Environmental Racism: Flint Water Crisis

SSW WP 701

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February 18, 2020

**Problem**

Flint, Michigan has a rich history as a pioneer in the United States. In 1908, General Motors (GM) was founded in Flint and the city became a hub for automotive manufacturing during he transition from horse drawn to automotive vehicles (Lazovic, 2016). The automotive industry provided opportunity for community members in Flint to play a vital role in developing the American labor union with representatives in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada that gained higher wages and pensions for automotive workers (Lazovic, 2016). Despite Flint’s plentiful beginning, starting in 1960 Flint has faced several crises from economic depression, increased crime rates, and lead contamination in the public water supply (Lazovic, 2016).

The water crisis began in 2011 when the state of Michigan took over Flint’s finances after an audit revealed a $25 million deficit (CNN, 2019). In attempts to save money water that was once taken from Detroit would stop and water would be supplied to Flint residents from Flint river while a more permanent pipeline is under construction. Almost immediately following the switch in 2014, residents reported changes in the color, taste, and smell of the water running from their faucets (CNN, 2019).

**Academic Literature and Public Discourse**

The public discourse from community members regarding the lead contamination conflicts with the discourse coming from political powers. Nakiya Wakes (2017), long time resident of Flint provides testimony on the impact of the crisis on her and her family. Nakiya advocates and volunteers on behalf of her family and larger community after suffering negative consequences from the contamination including the miscarriage of her twins, body rashes on her daughter, and increased behavioral problems at school for her son (Wakes, 2017). In her testimony, she reports numerous counts of the similar experiences.

Academic literature supports the urgency of the situation. From the start of the switch, April 25, 2014, to December 31, 2016 a search on Boston University library of “Flint water crisis” yields 5,257 results. Scholar and journalist Marc Lamont Hill published *Nobody: causalities of America’s war on the vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and beyond* an analysis on race and class and the alarming trend to further exploit groups of the most vulnerable. Further literature examines white innocence and political geography in relation to the water crisis, racial and economic segregation in Flint, and environmental justice (Inwood, 2018; Mohai, 2017; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Despite the overwhelming public outcry, public discourse among politicians was the opposite. In the seven months following the switch officials increased chlorine intake to flush the pipes, issued numerous boil water advisories at the presence of disease-causing bacteria, and cautioned against the intake of water for the elderly and children all while maintaining the water supply was safe for general population (CNN, 2019).

**Changing Definitions**

The way in which officials define the water problem in Flint has changed overtime. For its inception, the problem in Flint was defined as an economic problem due to Flint’s $25 million deficit. In October of 2014, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) shift the definition from financial to a low level public health concern after tests reveal increased presence of disease-causing bacteria in tap water is due to bacteria buildup that can be remedied by increasing the chlorine content to flush the pipes (CNN, 2019). After numerous studies done by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on lead levels in residential zones and a study done out of Hurley Medical Center on the rising blood lead levels in children the city of Flint declared a state of emergency on December 14, 2015 (City of Flint, 2016; CNN, 2019). In January of 2016, Michigan governor Rick Snyder asked President Barack Obama to declare Flint a disaster in order to access $55 million dollars of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds, however Obama declares it a state of emergency allocating $5 million in aid (CNN, 2019). Flint still has a state of emergency issued by their current mayor to “let the public know the citizens and city of Flint are not out of the woods and still need help” (City of Flint, 2016).

**Task Force Definition**

Our group will define the water crisis in Flint in relations to environmental racism. The discourse of community members, advocates, and members of academia support the narrative of environmental injustices and the lack of accountability reflected in policies (Burke, 2016; Inwood, 2018; Logan, 2018; Masten, Davies, & McElmurry, 2016; Mohai, 2017; Sadler & Highsmith, 2016; Wakes, 2017).

**Scope**

The effects of the water crisis beginning on April 25, 2014 are severe and long-lasting impacting Flint residents to this day.

**Severity**

The water crisis in Flint affected everybody that lived in the city. Flint, and Michigan’s focus on cost saving and Flint’s inability to upgrade the infrastructure due to declining revenue stemming from the closure of the once booming GM factories and subsequent shift of the population allowed lead to leach into the water supply (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). The decisions of local and state politicians exposed more than 100,000 Flint residents to toxic lead levels in their tap water. Of that number, at least 9,000 children under the age of six were exposed to lead levels that will most likely impact their health including impaired cognition, behavioral disorders, hearing problems, and delayed puberty (CNN, 2019; Inwood, 2018). It’s important to note that while Flint was experiencing increased poverty and infrastructure decline, the affluent suburbs, which are overwhelmingly white, continued to prosper (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Likewise, while both residents and businesses, GM, were raising alarms in response to the water crisis, the people of Flint waited until 2017 for the lead levels to meet EPA standards as opposed to the six months it took GM to secure a clean water source (Logan, 2018). The lead levels have since stabilized and as mentioned above are meeting national limits however further health consequences are lingering.

**Correlates of the Problem**

There were structural challenges leading up with the water crisis, lawsuits, and professional ethics that were all affected by the problem. Burke (2016) reflects on the implications within professional ethics. There were state, city, and federal officials that disagreed on the urgency of the situation at different times. Burke (2016) discussed dissonance between the ethics and morals that are within the science profession and research funding. Hurley Medical Center studies led by pediatrician Dr. Mona Hana-Attisha and EPA studies provided the catalyst for MEDQ and other local actors to acknowledge the health risk and begin to take action (Burke, 2016; Masten, Davies, & McElmurry, 2016; Mohai, 2016). With the public ringing alarm bells that are not received the population also dramatically decreased during the crisis putting further financial stress on Flint that delays infrastructure improvements (Sadler & Highsmith, 2016). Of the residents that stayed in Flint during the crisis they were exposed to numerous health complications. Between June 2015 to January 2016 Flint reported 87 cases of Legionnaires' disease, 12 of which were fatal. The lack of accountability on the political level prompted 7 class action lawsuits filed against the state of Michigan, the city of Flint and specifica political actors claiming exposure to tainted water from June 2015 to January 2017. Additionally, several state officials faced criminal charges for willful negligence of duty, and involuntary manslaughter in connection with the Legionnaires' outbreak (CNN, 2019).

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