



# Water Shutoffs and COVID-19 in 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 shutoffs<sup>1</sup>. 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.<sup>1</sup>



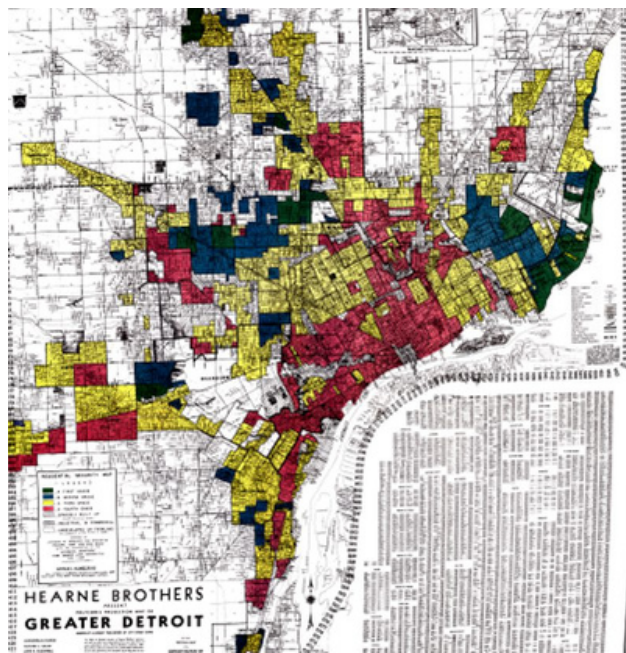
## Implications for COVID-19

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.



## Historical Context of Detroit's Water Crisis

Detroit's water crisis is shaped by a long history of unfair housing policies. In the early to mid-1900s, rules about who could get loans, where people could live, and how neighborhoods were rated led to deep divides between different parts of the city.<sup>1</sup> From the 1930s to the 1950s, federal programs helped many White families buy homes in the suburbs, while offering far less support to others. As a result, Detroit became home to many people with fewer housing options, while nearby suburbs received more resources. Over time, this unequal investment led to big differences in things like water access. Today, some Detroit neighborhoods face more water shutoffs because of this history.



Map of Unfair Housing Policies in Detroit  
Courtesy of the University of Richmond, Virginia Tech, University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins University

## The Fight for Water in Detroit

The rich and powerful history of championing causes 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. Detroit BLM, 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, MPLP, NAACP, Sierra Club, 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 linkages among water shutoffs, public health, [discriminatory] 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/>

Please see [http://mleead.umich.edu/Coec\\_Fact\\_Sheets.php](http://mleead.umich.edu/Coec_Fact_Sheets.php) for the citations included in this factsheet.

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