

Identification of Legacy and Active Sources of Metal Contamination in Soils in Brooklyn, NY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the spatial distribution and potential anthropogenic sources of Pb, Zn, Cu, Mn, and Fe in surface soils throughout Brooklyn, NY. We collected soil samples ($n=1,373$) from 176 different New York City parks. Metal concentrations were analyzed ex-situ using a portable X-ray fluorescence with a subset ($n=350$) confirmed with ICP-MS. The effect of multiple sources on metal concentrations were determined by stepwise multivariable linear regression with generalized estimating equations. Median concentrations for Pb, Zn, Cu, Fe, and Mn were 107.8 ppm, 144.7 ppm, 49.4 ppm, 14033.6 ppm, and 279.2 ppm, respectively. All metals were significantly correlated with one another ($p<0.001$), with the strength of the correlation ranging from a low of approximately $\rho = 0.3$ (Pb-Mn and Zn-Mn) to a high of $\rho = 0.7$ (Pb-Cu). In final multivariate modeling, scrap yards were significantly associated with Mn concentration ($\beta = 0.075$, 0.019), NPL sites was significantly associated with Pb, Fe and Mn ($\beta = 0.134$, $p=0.004$; $\beta = 0.038$, $p=0.014$; $\beta = 0.057$, $p=0.037$, respectively), and bridges nearby were significantly associated with Pb and Zn ($\beta = 0.106$, $p=0.003$; $\beta = 0.076$, $p=0.026$, respectively). Although manufacturing and industry have mostly left the area, smaller scrap metal recyclers are abundant and significantly increased Cu and Mn soil concentrations. In addition, NPL sites contributed to increased concentrations of all five metals within 800 m. Roadways have long been established to be sources of urban pollution; however, in our study we also found the presence of bridges within 800 m were also strongly predictive of increased Pb, Cu, and Zn concentrations.

Introduction

Soil is a sink for anthropogenic metal pollution^{1,2} that often requires remediation to reduce exposure to the surrounding community.^{3,4} Anthropogenic metals in soil are generally more bioavailable than natural sources, which increases adsorption and body burden.³ Contaminated soil can expose urban populations via resuspension, especially during dry summer periods.^{5,6} Consequently, children's blood lead levels (BLL) were found to be significantly higher in dry summer months in an area with widespread Pb contaminated soil.⁷ Soil metal levels can also serve as indicators of active environmental pollution generated within the community.

Like many urban areas within the United States (U.S.), Brooklyn, New York (NY) was once home to a vast manufacturing and industrial sector that has largely ceased operations. Although, these operations have left the borough the legacy of environmental metal contamination continues to expose residents.^{8,9} In the 1800s, factories opened along Brooklyn's East River waterfront that propelled it to become one of the nation's leading manufacturers of processed goods. Coal was used to power many of these factories, releasing metals into the environment.^{9,10} Sugar refining was the largest industry in Brooklyn, but other major industries included shipbuilding and repair, oil and gas refining, glass and pottery making, book publishing, and cast iron manufacturing; and at the turn of the twentieth century, Pb smelters and incinerators operated in parts of Brooklyn.¹⁰ In addition to industrial and manufacturing metal sources, various types of debris were used to fill marshlands, raise land elevation, and expand waterfront property in Brooklyn. This fill was composed of materials containing metals and may account for the spatial heterogeneity in metals concentration throughout the borough.¹¹ Over the past 20 years, industrial and manufacturing land has been rezoned and a large influx of new residents have migrated to areas of Brooklyn that have a history of contamination sources that may lead to continued contamination and exposure risk among residents.¹²

Metals such as zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), manganese (Mn), and iron (Fe) are essential nutrients that are required for various biochemical and physiological functions, but can exhibit an "U" shaped dose response relationship.¹³ Lead (Pb), on the other hand, is a toxic metal with no biological requirement in humans nor exposure threshold for harm.¹⁴ Exposure to high concentrations of all five metals are associated with various negative health effects ranging from neurological to immunological. High levels of Mn exposure can cause irreversible neurological disease, including behavioral changes and a lowered IQ as well as a condition called manganism that presents with symptoms similar to Parkinson's.¹⁵⁻¹⁹ Occupational inhalation exposure to Zn has long been known to cause metal fume fever, which is characterized by acute influenza like symptoms.^{20,21} Long-term exposure to Cu dust can cause upper respiratory irritation,²² while high Fe exposure can increase the risk of cancer through the generation of free radicals.²³ All organ systems in the body are negatively affected by the cumulative exposure to Pb, regardless of the exposure route, and Pb exposure can result in adverse effect to the neurologic and nervous system, slowed growth and development, and learning and behavior problems. The neurological effects linked to Pb exposure, including a lowered IQ and behavioral changes, appear to be permanent.²⁴⁻²⁸

While most exposure assessments look at exposure to individual metals, there are potential additive and synergistic health effects from exposure to multiple harmful metals (metal mixtures), including oxidative stress, cardiovascular, and neurological effects.²⁹⁻³¹ Metal mixtures can disrupt the blood brain barrier and induce a synergistic toxicity in astrocytes.³⁰ Short-term inhalation exposure to urban particulate matter laden with multiple metals was associated with increased systemic inflammation and oxidative stress.²⁹ Increased fetal exposure to metal mixtures has also been associated with oxidative stress and congenital heart disease.^{31,32}

A previous study conducted by some of the authors on this paper found an ecological association between high soil Pb levels and increased rates of elevated pediatric BLLs in Brooklyn.³³ This study seeks to expand upon that finding and characterize the spatial distribution and identify potential active and legacy sources of Pb, Zn, Cu, Mn, and Fe in surface soils in Brooklyn, NY. Identifying key sources of metal contamination can help predict areas with elevated metal levels and direct the implementation of programs designed to mitigate risk to residents.

Methods

Soil Sampling

Between June 15 through August 15, 2020, we collected soil samples (n=1,373) from 176 different New York City Department of Parks and Recreation properties (NYC Parks), which included community parks, neighborhood parks, and triangles/plazas. Soil measurements were collected in a grid pattern when possible. However, the greenspaces in this study were unevenly shaped polygons with obstructions such as hard surfaces, playground equipment, and water. As a result, the sampling schemes were adjusted in the field as necessary. Sample locations were recorded and the ESRI ArcGIS Collector (Redlands, California) was used to manage the location data.

The parks where sampling took place varied in size, with areas ranging from 4.05 to 876,771 m². In parks larger than 100,000 m², 30 samples were taken per park; in parks between 10,000 m² and 100,000 m², a median of 14 samples (between 7 and 30 samples) were taken; in parks between 1,000 m² and 10,000 m², a median of four samples (between 1 and 8 samples) were taken; and in community parks and plazas less than 1,000 m², one sample was collected.

Soil Analyses with pXRF

For each soil sample, 50-200 grams were collected at 0-5 cm depth with a clean trowel and transferred to a clean Zip-lock plastic bag. Each sample was screened for Pb, Cu, Zn, Mn, and Fe concentrations ex-situ with a portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) instrument (Thermo Scientific Niton, model XL3t) set to soil mode. A 30 second exposure time was used for each measurement, which was taken directly on each sample bag containing soil. Prior to each use, a system check was carried out on the instrument, and before each sampling session, a series of soil standards reference materials, produced by The United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), were measured with the pXRF. These measurements had to fall within 2 standard deviations (SD) of the reference value. If a reading fell outside 2 SD but within 3 SD, another reading was needed and, if acceptable, data collection could start. If the reading was not acceptable, a system recheck was needed. The certified values for SiO₂ blank, NIST 2709a, NIST 2780, and USGS SdAR-M2 can be seen in Table 1. The limit of detection (LOD) for each metal was calculated from 1.5 times the precision of the measurement, which was unique for each measurement and two times the SD.³⁴ The LODs ranged from 11.5 to 19.3 ppm for Pb (n=31), 28.8 to 68.4 ppm for Cu (n=232), 79.2 to 127.4 ppm for Mn (n=13), and 19.7 to 23.6 ppm for Zn (n=2). No Fe readings were below the LOD.

Table 1
Certified values for soil standard reference materials

Soil Standard Reference Material	Certified Values (ppm)				
	Pb	Mn	Zn	Cu	Fe
SiO ₂	0	0	0	0	0
NIST 2709a	17.3 ± 0.1	529 ± 18	103 ± 4	33.9 ± 0.5	33,600 ± 700
USGS SdAR-M2	808 ± 14	*	760 ± 13	236 ± 4	*
NIST 2780	5,770 ± 410	462 ± 21	2,570 ± 160	215.5 ± 7.8	27,840 ± 800
*Metal was not in the soil standard reference material					

Table 2
Agreement between ICP-MS and pXRF by metal

Metal	Slope (mg/kg)	r ²	Mean relative % difference
Pb	0.976	0.94	7.5
Zn	0.913	0.90	30.4
Cu	0.890	0.91	15.9
Fe	0.752	0.95	35.5
Mn	0.735	0.88	35.5

Confirmation Laboratory Analyses with ICP-MS

A subset of samples (n=350) were validated using inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) analyses. Samples were first dried to constant weight at 105°C, disaggregated using a mortar and pestle, and then sieved to less than 2 mm. Approximately 0.3 g of this fine fraction was acid digested using a microwave oven digester following the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Method 3051.³⁵ The digested samples were then analyzed for metals using an ICP-MS (Perkin Elmer, Elan DRCe) at Brooklyn College (EPA Method 6020). Results from the ICP-MS analyses corroborated the findings obtained with the pXRF, with high degree of agreement between the methods, although the pXRF did slightly underestimate metal concentrations. The slope, r², and mean relative percent difference for each metal are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for soil concentrations (ppm) stratified by metal

Metal	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	25th Percentile	75th Percentile	Minimum	Maximum
Pb	143.1	141.9	107.8	60.8	179.5	7.6	1839.6
Zn	187.9	194.1	144.7	105.4	212.1	13.1	4826.7
Cu	61.3	42.8	49.4	35.4	70.0	19.2	505.2
Fe	14269.1	4268.0	14033.6	11852.3	16407.6	1366.1	48545.1
Mn	295.3	170.6	279.2	218.5	350.9	52.8	4826.8

Potential Sources of Metal Contamination

We investigated several potential sources of metals in the soil: scrap yards, National Priorities List (NPL) sites, Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) facilities, bridges, manufacturing/industrial land use, new construction, above-ground subway routes, and roads. The influence of these sources on metal concentrations in soil samples were operationalized in two ways. For relatively uncommon features (e.g., scrap yards), a binary approach using fixed-distance buffers was employed (i.e., the soil sample was “near” or “not near” the source). For features which are relatively common or ubiquitous (e.g., roads, industrial land use) a continuous approach using either kernel density estimation (KDE; varying intensities based on density of the potential source) or simple linear density (e.g., miles of roadway per unit area) were used. ERSI ArcGIS (ArcMap version 10.7.1 and Pro version 2.8.3) was used for geospatial analyses.

The binary approach was applied to scrap yards, National Priorities List (NPL) sites, Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) sites, and bridges. We created an indicator for “scrap yard” that included: steel fabricators, scrap metal recycling centers, scrap metal dealers, salvage yards, household waste recyclers, and construction waste recycling centers. Scrap yards were located via Google Maps and geocoded. Proximity buffers of 400 m (~1/4 mile) were then created to identify nearby soil samples. NPL and TRI sites were downloaded from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), geocoded, and filtered to the study area.³⁶ Data on bridges were acquired by selecting only the appropriate features from the NYC Department of City Planning’s Linear Integrated Ordered Network (LION) dataset via the NYC Open Data portal.³⁷ Distance buffers of 800m (~ ½ mile) were generated to characterize soil sample proximity to each of the NPL, TRI, and bridge features. Buffer distance was selected based on overall size of the facility and identification by the EPA.³⁸

The continuous approach was applied to industrial/manufacturing land uses, new construction (since 2010), above-ground subway routes, and roads. Information about roads was derived from the LION dataset³⁷ with densities calculated as linear length of all roadways within a 400m buffer of each sample location divided by the area of the buffer. Tax lots where (1) the building class is manufacturing and industrial land use, as well as (2) new construction since 2010 were extracted from the Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output (MapPLUTO) dataset and

downloaded via NYC Open Data.³⁷ A continuous KDE surface was produced to quantify the density of new construction and industrial/manufacturing land use. It was parameterized using an 800 m bandwidth using building area as the “intensity” value (i.e., larger building area results in higher density estimates). Above-ground subway routes were derived from subway route and station data collected from the Baruch College Geoportal.³⁹ Routes were considered to be “above ground” if they were between two stations which were “at grade” or “elevated”. Routes between one above-ground and one below-ground station were bisected, with the section closer to the above-ground station designated as “above ground”. These were then converted into KDE surfaces using the same parameterization as the tax lots, however without an added “intensity” value (i.e., it is simply the length of the subway route which impacts the resulting density values).

Statistical Analyses

Metal concentration data were right skewed and therefore log-transformed (base 10) to better approximate a normal distribution and confirmed from QQ plots. We assessed the bivariate associations among variables using Spearman Rank Order correlations for two numeric variables (e.g. the correlation between the five metals and between each metal with numeric predictors) and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to determine the significance of differences in the metal levels by categorical predictor variables.

We assessed the association between each metal and hypothesized contamination sources using backwards stepwise multivariable linear regression with generalized estimating equations (GEE) to adjust for clustering of soil samples, since multiple samples were collected at most parks. All independent variables were included in the initial model and the variable with the largest p-value was removed and the model rerun repeatedly until all variables left had p-values < 0.20. Data analyses were conducted using SAS statistical software (version 9.4, Cary, NC).

Results

Generalized spatial trends of metal concentrations are shown in Figure 1. The highest metal levels were observed along the periphery of Brooklyn, in the North along the East River waterfront, in the Southwest, and in the East. Metal concentrations were highly right skewed, with two to three orders of magnitude difference between the minimum and maximum concentration for all five metals. Iron was found in the greatest abundance, while soil Cu concentrations were the lowest. Median concentrations for Pb, Zn, Cu, Fe, and Mn were 107.8 ppm, 144.7 ppm, 49.4 ppm, 14033.6 ppm, and 279.2 ppm, respectively (Table 3). All metals were significantly correlated with one another ($p < 0.001$), with the strength of the correlation ranging from a low of approximately $\rho = 0.3$ (Pb-Mn and Zn-Mn) to a high of $\rho = 0.7$ (Pb-Cu) (Table 4).

Table 4
Unadjusted associations for continuous and categorical variables

Variable	Total n	Pb		Zn		Cu		Fe		Mn	
		Measure	P-value								
Pb, S _p	1373	1		0.60	<0.001	0.66	<0.001	0.54	<0.001	0.32	<0.001
Zn, S _p		0.60	<0.001	1		0.60	<0.001	0.39	<0.001	0.32	<0.001
Cu, S _p		0.66	<0.001	0.60	<0.001	1		0.47	<0.001	0.36	<0.001
Fe, S _p		0.54	<0.001	0.39	<0.001	0.47	<0.001	1		0.64	<0.001
Mn, S _p		0.32	<0.001	0.32	<0.001	0.36	<0.001	0.64	<0.001	1	
Manufacturing/ Industrial Density, S _p		0.08	0.004	0.19	<0.001	0.25	<0.001	0.16	<0.001	0.13	<0.001
Road density, S _p		0.28	<0.001	0.28	<0.001	0.28	<0.001	0.11	<0.001	0.03	0.266
Subway Density, S _p		-0.01	0.617	0.02	0.573	-0.04	0.129	0.05	0.082	<0.01	0.944
Construction density, S _p		0.03	0.214	0.16	<0.001	0.20	<0.001	0.07	0.007	0.02	0.438
NPL, median (ppm)											
Yes	43	102.2	0.588	155.9	0.008	67.1	<0.001	15021.3	0.125	313.9	0.036
No	1330	107.8		144.2		49.0		13990.0		278.3	
TRI											
Yes	631	113.9	<0.001	160.8	<0.001	56.5	<0.001	14421.1	0.003	284.3	0.075
No	742	105.1		135.2		44.5		13844.6		277.6	
Scrap yard											
Yes	77	131.4	0.170	181.1	0.001	74.9	<0.001	15625.8	<0.001	333.8	<0.001
No	1296	107.0		143.8		48.7		13933.6		277.2	
Bridge											
Yes	440	147.0	<0.001	165.4	<0.001	58.0	<0.001	14446.0	0.008	282.2	0.310
No	933	94.9		140.7		46.4		13898.1		278.0	

Manufacturing/industrial land density and road density were significantly correlated with the five metals, with the strength ranging from $\rho = 0.08$ (manufacturing/industrial density with Pb) to $\rho = 0.28$ (road density with Pb, Cu, and Zn). The only exception was the correlation between road density and Mn, which was not significant. There was a significant positive correlation between construction density and Zn, Cu, and Fe ($\rho = 0.16$; $\rho = 0.20$; $\rho = 0.07$, respectively). Subway density was not significantly correlated with any of the metals. In addition, the concentration of Pb was significantly higher in areas near TRI facilities and bridges (median concentrations: 113.9 ppm versus 105.1 ppm, $p < 0.001$; 147.0 ppm versus 94.9 ppm, $p < 0.001$, respectively), as was Fe (14421.1 ppm versus 13844.6 ppm, $p = 0.003$; 14446.0 ppm versus 13898.1 ppm, $p = 0.008$, respectively). Copper concentration was significantly higher in locations near NPL and TRI sites, scrap yards, and bridges (Median concentration: 67.1 ppm versus 49.0 ppm, $p < 0.001$; 56.5 ppm versus 44.5 ppm, $p < 0.001$; 74.9 ppm versus 48.7 ppm, $p < 0.001$; 58.0 ppm versus 46.4 ppm, $p < 0.001$, respectively), as was Zn concentration (median concentration: 155.9 ppm versus 144.2 ppm, $p = 0.008$; 160.8 ppm versus 135.2 ppm, $p < 0.001$; 181.1 ppm versus 143.8 ppm, $p = 0.001$; 165.4 ppm versus 140.7 ppm, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Mn concentration was significantly higher near NPL sites and scrap yards (median concentration: 313.9 ppm versus 278.3 ppm, $p = 0.036$; 333.8 ppm versus 277.2 ppm, $p < 0.001$, respectively) (Table 4).

In the final backwards stepwise multivariable regression model, all predictor variables were positively associated with log-transformed metal concentrations except new building construction density which was significantly negatively associated with Pb ($\beta=-2.51E-08$, $p=0.030$) and Cu ($\beta=-1.23E-08$, $p=0.022$). Road density was significantly associated with Pb ($\beta = 0.008$, $p<0.001$), Cu ($\beta = 0.005$, $p<0.001$), Zn ($\beta = 0.005$, $p=0.026$), and Fe ($\beta = 0.004$, $p<0.001$) concentrations. Manufacturing/industrial density was significantly associated with Cu, Zn, and Fe ($\beta = 1.44E-08$, $p=0.035$; $\beta = 1.58E-08$, $p=0.048$; $\beta = 1.15E-08$, $p=0.014$, respectively). Above subway density was significantly associated with Pb and Zn concentration ($\beta = 0.047$, $p=0.042$; $\beta = 0.028$, $p=0.027$, respectively). Scrap yards were significantly associated with Mn concentration ($\beta = 0.075$, $p=0.019$) and NPL sites was significantly associated with Pb, Fe and Mn ($\beta = 0.134$, $p=0.004$, $\beta = 0.038$, $p=0.014$; $\beta = 0.057$, $p=0.037$, respectively). Finally, bridges nearby were significantly associated with Pb and Zn ($\beta = 0.106$, $p=0.003$; $\beta = 0.076$, $p=0.026$, respectively) (Table 5).

Table 5
Multivariable linear regression models looking at the adjusted association between metal concentrations (log transformed) and nearby potential sources of contamination

Variable	Pb		Cu		Zn		Fe		Mn	
	Beta	p	Beta	p	Beta	p	Beta	p	Beta	p
Road density	0.008	<0.001	0.005	<0.001	0.005	0.026	0.004	<0.001	0.002	0.053
Manufacturing/ Industrial Density	—	—	1.44E-08	0.035	1.58E-08	0.048	1.15E-08	0.014	8.23E-09	0.095
Construction density	-2.51E-08	0.030	-1.23E-08	0.022	—	—	-8.09E-09	0.053	-8.20E-09	0.062
Above ground subway density	0.047	0.042	—	—	0.028	0.027	—	—	—	—
Scrap yard within 400 meters (ref=none within 400 meters)	—	—	0.043	0.065	—	—	—	—	0.075	0.019
TRI*	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.025	0.149	—	—
NPL*	0.134	0.004	0.073	0.084	0.090	0.132	0.038	0.014	0.057	0.037
Bridge*	0.106	0.003	0.046	0.101	0.076	0.026	—	—	—	—
— = not significant										
*ref=none within 800										

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the spatial distribution and identify potential anthropogenic sources of Pb, Zn, Cu, Mn, and Fe contamination in surface soils throughout parks and greenspaces in Brooklyn, NY. Median concentrations of Pb, Zn, and Cu were approximately two to six times greater than background concentrations in the US, while Mn and Fe were slightly lower.⁴⁰ However, Pb, Zn, and Cu concentrations were similar, or in some cases a bit lower, than what was found in other soil characterization studies conducted in large urban areas, including in Chicago, IL (Pb=198 ppm; Zn=235 ppm; Cu=59 ppm),⁴¹ New Orleans, LA (Pb=656 ppm; Zn=373 ppm; Cu median= 32 ppm),⁴² and Syracuse, NY (Pb=130.0 ppm; Zn=178.7 ppm).⁴³ In our study we found that metal concentrations were highest along the periphery of Brooklyn near the waterways.

Roadway density and the presence of bridges within 800 m were strongly predictive of increased Pb, Cu, and Zn concentrations. In urban areas, roadway proximity has long been an environmental justice issue with racial minority groups or low-income households more likely to live in the vicinity of high volume roadways.⁴⁴ Increased metal concentrations observed in this study are likely a combination of legacy and active sources. Lead was a gasoline additive for most of the 20th century until it was banned for use in on-road vehicles in 1996.⁴⁵ However, Pb-based paint is still used on steel coatings such as bridges.⁴⁶ Copper and Zn are released into the environment through brake pad abrasion and tire wear, while Zn is used as an oil additive.² Elevated bridges likely disperse traffic-generated particulates over a greater distance as well as serve as potential source itself. In NYC, there have recently been proposals to cap a major bridge, located in a disadvantage area, to reduce air pollution to the surrounding community.⁴⁷

The U.S. EPA designates NPL sites to guide further investigation due to active release or threatened release of pollutants into the environment.⁴⁸ In multivariate models, all metal concentrations increased in the vicinity of a NPL sites. Adjusting for significant co-variables, Pb concentrations increased by 27% (139.8 versus 102.6 ppm) within 800 m of a NPL, while Zn concentrations increased by 23.1% (206.1 versus 167.4 ppm). Like roadways, proximity to NPL sites disproportionately affects low-income residents⁴⁹ and pollutants contained within hazardous waste sites can migrate to residential homes. A study of homes located within 800 m of a hazardous waste site had 27% greater Pb and 43% greater Zn concentrations in house dust compared to homes outside the 800 m buffer.⁵⁰ Remediation of NPL sites needs to consider the surrounding area as pollution can migrate offsite and potentially contaminate residential zoned land.

We identified twenty scrap metal recyclers operating in Brooklyn, many of which were in dense residential neighborhoods. Soil samples collected within 400 m of scrap yards had increased Cu and Mn concentrations even after controlling for other likely sources. At scrap metal recyclers, the metals are broken down by torch cutting, shredding, shearing, or crushing, usually in open scrap yard spaces. As a result, metal laden particulate may be transported into the surrounding community through the air and deposited onto soil. A study conducted in Houston, TX observed increased concentrations of Fe, nickel (Ni), chromium (Cr), Mn and Pb particulates in the vicinity of metal recyclers.⁵¹ In our analysis, Fe was associated with scrap yards in the crude association but not after adjusting for other potential sources of metals while Pb was not significantly associated with scrap yards in the crude or unadjusted associations; however, our data was non-specific and did not take into account the type of metals processed at the facility or wind direction.

There were several limitations in this study. There may have been some measurement error since we only collected samples from publicly accessible spaces, and our definition of potential sources may be inaccurate as we did not take into consideration wind patterns and the built environment which could impact the direction in which pollutants spread and where they accumulate. This measurement error, however, is likely non-differential, which would attenuate associations. Additionally, some of the associations may have been underpowered, especially for weaker associations, leading to type 2 error (failing to reject the null hypothesis when it is not true) and we looked at five different metals but did not adjust our alpha for multiple comparisons, which could have led to type 1 errors (rejecting the null when it is true). Furthermore, we did not collect data on all potential sources of metal contamination, which may have led to residual confounding. Soil samples were only collected from publicly accessible spaces and did not include residential soil samples. A previous NYC study found significantly lower Pb concentrations in community garden soils compared to home garden soils, likely the result of tillage and soil replacement.¹ Thus our findings cannot be generalized to soil in other types of greenspace, such as private gardens, which could be important sources of exposure. Future studies should consider including greenspaces and other soils not included here (e.g., lawns of public housing, private and semi-private spaces, etc.) in their sampling methodology. Finally, Brooklyn, NY may differ in important characteristics from other boroughs of NYC and from other cities, and therefore results of this study may not be generalizable to other locations.

Conclusions

Metal contamination throughout Brooklyn, NY is widespread and from a combination of legacy and active sources. This study found elevated levels of Pb, Cu, Fe, Mn, and Zn along the periphery of the borough and in the North along the East River waterfront where there are legacy sources of metal contamination. Although large manufacturing and industry have mostly left the area, smaller scrap metal recyclers are abundant and significantly increased Cu and Mn soil concentrations. In addition, NPL sites contributed to increased concentrations of all five metals within 800 m of the site. Roadways have long been established to be sources of urban pollution; however, in our study we also found the presence of bridges within 800 m were strongly also predictive of increased Pb, Cu, and Zn concentrations. Additional studies are needed to assess the health impacts and develop programs to protect the residents near and visitors of these green spaces.

Declarations

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Figures

Figure 1

Metal concentrations in soil. *Continuous surfaces of metal concentration estimates extrapolated from sample locations (bottom right map) using empirical Bayesian Kriging. All estimates are shown in deciles (first decile is lightest shade; 10th decile is darkest shade). Note that the surfaces were created for the visualization of generalized spatial trends and were not used for statistical analyses.*