



# At a Glance

*Catalyst for Improving the Environment*

## Why We Did This Review

In February 2005, a representative of the Mercury Poisoning Project, a private organization that provides the public with information on the dangers of being exposed to mercury, identified concerns related to the ritual use of mercury. He asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Inspector General to evaluate EPA actions to address the problem. The representative also asked us to look into whether EPA had falsified the results of a study to measure mercury vapors, or had deliberately designed the study to fail.

## Background

Some people use mercury as part of folk remedies and religious practices to: attract luck, love, or money; protect against evil; or speed the action of spells. These uses may pose health risks because mercury vapors can cause health problems, such as damage to the nervous system.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional and Public Liaison at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:  
[www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2006/20060831-2006-P-00031.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2006/20060831-2006-P-00031.pdf)

## ***EPA Is Properly Addressing the Risks of Using Mercury in Rituals***

### **What We Found**

EPA staff and the Mercury Poisoning Project representative agree that the ritual use of mercury poses a health risk. Those who use mercury in folk remedies and religious practices, as well as others who live in buildings where such rituals are performed, may be exposed to mercury vapors. However, EPA and the representative differ in how EPA should address the risks. The representative believes EPA's actions are insufficient and wants EPA to:

- regulate the use of mercury; and
- be prepared to address what he believes are many homes throughout the United States that are contaminated by the ritual use of mercury.

On the other hand, EPA staff:

- believe that EPA regulations are not warranted at this time, and starting the process to establish such regulations would drive the practice underground; and
- have addressed the issue by providing community education and outreach, sponsoring research and environmental monitoring, and purchasing 63 portable mercury analyzers for measuring mercury levels.

We agree with EPA's assessment about regulating the ritual use of mercury, and believe the actions taken by EPA are consistent with current legal requirements.

In 2002 and 2003, EPA performed a study measuring the levels of mercury vapors from "spills" of differing amounts of mercury. One experiment simulated the ritual use of mercury. According to the representative, if the experiments had been performed differently, the results may have been more realistic. However, the report details the experiments as they were performed, and identifies the related assumptions. We found no evidence that the study was inadequately designed or the results falsified.

Although we are not recommending additional actions by EPA, we are reporting the results of our work to further emphasize that the ritual use of mercury poses a health risk.