

Detroit's Water Austerity: Lack of Household Water, Contamination, Potential Public Health Crisis

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[A report based](#) on morbidity data from Henry Ford Hospital and the Detroit Health Department from 2012 to 2017 tracked the trends between waterborne illnesses and year. The drastic increase in levels of waterborne diseases showed links between the lack of household water and access to sanitation caused by repeated water service interruptions and the risk of waterborne illness.

In 2017, the City of Detroit alone faced 171 cases of hepatitis A. This was more than all the rest of Wayne County with 142 cases, and topped any other county in Michigan. In total, over 500 cases were reported statewide in 2017, including 25 deaths.

Contamination worsens

After Detroit's major flood spells, namely the devastating flood of August 11, 2014, which caused at least \$1 billion in damage, residents waited years for compensation from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), if they received it at all. When FEMA assistance was received, it often barely amounted to a third of total damages. Floods in subsequent years continued to damage Detroiters' homes. Despite one district 4 resident's own costs, amounting in the "tens of thousands," the homeowner received far less than the [average compensation](#) amount of \$4,000. Many homeowners sustained tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage.

"Anything happens at my house, I have to pay out of pocket — and it usually is a large expense. Next summer, it's like I just want to fill up the basement with concrete and not have a basement anymore."

Meanwhile, toxic mold and fecal contamination of homes continues to go untreated, compounding the public health issues caused by shutoffs and home demolitions. Michele, a small business owner and urban gardener from the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood, described great concern dealing with a basement that "floods so much, I have to be concerned with mold."

The issue started for her and many others she knows following the great rainstorms in 2014. She affirms the problem is only spreading, telling this reporter,

"Not only are people's basements being flooded, but their streets are being flooded in areas where they never had it."

Yet few in her East Side Detroit neighborhood, characterized by a high degree of home abandonment and situating a long-closed down school, are immune from shut offs and floods. Many of the young woman's neighbors are elderly homeowners, unfortunately representing a high proportion of long time residents most negatively affected by the city's history of economic tumult.

Elderly Detroiters Especially At Risk

Seniors are particularly burdened with the consequences of Detroit's water woes. Detroit's seniors represent a high proportion of homeowners in the city, and also tend to be much poorer, more likely to be disabled, and the caretaker of grandchildren or other extended family members in comparison to seniors nationwide.

In addition to the financial costs of Detroit's infrastructure woes, elderly Detroiters, seniors are more at risk when fixed incomes and rising maintenance and utility costs wrap them in a tighter bind.

In addition to water shut offs, recurrent flooding has further endangered seniors' health and wellbeing. Given the effects of major neighborhood floods, namely the summer floods of 2014 and 2016, seniors were especially neglected and/or undersupported.

Seniors cleaning up toxins, suffering from breathing ailments, and suffering from shut off water have been the unsettling theme of myriad reports since 2014.

A recent [study](#), analyzing the reports of a number of Detroit seniors, confirmed the gravity of the consequences of this neglect.

In the study, an East side woman recounted futile attempts at receiving clean up assistance, despite the presence of black mold:

"I still do have some black mold left," she said in a 2017 interview. "And then I had to find someone to clean up the black mold, and that's another problem. Who cleans up black mold? I got in touch with [volunteers] in 2014. I still haven't had any help from them."

Another resident, arguing that the city "hasn't cleaned the first mess up," before a subsequent major flood added another crisis in junction to a first one. Calling for long sought after city assistance in supporting his elderly neighbors, his sentiments echoed those of another elderly Detroiter on the city's Northeasternmost side

I have people that can't go anywhere...can't leave their house," he said. "[At least] I am the fortunate one because I have somewhere else to go to."

Human toll of mass shutoffs

The mass water shutoffs, and later, the heaviest instances of Detroit neighborhood flooding began as the emergency manager sought to privatize or regionalize the water system as part of the 2013 Detroit bankruptcy. Since the bankruptcy, recurring flooding and drainage fees have compounded the issues of water shutoffs, expenses that comprise the bulk of rate

increases. These drainage fees, newly tacked onto Detroiters' already high water bills in July 2017, were allegedly to help "pay for sewage infrastructure," facilities that, [according to the city](#), would "reduce street flooding and basement backups."

A significant reason for the increasing costs is the outdated combined sewage overflow system that mixes runoff and wastewater in large CSO reservoirs that overflow into the rivers when the system is turgid. During the 2014 storm, [10 billion gallons](#) of sewage went into the river system. This design flaw caused a federal takeover via the 1977 Clean Water Act, with the mandate's enforcement used to justify the tacked-on drainage fee.

Yet the drainage fees, which are separate from the rest of the bill, make up a disproportionately large addition to already over-inflated water bills. Urban farms, gardens and homes have still been affected by the fees, despite diverting water away from sewer systems, as proposed green infrastructure plans claim to do.

These fees ultimately represent an illegal charge on Detroit residents.

Public health crisis in effect

Because of limited access to water, as well as exposure to flooding, the issues with water and infrastructure caused by austerity in Detroit have led to a public health crisis similar to what was seen in Flint.

A study by the We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective and Henry Ford Health System documented [that since 2015](#), the rate of water-borne contamination in Detroit has skyrocketed, with cases of campylobacter, shigellosis, giardiasis and other gastrointestinal infections seeing a drastic increase in 2016 and 2017, the highest rates observed since 2012.

The study documented a clear and positive relationship between the water shutoffs and waterborne diseases, with patients in Detroit suffering from waterborne diseases 1.48 times more likely to be living on a block where water shutoffs have occurred. The report, citing research from an [April 2017 study](#) by the Henry Ford Global Health Initiative, coincided with earlier findings that had projected a 1.55 times greater likelihood of diagnosis of a water-related illness for neighborhoods that have faced shutoffs. The report, citing the American Public Health Association, highlighted that shigellosis deaths occur in the greatest frequency among children-yet the disease, at best producing no major, chronic problems in healthy adults, will also manifest its symptoms more severely in seniors as well.

A number of community groups in Detroit, such as We the People and Detroit Jews for Justice-have mobilized community support and neighborhood assistance to seniors suffering from the effects of water austerity. Yet their patronage reveals a concerning gap of social support and service provision from municipal agencies, whose failure to respond to the needs of their poorest, yet most loyal residents in a city with one of the highest rates of poverty for both families and seniors.

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