

The Flint Water Crisis: A Case of Environmental Racism?

Testimony before the Michigan Civil Rights
Commission Hearings on the Flint Water Crisis
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Environmental and Social Justice

- * Contemporary notions of environmental and social justice *depend* on access to water
- * *“Power, poverty and inequality are at the heart of today’s global water crisis”*

Report

United Nations Human Development
(2006)

Environmental and Social Justice

- * The Flint Water Crisis
 - * 100,000 residents were poisoned with lead
 - * 9,000 of them were children
 - * 200 confirmed cases of lead poisoning
- * In Detroit
 - * 178,000 households in jeopardy of having their water shut off
 - * Washington, DC; East Chicago, Ind.

Significant Bureaucratic Restructuring

- * Significant bureaucratic restructuring of the systems, structures, and institutions that provide drinking water and other public services.

The Flint Water Crisis

The question that needs to be clarified by the Commission is in what ways has emergency management specifically, and austerity type measures, more generally affected environmental justice outcomes, particularly as it pertains to racial inequality and injustice?

Outline

- * Environmental Justice Framework
- * Definitions of Environmental Justice
- * Elements of Environmental Justice
 - * Distribution
 - * Recognition
 - * Participation
- * The Flint Water Crisis: A Case of Environmental Racism?

Environmental Justice Framework

- * A theoretical and methodological approach
- * Uses a broad concept of the environment
 - * in which we live, work, learn, and play.
- * Links labor and public health, recreation and housing, and culture and history.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

The State of Michigan

The fair, non-discriminatory treatment and meaningful involvement of Michigan residents regarding the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies by the state.

Environmental Justice Working Group 2009

Environmental inequality (or Environmental Injustice)

- * A situation in which a specific group is disproportionately affected by negative environmental conditions brought on by unequal laws, regulations, and policies.

Environmental Racism

- * A specific form of environmental inequality
- * The deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of poisons and pollutants in industrial toxins, and their generally unequal distribution based on race and ethnicity.

Environmental Justice as Civil Rights

- * Environmental justice advocates frame ***environmental protections as civil rights*** that must be protected for all people regardless of “race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (EPA).

Examples of Environmental Injustice

- * Over 40 % of the Hispanic population, and over 25 percent of the Asian/Pacific population are disproportionately exposed to poor air quality
- * 3 out of 5 Black and Hispanic Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites
- * “Significant racial and socioeconomic disparities persist in the distribution of the nation’s commercial hazardous waste facilities.”
- * “Race continues to be an independent predictor of where hazardous wastes are located.”

Cumulative Impact

- * Forms of inequality that are not simply additive, but intersecting
- * Freddie Gray and Korryn Gaines

The Elements of Environmental Justice

- * Must encompass issues of
 - * *Distribution* of environmental ills and benefits.
 - * *Recognition* and/or respect are inherent preconditions for distributive justice
 - * Inclusive *participatory* decision-making institutions.

Environmental Justice

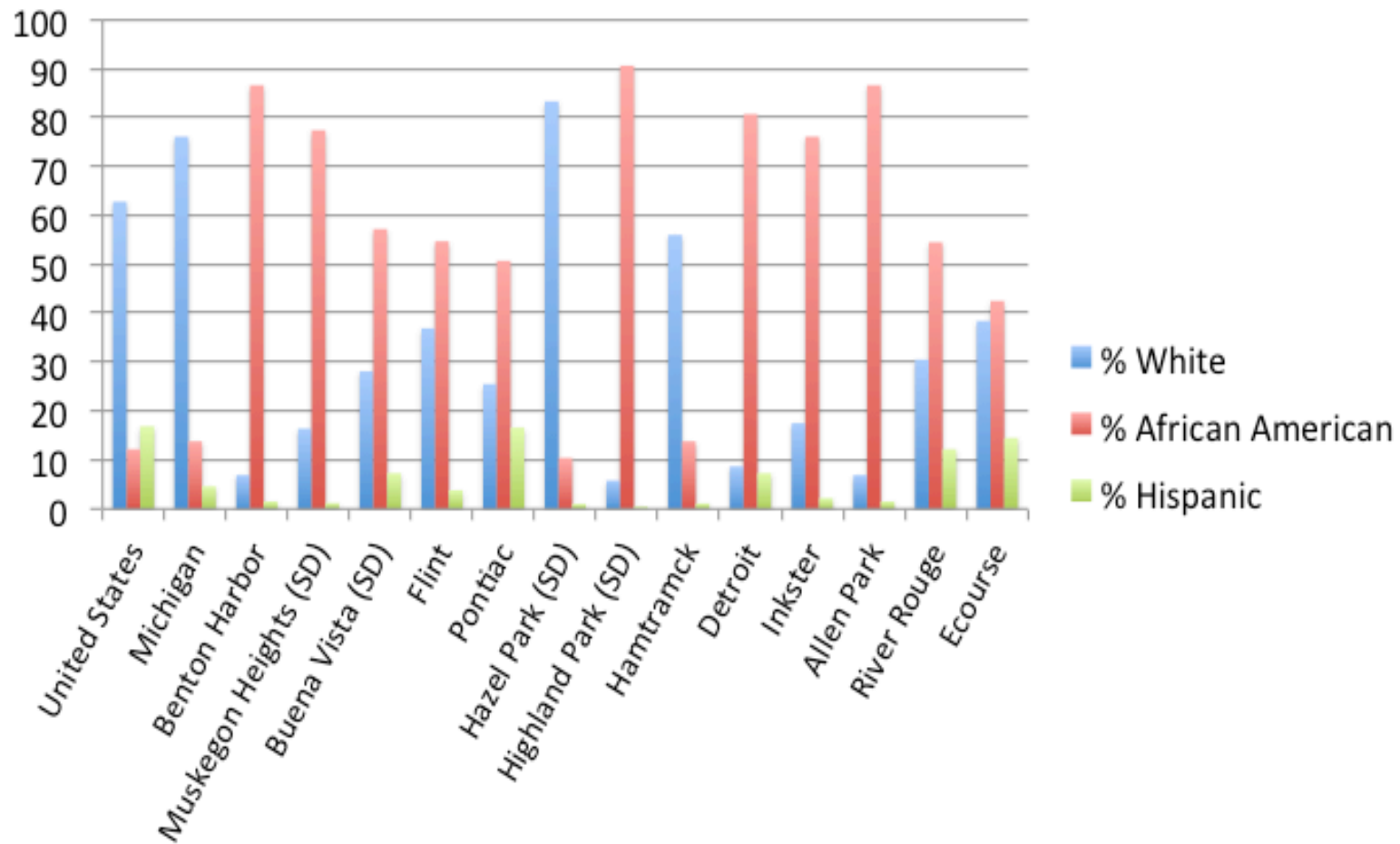
- * Environmental justice activism thus shares with the broader civil rights movement a principal conviction that “***race-conscious policies and practices are necessary, specifically to target and address the sources and causes of racial disparities***”

(Omi and Winant 2015: 257)

Environmental Injustice in Flint

Distribution	Recognition	Public Participation
Who was harmed?	Who was heard?	What sort of procedural mechanisms were available?

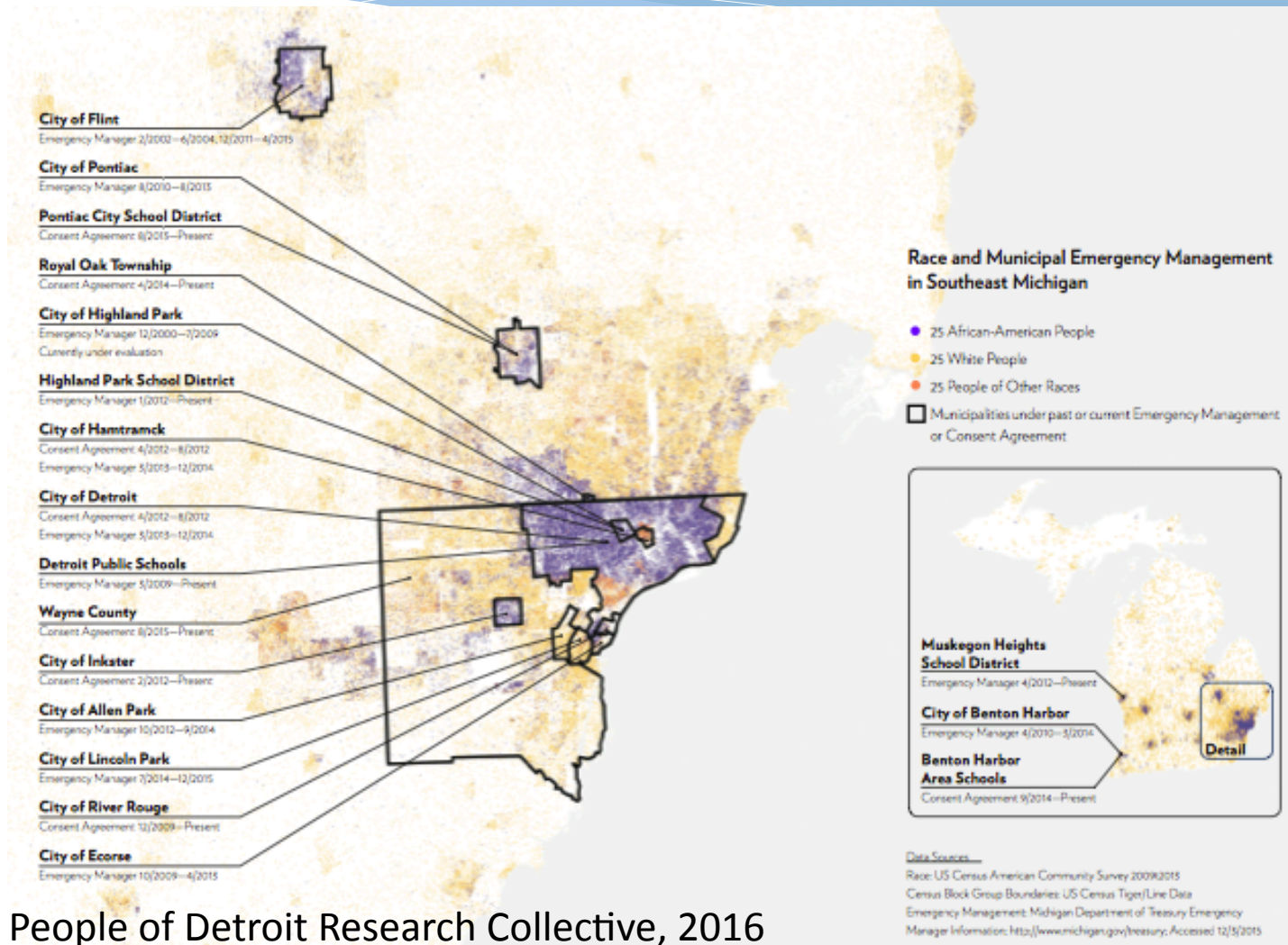
Distribution



Distribution

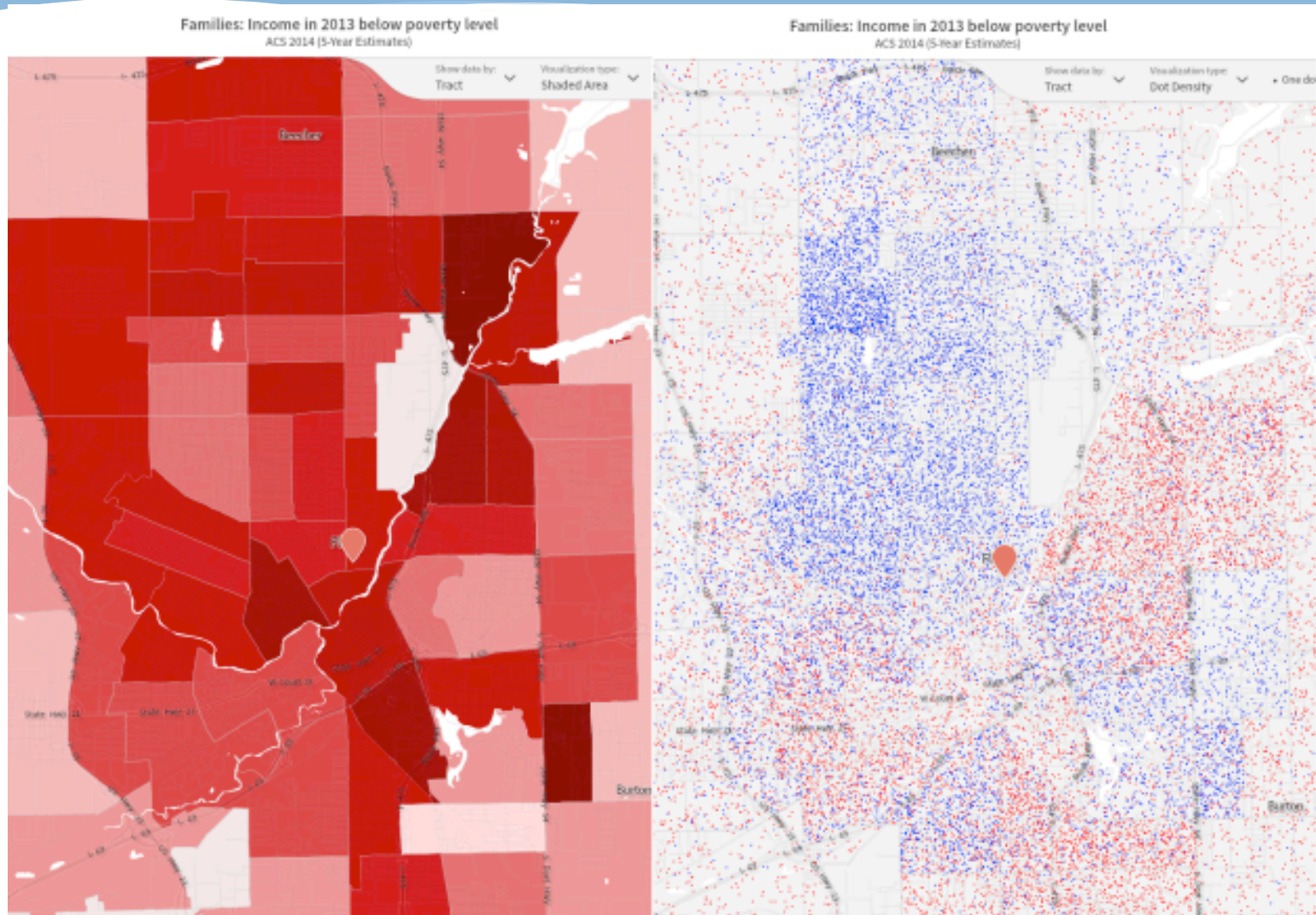
- * Over half of African Americans in Michigan have lived under EM
- * Cities under EM are on average 71 % African-American
- * White-majority municipalities with similar money problems are not under EM.

Mapping the Water Crisis



We the People of Detroit Research Collective, 2016

Distribution



Distribution

“I’ll tell you what, if the kids in a rich suburb of Detroit had been drinking contaminated water and being bathed in it, there would’ve been action.”

Hillary Clinton

Recognition

- * “This group specializes in looking for high lead problems.”
- * “They pull that rabbit out of that hat everywhere they go.”
- * “The water controversy is becoming “near-hysteria.”
- * “I wouldn't call them irresponsible. I would call them unfortunate,”

Public Participation

- * Public participation under emergency management has been temporarily suspended.
- * No mechanisms or procedures in place to advance community interests and concerns

The Flint Water Crisis: A Case of Environmental Racism

- * Flint Water Crisis
 - * ***Disproportionately*** impacted African-American communities.
 - * Did not ***recognize*** community concerns.
 - * Emergency Management prevented public ***participation***