



Water Shutoffs and COVID-19 in Detroit

The M-LEEd Center's Community Engagement Core (CEC) increases awareness and understanding of environmental health research.

Stakeholder Advocacy Board members include:

- Community Health and Social Services
- Detroit Health Department
- Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation
- Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice
- Eastside Community Network
- Ecology Center
- Henry Ford Health System
- Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition
- We the People of Detroit



The Human Right to Water

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized that access to clean, safe drinking water is a human right, essential to the realization of all human rights. Lack of access to safe and affordable water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities has a devastating impact on the health of billions of people, and has consequences for other human rights.

Detroit's Water Crisis

As detailed in a recent publication by Moody, Easley, and Sissen (2021), between 2014 and 2020, Detroit shut off water for an estimated 170,000 residents. Recognizing the incredibly detrimental impact of water shutoffs during a pandemic, an executive health order issued by Governor Whitmer in March 2020 urged the city to return water service to its residents. Despite this health order, around 10,000 Detroit homes were estimated to be experiencing water shutoffs as late as July 2020.

Those shutoffs disproportionately impacted non-Hispanic Black residents of the Detroit Metropolitan Area (DMA). Non-Hispanic Black residents make up 90% or more of the 9 ZIP codes that experienced the greatest number of cumulative water shutoffs¹. This means a greater public health burden for non-Hispanic Black residents. In addition to health concerns, lack of water can mean risk of home seizure, as well as potential seizure of children by Child Protective Services.¹



Implications for COVID-19

Lack of access to clean running water during a pandemic exacerbates an already devastating situation. Shutoffs prevent individuals from performing activities that help prevent COVID-19 such as hand washing or laundering reusable masks. Water shutoffs have previously been shown to be significantly related to water-related illnesses, and impede the ability to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

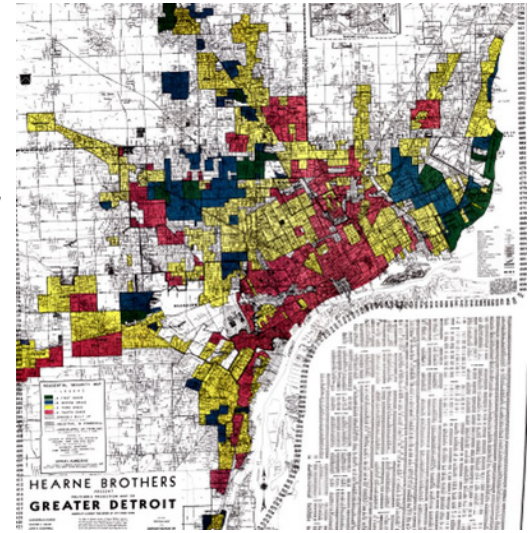
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Historical Context of Detroit's Water Crisis

Important insights behind Detroit's water crisis can be found in the long history of racial residential segregation. Beginning in the early to mid 1900s, social policies including redlining, inequitable lending practices, tax foreclosures, and other forms of housing discrimination, resulted in Detroit's status as one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States.¹ From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Federal Housing Authority and other insurance programs subsidized mortgages and loans to suburban middle and working-class White households, but substantially less financial support to future non-Hispanic Black homeowners. This contributed to a majority non-Hispanic Black Detroit, surrounded by a White suburban ring. Disinvestment in predominantly non-Hispanic Black neighborhoods in Detroit has contributed to the current landscape of water access and water shutoffs.



Map of Redlining in Detroit
Courtesy of Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, University of Richmond, Virginia Tech, University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins University

The Fight for Water in Detroit

The rich and powerful history of activism in Detroit has supported the emergence of a broad coalition of organizations working actively to address the water shutoffs and assure the right to water access for Detroit residents and beyond. The Detroit Black Lives Matter Movement, ACLU, Allied Media Project, Boggs Center, Brightmoor Food Pantry, Detroit Justice Center, Detroit People's Platform, Detroit People's Water Board Coalition, Detroit Community Research Collective, Fresh Water Future, Global Health Initiative at Henry Ford Hospital, Michigan Poverty Law Program, NAACP, Sierra Club Environmental Justice Office and We the People of Detroit are working collaboratively to address water rights on local, state, regional and global levels. These organizations have designed efforts to increase community awareness and engage residents. These collaborative efforts have been, and continue to be, key in linking water shutoffs to larger public health issues.

Moody, Easley and Sissen note "The immediate actions required are reconnecting household water, providing affordable housing, redirecting taxpayer funds to benefit the public good, and government transparency and accountability. We suggest that future research efforts focus on work that increases public awareness of the systematic linkages among water shutoffs, public health, racist social structures, housing patterns and government policies" (2021, p. 1).

For additional information about water access please see We the People of Detroit at <https://www.wethepeopleofdetroit.com/>

The University of Michigan Lifestage Environmental Exposures and Disease Center (M-LEEaD) Community Engagement Core (CEC) promotes collaboration among UM environmental health researchers and communities to advance knowledge of environmental health issues that affect community members in Detroit and Southeast Michigan. Support for this research was provided by grant P30ES017885 from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institutes of Health. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

1. Moody, H., Easley, E., & Sissen, M. (2021). Water Shutoffs During COVID-19 and Black Lives: Case Study Detroit. *Environmental Justice*, 00(00), 1-6.
2. University of Richmond, Virginia Tech, University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins. (n.d.). Redlining Map of Detroit. *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*.

