

## ***Flint Water Crisis: Is This an Issue of Environmental Racism?***

By KAROLINA GUILLEN    MAY. 3, 2016

Residents and celebrities argue that Flint suffers from a serious water contamination because the majority of the residents are black and poor.

A concern that is quickly gaining attention is whether the Flint water crisis would have occurred if the majority of the residents were rich and white. Problems began when the town of Flint stopped buying their water from Detroit and began using their river water back in April of 2014. The effects were cataclysmic to the drinking water and in result, so is the health of the residents in Flint, Michigan. Claims of environmental racism arise as the town of Flint is mostly black and a good amount are poor as well. Would more have been done ahead of time if the community were white and rich? Would the problem have ever even occurred?

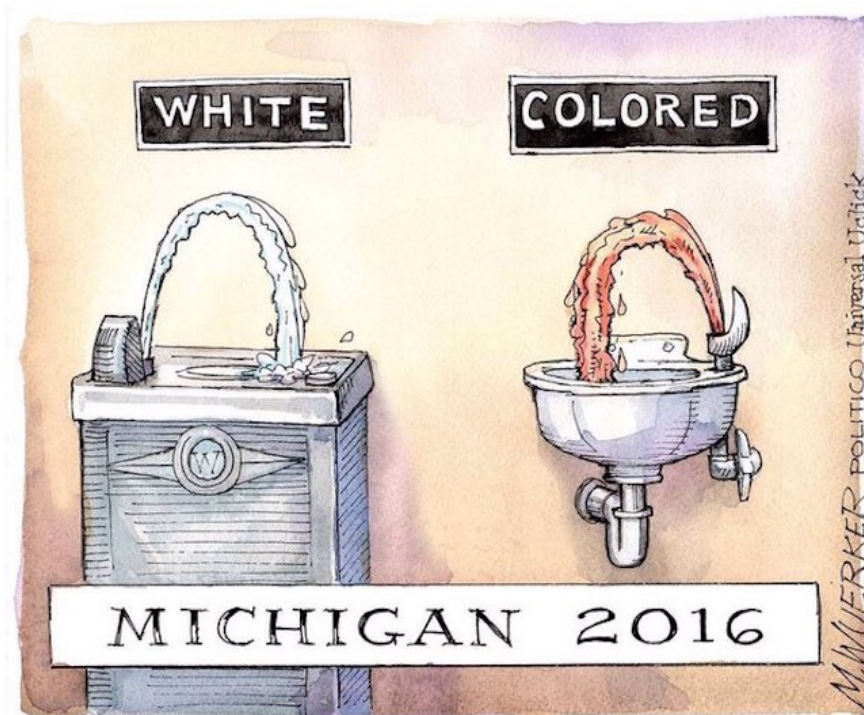


When residents began complaining about their strangely colored tap water, studies were made that showed lead levels in their pipes 10 times greater than normal. Residents claimed to encounter hair loss, skin lesions, psychological problems, memory loss, vision loss and high levels of lead in their blood. The residents were exposed to high levels of lead in their water, including chemical byproducts, bacteria and Legionnaire's disease. Regardless, they were told that the water was safe to drink until last fall. "The water contamination in Flint was born out of a decision to switch the city's water source to the Flint River in April 2014. The explicit goal was to save Flint, which was on the brink of financial collapse, millions of dollars." (Eligon, 2016)

The term, 'environmental racism' first came to light around the 1980's. It refers to blacks being disproportionately exposed to pollution, whether it's contaminated air, soil or water. "It is considered the result of poverty and segregation that has relegated many blacks and other racial minorities to some of the most industrialized or dilapidated environments." (Eligon, 2016)

Just two weeks ago, the New York Times came out with the article below showing both sides for and against the claim of environmental racism. The article's focus, however, is that the crisis began as an issue of poverty. Dean of the School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University, Dr. Robert Bullard, states that, "racism trumps class." The video shows that blacks making \$50 to \$60K a year are more likely to live in more polluted areas than whites making just \$10K a year.

Several studies and textbook cases prove that environmental racism is real. Detroit alone, with 84 percent of their population being black, they are known as being the most polluted zip code in Michigan. “All zip codes are not created equal.” (Dr. Robert Bullard) To no surprise, Wayne County in Detroit, has the highest reported cases of asthma in the state. Louisiana’s Cancer Alley is another prize example. The strip along the Mississippi river is known to have over 200 petrochemical plants and a high amount of reported cancer cases that have mainly affected black residents. Detroit is also known for pouring 1.6 million pounds of chemicals into the air yearly. Why? The area is unjustly concentrated in industries such as salt mining, steel production, oil refining and coal burning. The residents have been protesting for over a year and have been ignored. Is it because the majority of the residents are black? What do others have to say about



this?

Celebrities have voiced their concerns of this injustice being a racial issue on Twitter. The hip hop mogul visited the home of a mother of three in order to become a firsthand witness. Nakeyja Cade told Simmons that her water showed a lead test result of 185 ppb, way over the federal action level of 15ppb. "If this were Beverly Hills, it would be a minute before we found out and a second before someone would be blamed and be brought up on charges." Simmons voiced his opinion for the residents of Flint and strengthened the claim that this crisis is a case of environmental racism, with his words. Others looked to social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook to speak up for the lives lost and for the fear that environmental racism is real.



What does the governor of Flint have to say about this? An interviewer asked him, "If Flint were rich and mostly white, would Michigan state government have responded more quickly and aggressively to complaints about its level of lead in the drinking water. Is this a case of environmental racism?" His defense against the claim was that "in terms of public safety, we've

done a lot." Residents don't seem to agree. Although the United States Environmental Protection agency has a civil rights office, in 22 years, the office has never found a case of discrimination and more than 90 percent of claims are rejected.