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## More bedbugs are biting in Cincinnati

**The biting insects, which can live in mattresses and wall cracks, led to hundreds of complaints in the city last year. It's hard to determine the national scope of the problem.**

By P.J. Huffstutter

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Reporting from Cincinnati — In this Ohio city, it seems, it really is tough to stop the bedbugs from biting.

When complaints about the bloodsucking insects first trickled in to Cincinnati's public health department three years ago, officials assumed it was an anomaly -- or perhaps the overactive imagination of a bug-phobic public. After all, *Cimex lectularius* had all but vanished here by the 1950s because of the frequent use of DDT and other now-banned pesticides.

But that trickle of complaints has grown into a flood: A recent public survey found that 1 in every 6 people here has had a run-in with the biting bugs in the last 12 months.

Dozens of fire stations in Cincinnati have had to dump furniture or have their living quarters exterminated because firefighters unknowingly brought the eggs in on their boots or pant legs. Assisted-living complexes have spent tens of thousands of dollars on pest-control companies because, the thinking goes, visitors may have carried in the bugs on their purses or bags.

City health department officials said they now receive more frantic calls about the insects than about mice, rats and cockroaches combined.

If things continue, "we won't be able to keep up with the requests for inspections," said Camille Jones, assistant Cincinnati health commissioner and member of a city-county bedbug task force. "It's a problem that we expect to only get worse."

Cincinnati is not alone in its itchy woes. Reports of a well-covered public are coming in from college campuses, high-end hotels and even movie theaters across the country.

University officials at Texas A&M in College Station have flown in bedbug-sniffing dogs to root out the insects. The University of Florida in Gainesville reportedly has spent tens of thousands of dollars to clear dorm rooms and campus apartments of infestations.

In New York, there were 8,830 complaints about bedbugs in fiscal 2008, which ended June 30, up from 1,839 in 2005, according to the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

The bugs have shown up in unexpected places: An executive with Fox News told the New York Times that the Manhattan newsroom had to be exterminated for bedbugs and have its furniture replaced after an employee tracked the insects in from home.

Task forces aimed at eradicating the bugs and educating the public have been established in numerous states -- including Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota and Ohio.

In California, the bugs have become such a problem that the state's Department of Public Health started surveying local public health agencies in 2007 to get a handle on the scope of the infestation. Among the reasons cited for the return of the bugs: the DDT ban and an increase in international travel.

Often mistaken for ticks, adult bedbugs are about a quarter-inch long and reddish-brown. They are active mostly at night, and their bites can leave itchy welts on the skin.

During the daytime, they tend to hide near places where people sleep -- such as the seams of mattresses -- or in wall cracks or beneath furniture. The eggs are white, sticky and about the size of a speck of dust, so people can unknowingly spread them from room to room or even across town.

"Set a bag down on the carpet, or walk through an infested area, and it's almost impossible to tell that you're walking out with shoes or a bag that has bedbug eggs stuck to them," Jones said.

The bugs are not easy to kill. Most over-the-counter insecticides won't work, and clearing up the problem can take several treatments from a professional exterminator.

There's also a social stigma associated with the insect, but unlike some other vermin, bedbugs are attracted to blood -- such as a human's or an animal's -- not to garbage.

Renee Corea has battled the bugs in her New York apartment for months but shies away from talking to friends about the details.

"My home is clean. It's always been clean," said Corea, who helps run the online support and policy advocacy group [newyorkvsbedbugs.org](http://newyorkvsbedbugs.org). "I have

lost a lot of belongings because of this. The whole experience was emotionally draining and exhausting. It still is."

But figuring out the extent of the problem nationwide is difficult, entomologists say.

Part of the problem is that cash-strapped cities don't see the insect as a public-health priority. Unlike cockroaches, fleas and mosquitoes, bedbugs aren't known as disease carriers.

"Anyone can be at risk," said Greg Kesterman, director of environmental health for the Hamilton County public health agency, which includes Cincinnati.

Kesterman noted that the county received two complaints about bedbugs in 2003 and nearly 300 in 2008.

"This is not only an urban concern," Kesterman said. "This is everywhere."

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