposure and occupational safety and health in the informal work environment to prevent associated health effects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational Pb exposure is still common in developing countries especially among workers in the informal sector who come into contact with Pb during their manufacturing processes [1,2]. In developed countries there are stringent controls, improvements in industrial processes and regulations regarding emission and release of Pb into the environment. On the contrary, in the informal sectors in the developing countries, handling, recycling, manufacturing, use and disposal of materials containing Pb is often unregulated. Exposure to Pb is more prevalent in workers in radiator repairs, auto-panel works, welding and fabrication of metals, painting operations, lead battery manufacturing and recovery, soldering, lead alloy production, lead mining and smelting [3–5]. Moreover, in Kenya where the majority of the population works in the informal sector, exposure to Pb is likely to occur.

This is further exacerbated by lack of adequate occupational safety and health measures among workers including information in regard to exposure to Pb and associated health effects [2,6]. The production areas of the informal sector workers are usually unregulated, and located in close proximity to residential areas. In most cases, these areas lack the necessary facilities that assist in reducing exposure to Pb [3–5]. Due to a combination of several factors, Pb containing fumes and dust generated from such operations pose exceptional health effects to both children and workers [1]. High levels of Pb exposure have been linked to damage of almost all organs of the human body, and mainly the central nervous system and kidneys. Additionally it interferes with brain development in children [6,7] This study therefore sought to evaluate the concentration of airborne Pb in the production areas in the informal sector in Kenya.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Description of the Study Area and Population

After obtaining the necessary approvals and permits, the study was undertaken between October 2016 and July 2019 to evaluate lead exposure in the informal sector, located approximately 2 km from the Nairobi Central Business District. The sector was started in 1961 by nine ex-detainees who had some skills on metal fabrication [8]. In mid-70s the number of these artisans increased to 350. The artisans were also working in harsh conditions, in open space under the "scorching sun". In 1986, the Kenyan government constructed three big sheds (Fig. 1), which were later subdivided into a total of thirty-seven small sheds as a way to support the artisans. Presently, the sector is one of the largest and densely populated in Kenya with a population of 5000 dominated by clusters of micro (1-3 workers) and small enterprises (4-10 workers) that are located adjacent to each other [9].

### 2.2 Sampling Sites and Airborne Lead Collection

The airborne lead samples were collected in the thirty-four (n = 34) production areas (sheds) on the basis of activities that were taking place during working hours in accordance with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) USA 7082 and [1]. The collection of airborne Pb samples in the thirty-four sheds were categorized as follows: in (i) twenty-three (n =23) sheds that included 1 to 4, 7 to 9, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19, 20 to 26 and 28 to 31 where fabrications of various metallic items were carried out. (ii) seven (n = 7) sheds that were 17 and 32 to 37 that involved grinding, heating and soldering activities, (iii) two (n = 2) sheds that included 11, and 27 that were mainly carrying out welding activities, (iv) two (n =2) shed, 6 and 16

that was mainly involved in spray and painting operations. The airborne Pb samples were also collected in the two control sites namely an open library and open field.

Area airborne Pb was then sampled full-shift (8 hours) in 34 sheds and 2 control areas during working hours using air sampling pumps. The batteries for the pumps were fully charged prior to sampling, to ensure they could run a full shift. The cellulose membrane filter paper with diameters of 37 mm and 8 μm pore size were used. The sampling apparatus was assembled by placing the filter paper in between the support ring and the cover and the sampling tube (flexible by design) was connected to a pump that was calibrated using a flow meter (rotameter) [10]. Air samples were collected by placing the pumps onto a stand and the sampling head mounted to the workers breathing zone level while the pumps were placed 1 m from the ground [10]. The apparatus was set to a flow rate of 2 L/min which was checked periodically during sampling. Upon completion of the sampling process, the filters were then stored in cassette filter holder and transported to the analytical laboratory for further analysis of Pb.

## 2.3 Sample Digestion and Lead Analysis

The stored filter samples were analysed according to NIOSH 7082 Method. Samples were removed from the filter cassettes using forceps and transferred to clean 50 ml beakers. 3.0 ml of concentrated nitric acid and 1.0 ml of 30 % hydrogen peroxide was then added to each beaker and heated on a hot plate at 140°C [4,11–13]. The samples and blanks were not allowed to dry during the digestion process. These procedures were repeated twice with 2.0 ml concentrated $HNO_3$ and 1.0 ml of 30% $H_2O_2$ added, each time the volume reduced to 0.5 ml. After digestion, the beakers were rinsed with 5.0 ml of 10% $HNO_3$ and the sample evaporated to dryness, cooled and the residue dissolved with 1.0 ml concentrated $HNO_3$. The solution was then filtered and transferred to 10 ml volumetric flask and diluted to the mark. A series of lead metal working standards ranging from 0.25 to 20 μg/ml were then prepared and used to plot a standard calibration curve. The samples were then analysed by aspirating the samples through a Shimadzu AA 6200 Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer set at a wavelength of 283 nm [4,11–13].
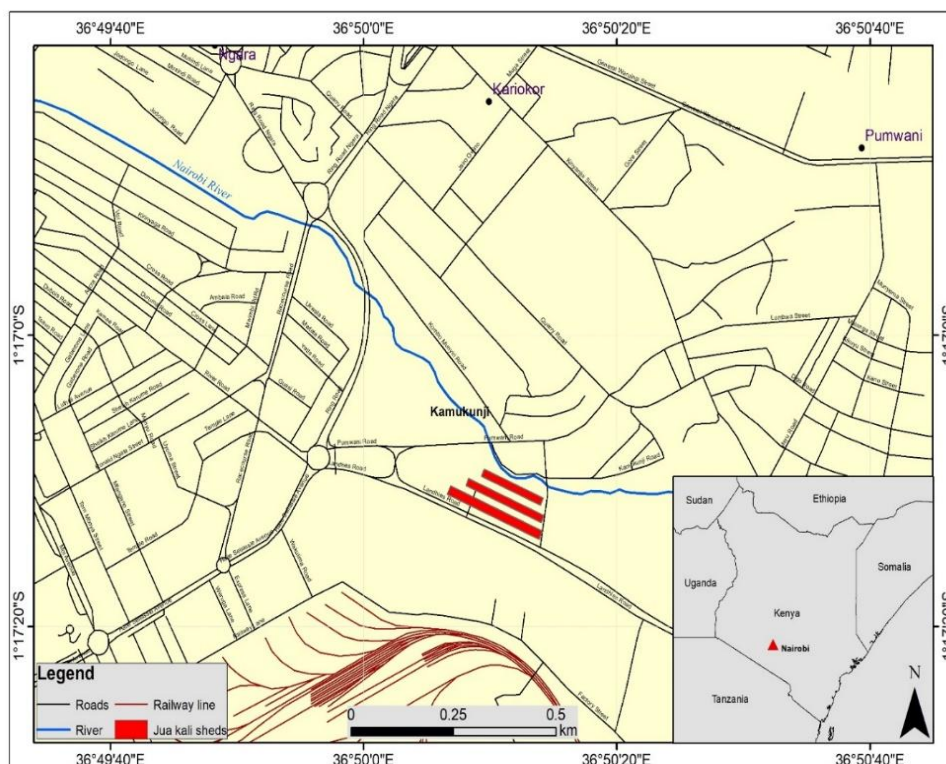


**Fig. 1. A map showing three big sheds that were later subdivided into 37 small sheds in Kamukunji area Nairobi County**

## 2.4 Empirical Survey

The empirical survey was divided into two arms. The first arm gathered information on socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, while the second arm concentrated on the levels of awareness, perception and understanding of occupational safety and health control measures in regard to airborne lead exposure [14]. This information was obtained using questionnaires and observations. The questionnaires were only issued to permanent employees, shed leaders, where long exposure was assumed. Temporal workers were therefore excluded from this study [14].

The questionnaires gathered the following data; gender of the respondent, approximate age, level of education, how long the respondent had worked in the current work place, how many hours worked in a day, knowledge on Pb poisoning, how the respondent attained the knowledge on Pb exposure, and any health and safety measure concerns. In the case of medical history, the following information was captured; whether the respondent underwent any medical examinations, related to blood pressure or coughs and chest pains, and if the respondents had noticed any health changes due to the work environment. Observations on the ventilation at work area, health aspects, provision of PPEs to the workers and personal hygiene, were considered during the sampling period.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Lead Exposure

Table 1 summarises the airborne lead concentrations in the thirty-four (n = 34) production areas (sheds) of the informal work environment and two (n = 2) control sites. Fig. 2 presents the corresponding mean levels of lead in air (LIA) in production areas when compared to the USA Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) Permissive Exposure Limit (PEL) of 50 $\mu g/m^3$.

**Table 1. Mean ± sd Airborne Lead Level involving different Operations in the Sheds (n = 34)**

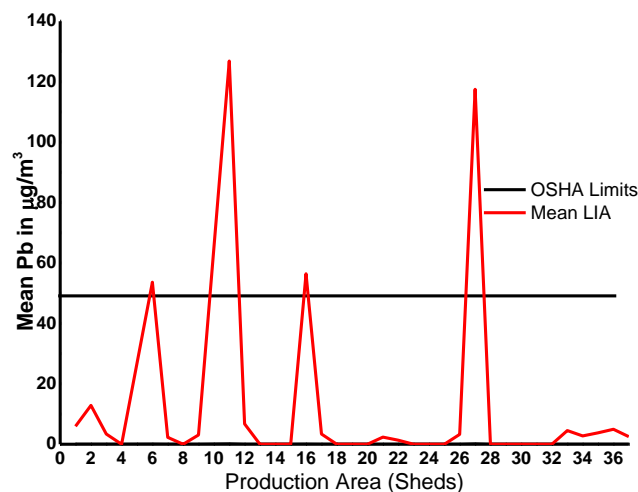| Study Areas | n | Sheds | Nature of Work | Mean ± sd ($\mu g/m^3$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Production | 23 | 1-4, 7-9, 12,13, 15, 18,19, 20-26, 28-31 | Fabrication metallic materials | 1.5± 2.8 |
| | 7 | 17, 32-37 | Grinding heating, soldering works | 3.0±1.6 |
| | 2 | 6 and 16 | Spray and brush painting | 55.0 ± 2.0 |
| | 2 | 27 and 11, | Welding areas | 122.0 ± 46.7 |
| Control | 1 | Library | BDL | |
| | 1 | Open field | BDL | |



**Fig. 2. Airborne Lead concentration in production areas (sheds) in the informal sector compared to the USA OSHA limits**

From Table 1, the welding works in production areas in sheds 11 and 27 had the highest airborne Pb concentration with a mean ± standard deviation (sd) of 126.9 ± 20.1μg/m$^3$ and 117.4 ± 5.2 μg/m$^3$, respectively, when compared to the other activities in the production areas, and the controls that had values below the detection limit (BDL). These levels in the welding areas also exceeded the USA. OSHA PEL of 50 μg/m$^3$ and were comparable to the levels that were reported by [1] in another welding operation in Industrial Area, Nairobi, Kenya. The high airborne Pb levels observed in the welding areas and with no respiratory protection suggests that welders were likely to have high blood lead levels (BLL). Previous studies done by [1], reported airborne Pb of 126.2±33.2 ug/m$^3$ in a scrap welding plant. The welders had an average BLL of 40.9 ±7.5 μg/dl that exceeded the American Conference government of Industrial Hygienist (ACGIH) Biological Exposure Indices (BEI) for BLL of 30 μg/dl [15].

The findings by [9] also reported that welders had a mean BLL of 25.3 ±17.8 μg/dl. Other previous studies have revealed that out of fifty-one welders, six had BLL above 10 μg/dl, while construction workers who were exposed to welding fume, had detectable levels of Lead (Pb), Manganese (Mn), Cadmium (Cd), Nickel (Ni) and Arsenic (As) in their toenail clippings of the workers [16,17]. The welders in Shed 11 and 27 are therefore likely to have high BLL and suffer from related adverse health effects.

Elevated mean airborne Pb levels of 53.6 ± 0.6 μg/m$^3$ and 56.4 ± 3.15 μg/m$^3$ were also found in sheds 6 and 16 where painting works were carried out in the open. Interestedly, none of the painters had respiratory protection equipment to protect them from these exposures. These results are in agreement with those of [1], where the mean airborne values of 76.3 ± 33.2 μg/m$^3$ were reported in a formal production areas of paint manufacturing plant. Studies done on 84 bridge painters further showed that painters were exposed to airborne Pb during several job tasks performed during the workday, such as sanding, scraping, and blasting [18].

The International Conference on Chemical Management (ICCM) held in 2009, identified Pb paint as an emerging human health and environmental policy issue. It was in this context that UNEP and WHO were tasked to provide leadership and form a partnership with diverse stakeholders to get rid of Lead paint and create a healthy and habitable environment [19] . It is out of this effort that the Kenya Bureau of Standard (KEBS) and the technical committee of the East Africa Standard for Paints and Allied Products recently established 90 ppm as the allowable maximum total Lead content in paints that should be sold in the East African market [20] . This means that manufacturers should not add leaded materials during the production processes. High airborne Pb levels that were observed during painting in shed 6 and 16 implied that leaded materials are still being used by workers in the informal sector during formulation of paints. Enforcement and comprehensive awareness programs are necessary in this sector to phase out Pb in paint.

It should also be noted that in this study, 19 of the selected 34 production areas, representing approximately 56.0% had Pb concentration ranging from 1.45± 0.1 μg/m$^3$ to 126.9 ± 20.1 μg/m$^3$. Four sheds had Pb in air levels that exceeded the USA. OSHA PEL of 50 μg/m$^3$. On the other hand, 15 of 34 production areas (sheds, 44.1% and the two control sites had Pb concentration in air below the detectable limit (BDL). The World Health Organization (WHO) and other health authorities have acknowledged the health impacts of Pb even at low level of exposure since Pb persists in the environment, bio accumulate in biological system and is highly toxic. WHO estimates that about 99% of people affected by Pb poisoning are from developing countries. Lead is absorbed into our bodies through either ingestion, inhalation or dermatological absorption [21]. In workers, the most common route of exposure to Pb is through inhalation from contaminated workplace air [21].

## 3.2 Demographic Characteristics of the Workers and Lead Exposure

From Figs. 2 and 3, the study considered demographic characteristics (gender and age), of the workers where 67.6% were males while 32.4% were females.

The activities that were performed by the female workers included painting, cooking, cleaning and selling of the products. Airborne Pb levels where the female respondents were painting in shed 6 was 53.6 ± 0.1 μg/m$^3$ while sheds 20 and 30 where they carried out general activities the levels were BDL. Previous studies done by [16] and [9] reported elevated BLL among painters in the informal sector that could have been contributed to airborne Pb within the working area. In this study, painting was done using

brushes and spray guns, in the open space and none of the workers had respiratory protection which could have resulted in high BLL of the workers.

It was also observed that the majority of the respondents were aged between 30-39 years, which accounted for 55.9% of the respondents, while 35.3% of the respondents were aged between 19-29 years (Fig. 4). However, 5.9 % respondents were aged between 40-49 years, and only 2.9% were aged above 50 years. From

these findings, it is clear that the activities and operations of the informal sector are labour intensive and entirely manual, hence had limited involvement of workers above the age of 40. Most production workers in sheds 6, 11, 16 and 27, were aged between 19-29 years and 40-49 years. The female workers in shed 6 that had elevated levels of airborne Pb were of child bearing age, Pb exposure may be detrimental to their unborn babies and during breast feeding [13].
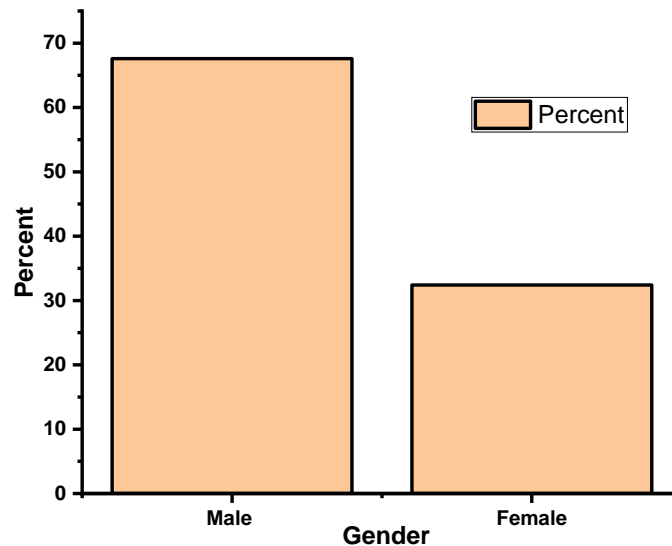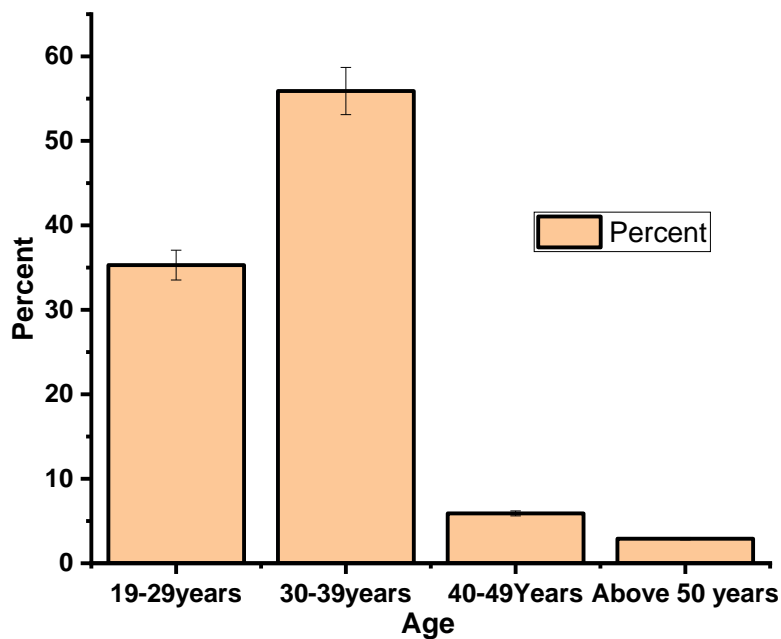


**Fig. 3. Gender of the respondents**



**Fig. 4. Age of the respondents**

### 3.3 Level of Education and Knowledge on Lead Exposure

Fig. 5 depicts the results obtained in regard to the level of education and knowledge about lead exposure in the work place.

The study found that 50.0% informal workers had secondary education, 29.4% had primary education while 20.6% had high level education. All the respondents who had primary school education had limited information on Pb exposure. It is worth noting from this survey that most of the respondents working in this sector did not acquire formal education as this was not a prerequisite to get employment in this sector. From those who participated in the study, 61.8% did not know about Pb exposure while 38.2% were aware about Pb exposure. Nevertheless, this percentage is significantly higher than that of [16] where only 6.7% were aware of lead toxicity. Among the 38.2% respondents that had knowledge about Pb exposure, 8.5% obtained the information through formal training, 23.5% was through friends and 23.5% through electronic media reinforcing the importance of social platform in awareness raising in the informal sector [22,23].

With regard to safety data sheets (SDS), most chemicals used in this sector lacked the SDS hence the workers were not informed about the risks posed by the chemicals they were handling. It was also observed that most of the artisans did not refer to the labels and markings on the containers. This poses a safety and health risk to the workers since some containers had toxic chemicals in powder form where workers may have been exposed to through inhalation [5]. Recycling of painted scrap metals in metal fabrication activities was also a potential source of Pb Exposure. These findings concur with those reported by [5] who observed that recycling of scrap metal resulted in exposure to various toxic chemicals amongst workers in the informal sector. Although the respondents working in areas with high Pb levels had secondary education. Of the four respondents, only two had knowledge about Pb exposure, the other two had limited knowledge about Pb exposure but they were interested in getting more information about Pb exposure and its adverse health effects. One shed leader was not interested in getting further information about Pb exposure, while 44.1% were interested in gaining further information, and thus the need for detailed awareness and training programs in this sector about Pb exposure.
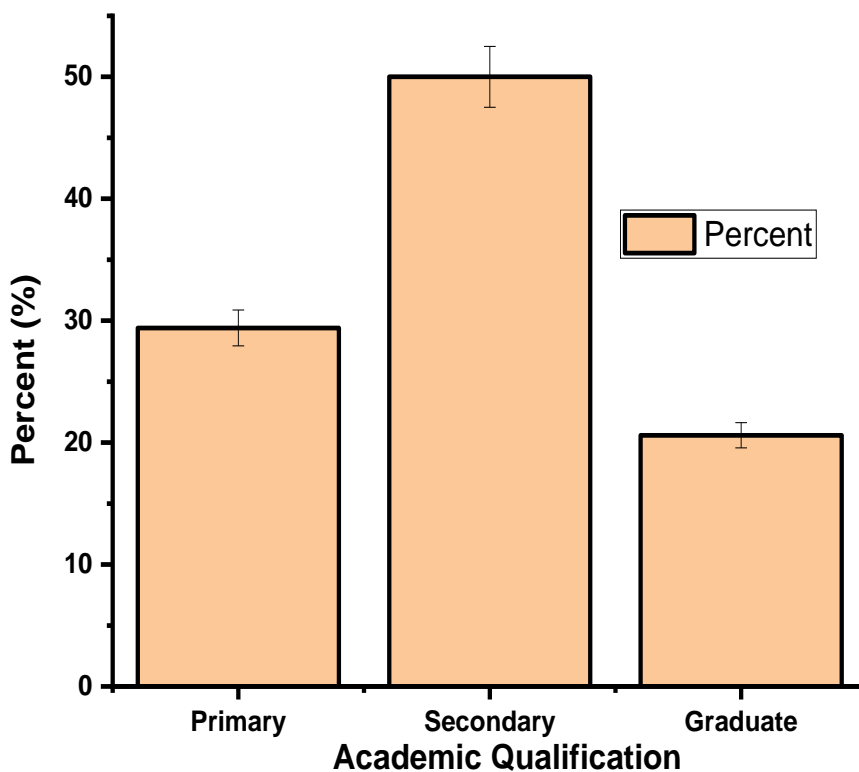


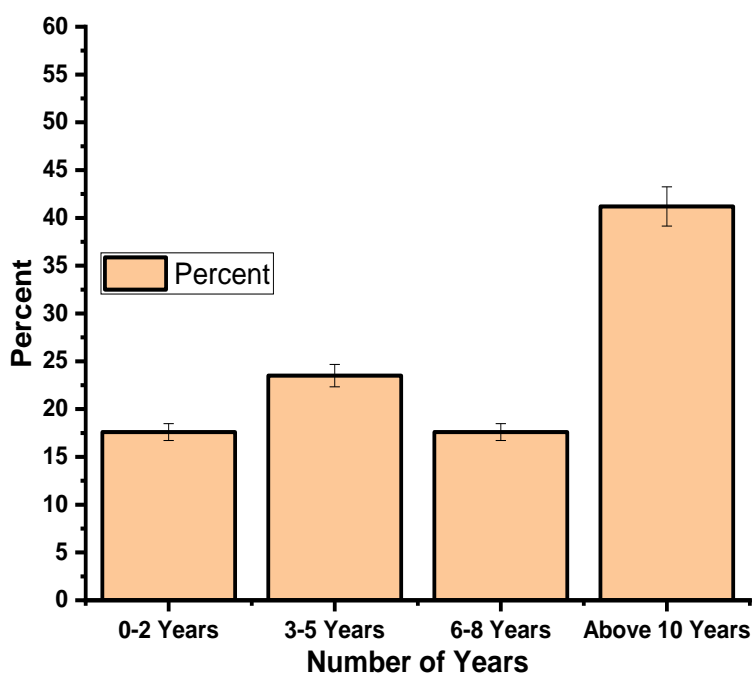**Fig. 5. Level of Education and Knowledge on Lead Exposure**

**Fig. 6. Duration of exposure estimated through number of working years**
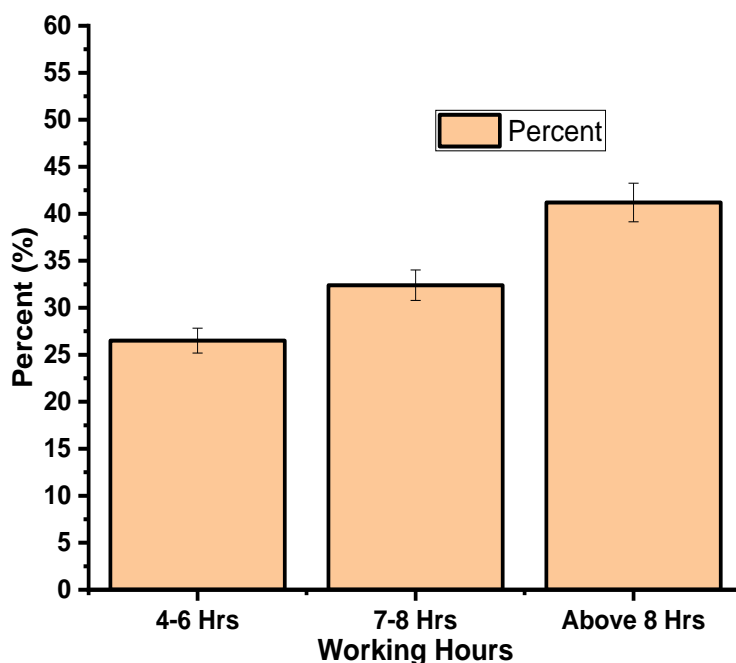


**Fig. 7. Duration of exposure estimated through number of working hours**

## 3.4 Duration of Exposure and Working Hours

Figs. 6 and 7 is about the duration of exposure and number of working hours in the informal sector.

Nearly 41.0% of the shed representatives had worked in the sector for more than 10 years and a small proportion of 17.6% had worked for less than 2 years. In the sites, sheds 6, 11 and 27 where airborne Pb exposure PEL of 50 ug/m$^3$ were exceeded, the respondents had worked in these areas for over 10 years. The respondents

**Table 2. Correlation coefficient matrix for airborne Lead Levels and Empirical survey questions**

| | Airborne lead levels in the working areas | Do you undergo medical examination | Type of PPEs you use | Do you agree with stringent policy formulation? | How much do you know about lead exposure? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Airborne lead Levels in the Working Areas | 1 | | | | |
| Do you undergo medical examination | 0.069 | 1 | | | |
| Type of PPEs you use | 0.005 | .0. 717[**] | 1 | | |
| Do you agree with stringent policy formulation? | -0.134 | .0.719[**] | O.601[**] | 1 | |
| How much do you know about lead exposure? | -0.303 | 0.292 | -0.045 | 0.274 | 1 |

*\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

in shed 6 and 11 indicated their work shift was more than 8 hours per day and was more than the USA OSHA PEL Time Weighted Average (TWA) of 8 hour per day for 5 days in a week. This is a worrying trend, since some researchers revealed a decline in fertility rates in environmentally or occupationally exposed male to Pb over a longer time [24]. It has been reported that long term inhalation of Pb resulted in deposition of Pb in the bone and higher concentration in the blood [24].

### 3.5 Medical Surveillance

The study also established that a high proportion (70.6%) of the respondents did not undergo any medical examination even though they had experienced health effects related to their work environment. A small proportion of the respondent stated that they occasionally visited the health facilities although they were unclear on the nature of illness and the frequency of medical visits. The majority (85.0%) of these medical visits reported were either because of hypertension or respiratory ailments.

### 3.6 Use of Protective Equipment and Hygiene

It is also worth mentioning that even though 75.0% of the workers in the informal sector had observed adverse health effects, a large number (70.6 %) of the respondents did not use PPEs against Pb exposure. Only 29.4% stated that they use some PPEs to protect themselves from lead fumes.

The study also found that the hygiene and welfare facilities in the area were ineffective to cope with the risks that were identified. For instance, none of the workers had lockers to store working clothes and home clothes.

### 3.7 Correlation between Airborne Lead Levels and Empirical Survey

Correlation coefficient (r) measures the combined variation between two variables, x and y and it can only take values in the range $-1 \leq r \leq +1$. An r value of $-1$ describes a perfect negative correlation and an r value of $+1$ indicates a perfect positive correlation while an r value of 0 indicates no linear correlation between the values of x and y [25].

From Table 2, there is a positive correlation ($0 < r < 1$) between airborne lead, PPE usage,

medical examination, and negative correlation between ($0 > r < 1$) airborne lead, policy, and knowledge on lead exposure. There was also a positive correlation between use of PPEs, medical examination and positive correlation between stringent policy and use of PPEs. This observation implies that use of PPEs is highly dependent on the strategies and policies put in place in a given shed as workers will tend to use the PPEs if strict policies are observed. Similarly, it can be observed from the correlation value that the use of PPEs also influences the frequency with which one visits a medical facility [25].

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Nearly 11.0% of the production areas of the informal sector had elevated levels of airborne Pb ranging from $53.6 \pm 0.6$ $\mu g/m^3$ to $126.9 \pm 20.1$ $\mu g/m^3$ and exceeded the USA OSHA PEL TWA of 50 $\mu g/m^3$. Moreover, most respondents were working long hours per day, thereby increasing their exposure levels to Pb and hence aggravating the risk of developing associated complications. It was also evident that more than 50.0% of the workers in the informal sector had limited information about Pb exposure and related health effect. Similarly, they had inadequate knowledge on occupational safety and health, and use of appropriate PPEs.

Comprehensive awareness and training programs on Pb exposure and occupational safety and health are necessary in the informal work environment to prevent related health effects. The production sections with high Pb levels should be equipped with a combined ventilation and exhaust systems. Monitoring of Pb in biological samples and medical examinations should also be conducted at the pre-employment and post-employment phase to evaluate levels of occupational Pb exposure including the efficacy of wearing PPEs and engineering controls. Furthermore, the regulatory agencies should ensure that all the informal workplace are registered and annual occupational safety and health audits are carried out by competent personnel.

### CONSENT

All respondents who volunteered to participate in this study did so with informed consent, confidentiality and were aged 18 years and above.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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