

WATER SHUT OFFS IN DETROIT:

A Case Study of Environmental and Reproductive Justice

By Elizabeth A. Mosley, MPH, Cortney K. Bouse, MPH, and
Kelli Stidham Hall, PhD, MS

The claim that “water is a human right, not a privilege,” might summon up for those of us in the West an image of endless lines of women and children in the Global South carrying home vessels of water from far away wells. But here in the U.S., we have our own water crisis, in Detroit, Michigan.

The *Lancet* defined a global water crisis this way: “Access to clean, affordable water is an issue that joins the challenges of providing a sanitary infrastructure for poor, rich, and the middle class in Detroit, Delhi, Lagos, and Johannesburg alike.”¹

The local aspect of the larger crisis is occurring in the once-bustling Motor City located in the heartland of the United States, a country that boasts the world’s largest economy at \$16,800 billion gross domestic product.² Despite so much wealth, Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) officials shut off water to over 50,000 households in 2014 alone.³ Approximately 36,000 families still did not have access to safe water in spring 2016.

The United Nations recently declared, “Disconnection of water services [in Detroit] because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water.”⁴ The water shutoffs also violate the right to reproductive freedom as outlined at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994.⁵

Leaders in the reproductive justice movement have called for the centering of race and women of color’s experiences in the reproductive rights movement.⁶ They emphasize that a primary and enduring reproductive struggle for low income and women of color is oppressive living conditions that are unsuitable to motherhood. Using the framework of reproductive justice, this piece explores how the Detroit water shutoffs both parallel and perpetuate reproductive injustices sustained by marginalized women around the world.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

As one of the most racially segregated cities in the U.S., and the largest to ever file for bankruptcy, Detroit serves as a striking example of the consequences of exploitative capitalism, racism, and sexism.⁷ In 1950, the city was home to a racially diverse population of over 1.8 million; today there are 700,000 residents, 82% of whom are African American.⁸

In the wake of globalization and automation of the auto industry, half of Detroit’s residents are now unemployed and nearly 40% live below the poverty line.⁹ Suburbanization of jobs, subsequent White flight, and race-based residential segregation have isolated African American (and Latino) residents in high-poverty communities.¹⁰ Many of these communities have suffered from withdrawal of public services, a process others have called “planned shrinkage.”¹¹ The list of cut-backs is extensive and devastating, and includes emergency medics, fire fighters, schools, public transit, and streetlights.¹² Water shutoffs are simply the most recent violation residents have experienced.

WATER SHUTOFFS AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Detroit’s acute and chronic environmental and social stressors carry significant implications for reproductive health and justice. For example, the city’s maternal mortality ratio is now 131 deaths per 100,000 live births, a much higher rate than





View of Woodward Avenue, Detroit, Michigan.

other cities and countries in the developed world. Maternal mortality rates in Detroit are over three times the national average in the U.S., and nearly as high as rates in South Africa.¹³ Living in the context of racism and poverty also carries indirect health consequences due to biological and psychological wear and tear that accumulates over a woman's life and increases her risk of giving birth prematurely and of having a low-weight baby. Indeed, the more concentrated the racial segregation, the more dramatic the racial health disparities.

In Detroit, infant mortality rates are racialized and disastrously high.¹⁴ Rates for African American women are 15 per 1,000 live births compared to 8 per 1,000 for White women.¹⁵ The recent water shutoffs are likely to worsen this situation as diarrheal diseases caused by inadequate access to safe water and sanitation are a leading cause of mortality for children under 5.¹⁶

Furthermore, official discourse surrounding the water shutoffs degrades racially and economically marginalized women. Politicians, policy makers, and bureaucrats deny residents the dignity and agency due to persons reacting to unjust living

conditions. Instead, they label people who cannot pay their water bills “delinquent customers” who simply “opt not to” pay.¹⁷ DWSD officials have consistently targeted low income families, and some have suggested the implementation of conditional requirements—monitoring of both water consumption and household finances—in order to reactivate service for low income customers.¹⁸ These officials and others do not make such patronizing suggestions regarding corporate account holders, whose outstanding debts are actually much larger.

When low-income customers are infantilized in this way, treated simply as financially irresponsible, many African American women recognize the pattern. Recipients of public assistance were portrayed similarly as lazy, greedy, and neglectful welfare queens and crack mothers.¹⁹ In the same way, media outlets have myopically blamed Detroit's decline on corrupt city officials rather than on structural forces of capitalism and racism.

In addition, the media has justified cuts to vital public services as an unavoidable response to the city's declining tax base.²⁰ From a reproductive

justice perspective, human rights violations in Detroit, including water shutoffs, constitute deliberate assaults against low income communities of color in the interests of White-controlled financial institutions including Bank of America.²¹

Ultimately, low income women are caught in a treacherous double bind. On one hand, like all women, they are socialized and expected to perform the important but unpaid reproductive labor of taking care of children and home: 3 out of 5 children in Detroit are being raised in single mother households.²² On the other hand, women are denied virtually all means of support for childrearing. Mass incarceration of African American men has signifi-

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cantly destabilized families and contributed to the prevalence of single mother households.²³

Secondly, women continue to be segregated into lower-paying feminine occupations (such as child care, teaching, and nursing) and, on average, only make 80% of the salary of men in comparable jobs.²⁴

Third, women who rely on public assistance are generally accused of scamming the system and are criticized for “not working” as though childrearing and domestic labor is not work. Again, large businesses that receive tax breaks, subsidies, and other forms of “corporate welfare” are never subject to the same scrutiny.²⁵

Finally, significant and ongoing budget cuts mean women are denied critical resources necessary for their families’ survival, including water, housing, and food.²⁶ Each of these situations is exacerbated for women of color, whose partners are more likely to be incarcerated, who experience racial discrimination in access to education and employment, whose reproduction is scrutinized, and who are disproportionately affected by cuts to social services. In the end, it becomes impossible to keep up with rising costs of living; water alone now costs the average inner city family \$160 per month.²⁷

THE WAY FORWARD

Access to water, a requisite of an adequate standard of living, has been identified as a basic human right worldwide.²⁸ Lack of water access in Detroit is a reproductive justice issue. Discussions about and responses to this water crisis must reflect the complex social, cultural, and political processes that created and sustain them. By failing to acknowledge the legacies of deindustrialization or the impacts of ongoing racial and gendered oppression, we are likely to misunderstand the complicated origins of and solutions to the water crisis in Detroit.

Echoing the famous words of Audre Lorde, urban planner Jamie Peck once proclaimed, “We cannot use capitalist tools to dismantle the crises created by capitalism in Detroit.”²⁹ Yet the city’s Emergency Manager is still considering various bids to privatize the DWSD, which is likely to further increase water rates for Detroit residents.³⁰ This not only fails to address the fundamental and intersecting roles of capitalism and racism, but will also perpetuate health disparities shouldered by marginalized women and children.

Strategies to remedy such a public health challenge must originate from within those communities most affected. These are likely to begin with efforts to increase employment opportunities in the city, particularly for marginalized women.

Finally, activists and academics alike have argued that investment in basic social infrastructures, including health care, education, and housing with adequate water and sanitation services, is most likely to produce sustainable improvements to reproductive health and equity across the globe.³¹ Such macro efforts will require patience and a significant paradigm shift, yet they are more likely to result in equitable and sustainable improvements for Detroit’s most vulnerable residents.

NOTES

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