

Case Study - Flint, Michigan: The Water Crisis that Should've Ended Eight Years Ago

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Photo courtesy of FLINT JOURNAL.

Young black children and toddlers stumble around their run-down homes constantly gasping for air and always feeling fatigue. When reaching up to the counter to grab a glass of water, their parents gently remind them to drink from a water bottle instead. It is confusing for these children—in all of the cartoons they watch, characters get to fill up nice, tall glasses with water from their kitchen sinks. These children know better than to question it, however, and they continue to sit in front of their cartoons, unaware of the severe asthma and developmental issues they are suffering from.

The Case:

[Flint, Michigan](#) is a low-income, BIPOC community that has borne the repercussions of [environmental racism](#) for the past eight years. With a government that failed to properly treat its municipal water system, the Flint community has experienced a Water Crisis since April 2014,

when Flint's government decided to switch its water source to the Flint River as a cost-savings measure. This cost-saving decision proved to be a result of the deeply embedded institutional, systemic, and historical racism seen in Flint's past.

Sadly, tens of thousands of Flint residents were immediately exposed to dangerous levels of lead, due to the untreated, corroding pipes in the Flint River. Even as discolored, foul-smelling water ran from the faucet and shower heads of people's homes, the poisoning continued for months without the government addressing the issue, and when they finally did, solutions were poor and inadequate.

Although it has been eight years since Flint's Water Crisis began, the community still suffers from the lead-infested water today. Surrounding cities with a primarily white and wealthy population have no issues with even the slightest resemblance to that of Flint's, so what makes the community so prone to this Water Crisis issue? Unfortunately, Flint is a classic example of environmental racism; the community, with a predominantly low-income, African American population, cannot afford to pay for alternative water sources, leaving Flint vulnerable to the government's decisions and unable to combat issues like this.

The Problem: Flint Citizens - Left Without Help

The citizens of Flint suffered the most from the Water Crisis, as they constantly battled a multitude of health issues that many other people in surrounding neighborhoods did not suffer from: rashes, hair-loss, strokes, fatigue, and development issues in children. Not only were these issues linked environmentally, it also proved to be an outcome of social inequities.

Environmentally, the lead-infested water gradually killed the marginalized community. In fact, a total of [twelve](#) were officially announced dead by the state of Michigan.



Devastatingly, the lead poisoning in Flint affected young children the most, stunting their development. In comparison to other children, Flint children experienced delays in speaking, language, social areas, and were likely to be cognitively impaired, along with being more prone to asthma and skin conditions. In fact, the issue became so severe that a school, [Cummings Great](#)

[Expectations](#), was created specifically to help discover solutions for the children affected by lead. Despite this clear pattern in Flint children, the government still provided no adequate solutions, and parents were left to constantly worry about the well-being of their children.

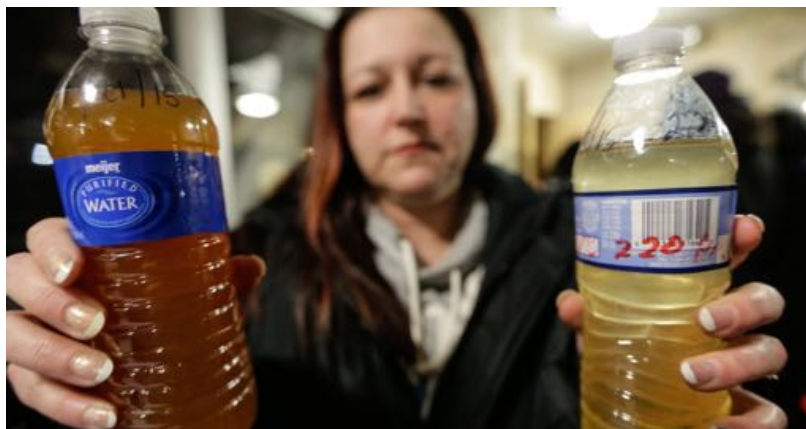
Moreover, because Flint residents did not trust the water, they turned off their water completely and solely relied on bottled water. Despite not using the water, the government still charged residents a minimum of \$800 for their water bills and an additional thousand dollars in water bottles. Being one of the poorest communities in the nation, it was extremely difficult for the Flint community to pay for these alternative water sources. The chronic stress families felt every day continued to grow as they were left alone to deal with the financial burden of the new water issue.

In an interview with Christina Murphy, a single mom of three, she expressed that the most difficult part of the Water Crisis was explaining the situation to her children. Murphy, unafraid of voicing her concern to the Flint government, asked government officials to tell her children they have been poisoned, that their legs will continue to hurt, that their nights will be filled with sweats and shakes, or that their “mommy can’t play with them the way she used to because she’s too sick.” Similar to many other citizens, Murphy was in utter disbelief that the government could overlook such a crisis for so long.

For years, community residents rallied in front of public officials, demanding their right to clean water. And for years their voices remained unheard. It was beyond frustrating for Flint residents, who soon lost all faith in their government.

The Culprits:

The Flint Government:



The Flint Government was a main culprit in the Water Crisis; even as health conditions worsened in Flint, they ignored the cries of desperation from its citizens and told the public that the lead-infested water was safe to drink. The government’s lousy solutions included handing out water filters to families, and for a small

amount of time, the government handed out free cases of water bottles. This still meant bathing in lead-infested water, however, and the filters were incapable of removing all traces of lead.

The Federal Government:

Although the officials in Michigan's government overlooked Flint's Water Crisis, it still took two years for the federal government to provide an appropriate response as well. The Obama administration was the first culprit to fail in response to the Water Crisis at the federal level, as President Obama did not declare a state of emergency for the situation until January 2016. In an effort to "mitigate" the anger in Flint, Obama visited the community, only to take a [singular sip of water](#) and announce that "this isn't a stunt," stressing that people could drink the water.

It was difficult to watch Obama's administration and their failure to take immediate action in Flint. This particular administration had a goal to restore security and opportunity within African American communities, and Flint was the ideal opportunity to do so with a population of 54% African Americans, officially classifying Flint as a minority community. Instead, the administration's lack of action stunted the community's growth, creating damaging effects. It soon became clear that Flint was a neglected, under-invested community. The administration's lack of urgency and understanding resulted in slow-moving solutions at the federal level; in turn, Michigan's state government mirrored the same type of response, conveying how environmental inequities are often [structural discriminations](#) against low-income, BIPOC communities, like Flint.



When the Trump administration came into office and also failed to take action, the issue lost its momentum. The Water Crisis went unnoticed by the media, due to President Trump's lack of focus on the issue. With President Biden in office, he [pointed](#) to Flint, Michigan as evidence for the nation's collapsing infrastructure when trying to pass his bill. However, President Biden has not taken direct action to speed up Flint's final stages to replace the lead-infested pipes.

The Accused:

In the summer of 2018, fifteen government officials were [charged](#), including the former governor of Michigan, Governor Rick Snyder. The severity of the situation was highlighted through these charges, as some officials were given the verdict of involuntary manslaughter.

[Lawsuits](#) were first filed in the summer of 2015 by the [Concerned Pastors for Social Action](#)

and other activists; however, the [case](#) was dismissed by a circuit judge. Four months later, Michigan Attorney General, Bill Schuette, began an independent review of the Flint Crisis.

The case was open for years, but at the beginning of 2021, Governor Snyder and eight others were officially criminally charged; however, till this date, trials are still taking place to potentially [dismiss](#) charges, and there is no set time as to when these trials will end.

The Bigger Picture:

Unfortunately, Flint's Water Crisis is far from being an anomaly, as it is only one of many U.S. cities that has suffered from unsafe water. Across the nation, both major cities and small towns are left with drinking water that is contaminated by industries, aging infrastructure, and weakening government oversight.

For example, on the [Navajo reservation](#) in Arizona and New Mexico, uranium mines leached radioactive waste into water sources. The potential health effects include lung cancer from inhaling radioactive particles, as well as bone cancer and impaired kidney function from exposure to radionuclides in the water. In 2007, the EPA created a [Five-Year-Plan](#) in efforts to remove all of the mines from the Navajo



reservation. After not achieving its goals, a [Ten-Year-Plan](#) was enacted by the EPA. This Ten-Year-Plan aims to have the mines cleared by 2029, but this also means the Navajo reservation is left without clean water for over two decades.

In [Newark, New Jersey](#), lead more than five times the [EPA action level](#) has leached from aging pipes, mirroring the situation in Flint. For five years, government officials ignored the crisis in Newark, leaving the marginalized community to suffer from different health diseases like hair loss and skin issues.

Newark resident, Anthony Diaz, emotionally voiced his anger: “How do you claim this to be an equitable or just society when you cannot do the basic thing, to provide water? You always hear this phrase, ‘Water is life.’ And you start thinking about it: plastic water bottles is not life, highly filtered water is not life. What’s the catalyst that’s going to change all this?”

Flint, Michigan; the Navajo reservation; and Newark, New Jersey are merely a fraction of U.S. cities deprived of clean water. In all three of these underserved communities, the government is the primary culprit for neglecting the residents and overlooking the severity of the issue.

What’s happening now?

On March 17th, 2017, the EPA provided [\\$100 million](#) from the federal funding to accelerate and expand the city’s replacement of lead service lines in Flint and to make other water infrastructure improvements. At the end of 2017, the city identified and replaced more than 6,000 lead service lines.

In an [agreement filed by the parties](#) of the 2017 settlement, Flint committed to using a data-driven approach to locate the remaining lead pipes delivering drinking water to residents’ homes. The city used a statistical model—already proven effective in earlier efforts—to guide its selection of homes for service line excavations in 2019. This approach increased efficiency and helped to ensure all remaining lead pipes were identified and removed.

As of now, the service line replacement program in Flint is scheduled to finish later this year. In January, the Flint government announced that approximately 95% of pipe excavations in residential homes had been identified and were being replaced. To guarantee the community continues to receive clean water in the future, Michigan adopted the nation’s toughest lead rules for drinking water. Water suppliers are required to replace an average of 5% of their lead service lines every year for the next 20 years, and starting in 2025, the action levels for lead are being lowered from 15 ppb to 12 ppb.

At last, the vulnerable community of Flint is rightfully receiving the solutions it deserved eight years ago. As the community moves forward with its replacements, Flint residents hope that this is a turning point for the city’s deeply embedded institutional, systemic, and historical racism.

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