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## Worms infect more poor Americans than thought

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By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Editor

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Roundworms may infect close to a quarter of inner city black children, tapeworms are the leading cause of seizures among U.S. Hispanics and other parasitic diseases associated with poor countries are also affecting Americans, a U.S. expert said on Tuesday.

Recent studies show many of the poorest Americans living in the United States carry some of the same parasitic infections that affect the poor in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, said Dr. Peter Hotez, a tropical disease expert at George Washington University and editor-in-chief of the Public Library of Science journal PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases.

Writing in the journal, Hotez said these parasitic infections had been ignored by most health experts in the United States.

"I feel strongly that this is such an important health issue and yet because it only affects the poor it has been ignored," Hotez said via e-mail.

He said the United States spent hundreds of millions of dollars to defend against bio-terrorism threats like anthrax or smallpox or avian flu, which were more a theoretical concern than a real threat at present.

"And yet we have a devastating parasitic disease burden among the American poor, right under our nose," Hotez said.

He noted a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, presented in November, found that almost 14 percent of the U.S. population is infected with *Toxocara* roundworms, which dogs and cats can pass to people.

"Urban playgrounds in the United States have recently been shown to be a particularly rich source of *Toxocara* eggs and inner-city children are at high risk of acquiring the infection," Hotez wrote, adding that this might be partly behind the rise in asthma cases in the country. Up to 23 percent of urban black children may be infected, he said.

"Because of its possible links to asthma, it would be important to determine whether covert toxocariasis is a basis for the rise of asthma among inner-city children in the northeastern United States," he added.

"Cysticercosis is another very serious parasitic worm infection ... caused by the tapeworm *Taenia solium*, that results in seizures and other neurological manifestations," Hotez wrote.

He said up to 2,000 new cases of neurological disease caused by tapeworms are diagnosed every year in the United States. More than 2 percent of adult Latinos may be infected, and with 35 million Hispanics in the United States, this could add up to tens of thousands of cases, Hotez said.

"In the hospitals of Los Angeles, California, neurocysticercosis currently accounts for 10 percent of all seizures presenting to some emergency departments," he wrote.

"We need to begin erasing these horrific health disparities," Hotez wrote in the paper, available online at [www.plosntds.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pntd.0000149](http://www.plosntds.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pntd.0000149).

(Editing by Alan Elsner)

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