Secret Cold War tests in US city raise concerns

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(AP)—Doris Spates was a baby when her father died inexplicably in 1955. She has watched four siblings die of cancer, and she survived cervical cancer.

After learning that the Army conducted secret chemical testing in her impoverished St. Louis neighborhood at the height of the Cold War, she wonders if her own government is to blame.

In the mid-1950s, and again a decade later, the Army used motorized blowers atop a low-income housing high-rise, at schools and from the backs of vehicles to send a potentially dangerous compound into the already-hazy air in predominantly black areas of St. Louis.

Local officials were told at the time that the government was testing a smoke screen that could shield St. Louis from aerial observation in case the Russians attacked.

But in 1994, the government said the tests were part of a biological weapons program and St. Louis was chosen because it bore some resemblance to Russian cities that the U.S. might attack. The material being sprayed was zinc cadmium sulfide, a fine fluorescent powder.

Now, new research is raising greater concern about the implications of those tests. St. Louis Community College-Meramec sociology professor Lisa Martino-Taylor's research has raised the possibility that the Army performed radiation testing by mixing radioactive particles with the zinc

cadmium sulfide, though she concedes there is no direct proof.

But her report, released late last month, was troubling enough that both U.S. senators from Missouri wrote to Army Secretary John McHugh demanding answers.

Aides to Sens. Claire McCaskill and Roy Blunt said they have received no response. Army spokesman Dave Foster declined an interview request from The Associated Press, saying the Army would first respond to the senators.

The area of the secret testing is described by the Army in documents obtained by Martino-Taylor through a Freedom of Information Act request as "a densely populated slum district." About three-quarters of the residents were black.

Spates, now 57 and retired, was born in 1955, delivered inside her family's apartment on the top floor of the since-demolished Pruitt-Igoe housing development in north St. Louis. Her family didn't know that on the roof, the Army was intentionally spewing hundreds of pounds of zinc cadmium sulfide into the air.

Three months after her birth, her father died. Four of her 11 siblings succumbed to cancer at relatively young ages.

"I'm wondering if it got into our system," Spates said. "When I heard about the testing, I thought, 'Oh my God. If they did that, there's no telling what else they're hiding.'"

Mary Helen Brindell wonders, too. Now 68, her family lived in a working-class mixed-race neighborhood where spraying occurred.

The Army has admitted only to using blowers to spread the chemical, but

Brindell recalled a summer day playing baseball with other kids in the street when a squadron of green Army planes flew close to the ground and dropped a powdery substance. She went inside, washed it off her face and arms, then went back out to play.

Over the years, Brindell has battled four types of cancer—breast, thyroid, skin and uterine.

"I feel betrayed," said Brindell, who is white. "How could they do this? We pointed our fingers during the Holocaust, and we do something like this?"

Martino-Taylor said she wasn't aware of any lawsuits filed by anyone affected by the military tests. She also said there have been no payouts "or even an apology" from the government to those affected.

The secret testing in St. Louis was exposed to Congress in 1994, prompting a demand for a health study. A committee of the National Research Council determined in 1997 that the testing did not expose residents to harmful levels of the chemical. But the committee said research was sparse and the finding relied on limited data from animal testing.

It also noted that high doses of cadmium over long periods of exposure could cause bone and kidney problems and lung cancer. The committee recommended that the Army conduct follow-up studies "to determine whether inhaled zinc cadmium sulfide breaks down into toxic cadmium compounds, which can be absorbed into the blood to produce toxicity in the lungs and other organs."

But it isn't clear if follow-up studies were ever performed. Martino-Taylor said she has gotten no answer from the Army and her research has turned up no additional studies. Foster, the Army spokesman,

declined comment.

Martino-Taylor became involved years ago when a colleague who grew up in the targeted area wondered if the testing was the cause of her cancer. That same day, a second colleague confided to Martino-Taylor that she, too, lived in the test area and had cancer.

Martino-Taylor decided to research the testing for her doctoral thesis at the University of Missouri. She believes the St. Louis study was linked to the Manhattan Atomic Bomb Project and a small group of scientists from that project who were developing radiological weapons. A congressional study in 1993 confirmed radiological testing in Tennessee and parts of the West during the Cold War.

"There are strong lines of evidence that there was a radiological component to the St. Louis study," Martino-Taylor said.

Blunt, in his letter to the Army secretary, questioned whether radioactive testing was performed.

"The idea that thousands of Missourians were unwillingly exposed to harmful materials in order to determine their health effects is absolutely shocking," the senator wrote.

McCaskill agreed. "Given the nature of these experiments, it's not surprising that Missouri citizens still have questions and concerns about what exactly occurred and if there may have been any negative health effects," she said in a statement.

Martino-Taylor said a follow-up health study should be performed in St. Louis, but it must involve direct input from people who lived in the targeted areas.

"Their voices have not been heard," Martino-Taylor said.