

USA: The lead poison water crisis in Flint, Michigan

Wednesday 2 March 2016, by [FEELEY Dianne](#), [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2015).

The lead poison water crisis in Flint, Michigan—with a 43% poverty rate, the poorest city in the country—was caused by Governor Rick Snyder and the Emergency Manager he appointed, Darnell Early. By September 2015, tests by Flint's Hurley Medical Center confirmed that the city's children had elevated lead-blood levels, and in the most at-risk neighborhoods the percentage of children affected by lead poisoning had doubled. Experts say that lead poisoning is so toxic that there is no "safe" level. It poisons people differently, depending on age, health, and nutrition. But it is particularly damaging for children under six and can cause irreversible brain damage.

Immediately following the Hurley Medical Center report Angela Minicuci, a spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, told the Detroit Free Press that the increase was "seasonal and not related to the water supply." She forwarded State of Michigan data to refute the hospital's claim, but the data actually confirmed the charge [1]. What had caused the dramatic increase in lead poisoning?

Under the Emergency Manager's watch, Flint officials decided in April 2013 to leave the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department system and join the Karegnondi Water Authority that was scheduled to go online in 2016. Both would take their water from the cold, clear depths of Lake Huron. In the meantime, the city—under the essentially dictatorial control of Darnell Earley—opted to save money and disconnected from DWSD's system, instead pumping its water from the Flint River. No testing was carried out before making this ill-fated switch. Officials from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality point out that testing under federal drinking water rules was not required beforehand. Yet given years of industrial pollution and agricultural runoffs, testing would have revealed the depth of the problem in meeting the most basic standards.

By the beginning of May 2014 the city disconnected from the DWSD; within a month residents began organizing demonstrations and packing city council meetings to complain about the smell, taste, and discoloration of the water. By August 2014 testing revealed *E. coli* in the system and residents were told to boil their water. The city added a disinfectant, but that produced by-products (trihalomethanes) that can cause cancer.

In the early fall the Flint's GM engine plant noted rust on newly machined parts; its lab found high levels of chloride in the water. The plant began trucking in its water supply and before the end of the year reconnected with Detroit's water—while the Flint population was drinking, cooking, and bathing in a toxic brew they were assured was "safe."

Corrosion, Corruption, and Coverup

It turns out that Flint River water is so corrosive that it was leaching lead from old pipes in people's homes, schools, and the system as a whole. In January 2015 the University of Michigan Flint campus tested its water and found elevated levels of lead. The director of the campus' environment, health, and safety department ordered filters installed or removed the drinking fountains and sinks; he notified the city about the problems. Meanwhile Flint ministers were distributing filters (secretly

supplied by the state) and cases of bottled water, but clearly these are inefficient and stopgap measures that cannot adequately serve an entire city.

Residents were continuing to demand reconnection to the Detroit system. The Flint City Council actually voted on March 23 to reconnect with Detroit's water, but the then Emergency Manager, Jerry Ambrose, opposed the decision and stated "Water from Detroit is no safer than water from Flint." What was he drinking?

In July a number of Detroit organizations sponsored a Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey. The 70-mile walk called for affordable clean water available to all. Beginning in Detroit, where residents are battling shutoffs that result from the high cost of water and are demanding a Water Affordability Plan, the march ended with a rally at the Flint City Hall, where residents reported the continuing lead poisoning, skin burns, hair loss, and other problems.

Yet the Governor and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality remained silent even when an internal memo from the Environmental Protection Agency was leaked by the American Civil Liberties Union. Miguel Del Toral, the author, wrote: "A major concern from a public health standpoint is lack of corrosion control treatment in the city of Flint for mitigating lead and copper levels in the drinking water." In August Marc Edwards, a Virginia Tech University researcher, revealed that Flint water (going through copper pipe with lead solder, which is common in older homes) without phosphates corroded lead at 19 times the rate of DWSD's water. Adding phosphates can coat the pipes and reduce the corrosion, but they carry their own problems (e.g. runoff causing cyanobacteria blooms).

It was only on September 24th, when Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha at Hurley Medical Center released the data showing the dramatic spike in blood-levels of Flint children, that the story became international news. It took considerable courage for her to go public with her findings and blow apart the bureaucratic coverup of what had happened. By the beginning of October, state officials held a press conference and admitted that her data were accurate. Since reconnecting the water to DWSD will cost \$12 million until the Karegnondi Water Authority is up and running, the Governor has had to agree to take responsibility for coming up with the money. He is promising \$6 million from the state and has secured \$4 million from the Flint-based C.S. Mott Foundation, with \$2 million to come from the victimized city.

Why the state isn't responsible for footing the whole bill is a question Flint residents are raising. But even when Flint's water system is reconnected, it may take six months before the water is once again drinkable. The fear of those with infants and young children is justifiably high. What will be the long-term result for themselves and their children? What programs need to be made available to residents? Reparations should be on the agenda but Governor Snyder thinks throwing \$6 million at the problem ends his responsibility.

What criminal charges will be laid against state officials, beginning with Governor Snyder and including Emergency Managers and those in charge of the Michigan institutions that are designed to protect people's health and safety? As for Darnell Early, he has gone on to be the Emergency Manager over the Detroit Public Schools and will support Governor Snyder's plan to further dismantle it—a crystal-pure case of the logic of neoliberalism as it cuts services, encourages privatization, and kills people at the receiving end.

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P.S.

* October 16, 2015:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4516>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2015/09/26/state-data-flint-lead/72820798/>