

Cold War radiation testing in US widespread

• By jim salter, associated press

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In this Sept. 5, 2017, photo, sociologist Lisa Martino-Taylor poses for a photo in her office in Kirkwood, Mo. Martino-Taylor wrote in a recently released book that the U.S. government secretly exposed hundreds of thousands of people to dangerous radiation, along with chemical and biological materials in Cold War-era testing, including impoverished residents in St. Louis, poor pregnant women in the South and high school students in California. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)[more +](#)

• Three members of Congress are demanding answers after a St. Louis scholar's new book revealed details of how the U.S. government sprayed, injected and fed radiation and other dangerous materials to countless people in secret Cold War-era testing.

The health ramifications of the tests are unknown. Lisa Martino-Taylor, an associate professor of sociology at St. Louis who wrote "Behind the Fog: How the U.S. Cold War Radiological Weapons Program Exposed Innocent Americans," acknowledged that tracing diseases like cancer to specific causes is difficult.

But three congressmen who represent areas where testing occurred — Democrats William Lacy Clay of Missouri, Brad Sherman of California and [Jim Cooper](#) of Tennessee — said they were outraged by the revelations.

Martino-Taylor used Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain previously unreleased documents, including Army records. She also reviewed already public records and published articles. She told The Associated Press that she found that a small group of researchers, aided by leading academic institutions, worked to develop radiological weapons and later "combination weapons" using radioactive materials along with chemical or biological weapons.

Her book, published in August, was a follow-up to her 2012 dissertation that found the government conducted secret testing of zinc cadmium sulfide in a poor area of St. Louis in the 1950s and 1960s. The book focuses on the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s.

An Army spokeswoman declined comment, but Martino-Taylor's 2012 report on testing in St. Louis was troubling enough to spur an Army investigation. The investigation found no evidence that the St. Louis testing posed a health threat.

Martino-Taylor said the offensive radiological weapons program was a top priority for the government. Unknowing people at places across the U.S. as well as parts of England and Canada were subjected to potentially deadly material through open-air spraying, ingestion and injection, Martino-Taylor said. "They targeted the most vulnerable in society in most cases," Martino-Taylor said. "They targeted children. They targeted pregnant women in Nashville. People who were ill in hospitals. They targeted wards of the state. And they targeted minority populations."

The tests in Nashville in the late 1940s involved giving 820 poor and pregnant white women a mixture during their first pre-natal visit that included radioactive iron, Martino-Taylor said. The women were chosen without their knowledge. Blood tests were performed to determine how much radioactive iron had been absorbed by the mother, and the babies' blood was tested at birth. Similar tests were performed in Chicago and San Francisco, Martino-Taylor said.

Cooper's office plans to seek more information from the Army Legislative Liaison, said spokesman Chris Carroll.

"We are asking for details on the Pentagon's role, along with any cooperation by research institutions and other organizations," Carroll said. "These revelations are shocking, disturbing and painful."

In California, investigators created a radiation field inside a building at North Hollywood High School during a weekend in the fall of 1961, Martino-Taylor said. Similar testing was performed at the University of California, Los Angeles and at a Los Angeles Police Department building.

Sherman said he wants a survey of people who graduated from the school around the time of the testing to see if there was a higher incidence of illness, including cancer. He also said he will seek more information from the Department of Energy.

"What an incredibly stupid, reckless thing to do," said Sherman, whose district includes North Hollywood High School.

Among those who recall the testing is Mary Helen Brindell, 73. She was playing baseball in a St. Louis street in the mid-1950s when a squadron of green planes flew so low overhead that she could see the face of the lead pilot. Suddenly, the children were covered in a fine powdery substance that stuck to skin moistened by summer sweat.

Brindell has suffered from breast, thyroid, skin and uterine cancers. Her sister died of a rare form of esophageal cancer.

"I just want an explanation from the government," Brindell said. "Why would you do that to people?"

Clay said he was angered that Americans were used as "guinea pigs" for research.

"I join with my colleagues to demand [the whole truth](#) about this testing and I will reach out to my Missouri Delegation friends on the House Armed Services Committee for their help as well," Clay said in a statement.

St. Louis leaders were told at the time that the government was testing a smoke screen that could shield the city from aerial observation in case of Soviet attack. Evidence now shows radioactive material, not just zinc cadmium sulfide, was part of that spraying, Martino-Taylor said.

Doris Spates, 62, was born in 1955 on the 11th floor of the Pruitt-Igoe low-income high-rise where the Army sprayed material from the roof. Her father died suddenly three months after her birth. Four of her 11 siblings died from cancer at relatively young ages. She survived [cervical cancer](#) and suffers from skin and breathing problems.

"It makes me angry," Spates said. "It is wrong to do something like that to people who don't have any knowledge of it."

According to Martino-Taylor, other testing in Chicago; Berkeley, California; Rochester, New York; and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, involved injecting people with plutonium-239.

She said her book shines a light on the team of mostly young scientists tasked with developing radiological weapons. They worked in a closed world with virtually no input from anyone "who could say, 'This isn't right,' or put some sort of moral compass on it," she said.

She hopes her book prompts more people to investigate.

"We haven't gotten any answers so far," Martino-Taylor said. "I think there's a lot more to find out."