



Center for Social Development

Brown School

| OCTOBER 2019 | CSD POLICY BRIEF 19-41 |

Lessons and Policy Implications from the Flint Water Crisis

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The results of the Flint water crisis were disastrous. Though a desire to reduce public spending motivated the decisions that culminated in the water crisis, the economic costs of pipe replacement and health care have far exceeded any initially projected savings. Furthermore, permanent damage has been done to Flint's most vulnerable residents, the city's water system, and residents' trust in government institutions.

Though some public officials have been charged with individual crimes related to their roles in the Flint water crisis, the political system that enabled it remains intact. The decision to draw city water from the highly corrosive Flint River—and the 18 months of refusal to switch back to the Detroit water system—was made by an austerity-driven emergency manager whose mandate was to cut city expenses without the input of elected city leaders. The emergency management (EM) system severely limited Flint residents' recourse when their water quality dramatically declined (Krings, Kornberg, & Lane, 2018).

The purpose of this brief is to describe the shortcomings of Michigan's EM system and inform policymakers on potential improvements for its eventual replacement. We first frame the EM system within the logic and practice of urban austerity politics. Next, we demonstrate how emergency manager policies are not race-neutral approaches to solving urban financial crises. Rather, historically oppressed groups—and African Americans in particular—tend to absorb its costs. We conclude by considering what the Flint water crisis suggests about policy mechanisms that might prevent future environmental health crises, outlining the role of social workers in this process.

The Problem of Urban Austerity

A central feature of recent forms of neoliberal governance in the United States is the production of *austerity conditions* that require reducing or privatizing public services, raising taxes, declaring bankruptcy, or implementing state receivership (Anderson, 2011, Anderson, 2012, Bowman, 2013, Coe, 2008, Kimhi, 2008). Through the process of *scaler*

dumping, financial responsibility for public goods is passed down from national to state and local governments (Peck, 2012). This devolvement of responsibility disproportionately strains cities like Flint, which have both high needs and limited local resources as a result of deindustrialization, residential abandonment, aging infrastructure, high poverty rates, and racial segregation. Thus, though economic factors beyond the control of city leaders shape a city's municipal budget, financial hardships are borne by residents. In particular, those with the fewest resources to exert political power—the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-wage workers—shoulder the heaviest burdens (Abramovitz, 1999; Ponder & Omstedt, 2019).

By characterizing a city as being in “fiscal emergency,” state governments take additional public spending off the table, which is problematic given that a lack of resources is the root cause of budgetary issues. Instead, local governments are only able to respond to revenue losses and poor economic conditions through various austerity measures that cut services. Meanwhile, longer-term structural problems—a declining tax base, decreases in state revenue sharing, systemic racism, and growing unemployment—are cast outside the sphere of public debate (Desan & Steinmetz, 2015; Fasenfest & Pride, 2016). Emergency management neither acknowledges nor addresses these deeper structural problems.

Michigan's Emergency Management System

The use of EM systems to respond to financial crises began during the Great Depression, and at least 16 states have some form today (Scorsone, 2014). In Michigan, the Local Financial Stability and Choice Act of 2012 established an EM structure that provided the governor significant autonomy in appointing emergency managers. Emergency managers are accountable to the governor, not local residents.

Under EM systems, economic restructuring may involve developing and implementing new financial and operations plans without any involvement of the public or elected



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officials (Anderson, 2012; Loh, 2015). Thus, EM systems reflect undemocratic processes that use technocratic, “expert”-driven decision making, rather than decisions from democratically elected officials who are members of and accountable to their constituencies (Lewis, 2013; Pauli, 2019). Many question the fairness of states stripping mayors and city councils of their governing authority under EM systems (Guzmán, 2016; Hammer, 2016; Stanley, 2016; We the People, 2016). Moreover, emergency managers are granted the power to renegotiate, terminate, or modify labor contracts, which threatens organized labor (Lewis, 2013).

Lee and colleagues (2016) found that Michigan’s EM system also perpetuates and deepens racial inequalities. Since 2009, 11 Michigan cities—representing about 10% of Michigan’s population—have been under emergency management. After examining the implementation of EM systems, their study discovered a pattern: though approximately 14% of people in Michigan are African American, cities under emergency management have populations that are on average 71% African-American; and though 79% of residents are white, cities under emergency management had populations that were only 21% white on average. Perhaps most shockingly, 52% of African Americans in Michigan have been under emergency managers at some point since 2009. In effect, most African Americans in Michigan have been denied local control over the last decade. The EM policy in its current form, denies citizens—and particularly African Americans—local, elected democratic control.

Modes of Intervention

The Flint water crisis reveals multiple intervention points and policy changes that could prevent other environmental injustices and public health disasters (Teixeira, Mathias, & Krings, 2019). First, Michigan policymakers might consider replacing the EM system with strong environmental regulations and enforcement at all levels of government (Butler, Scammell, & Benson, 2016).

Second, in the absence of widespread environmental protections, partnerships between community groups and academics can validate local claims in ways that funders and media view to be “credible” (Gaber, 2019; Krings, Kornberg, & Lane, 2018). The Flint Water Study, for example, was a partnership between researchers at Virginia Tech and a grassroots coalition of residents and community organizations (<http://flintwaterstudy.org/about-page/about-us/>). The group collected and analyzed its own water samples, discovering that it was not safe to drink, and the study’s findings contributed to the Flint-based Mott Foundation’s decision to financially

support the shift back to the Detroit water system. Community practitioners can help other civic groups to develop ongoing relationships with academic partners and foster inclusive decision-making processes that address power imbalances between residents and researchers.

Third, the Flint case reveals opportunities for social work practitioners to ally with residents as they build the political power of residents and communities—goals that are central to the mission and ethics of the social work profession. Social work practitioners and scholars can work with communities to counter classist and racial bias embedded in conceptions of expertise and authority. This includes the development of democratic institutions that are accountable to residents, providing information in a transparent and timely way, and including public participation in the design and implementation of environmental policy.

Finally, social work practitioners and scholars are well-positioned to advocate for increasing low-income communities’ material resources and decision-making power in relation to social welfare, including but not limited to water provision. For example, Michigan’s EM system was used to reduce spending in Detroit’s public school system, but in focus groups, parents reported that spending cuts resulted in overcrowded classrooms, inadequate transportation, and safety concerns (Krings, Thomas, Lee, Ali, & Miller, 2018). Additionally, in part because the emergency manager held power that previously belonged to the elected school board, parents struggled to identify opportunities for involvement. This combination of reduced resources and transparency contributed to some parents pulling their children out of the public school system. In this way, the system of emergency management’s sole motive of improving economic solvency causes disinvestment that has a direct effect on people’s lives and well-being—from water to education, recreation, and safety. Social workers can collectively mobilize to support investments in children and families, including those who are now suffering from racialized bureaucratic disasters such as the Flint water crisis (Muhammad et al., 2018; Robinson, Shum, & Singh, 2018).

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Suggested Citation

Krings, A., Kornberg, D., & Lee, S. (2019). Lessons and policy implications from the Flint water crisis (CSD Policy Brief No. 19-41). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development.



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