# Flint Water Crisis: Environmental Racism at Work?

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What is environmental racism?  And is the poisoning of people in Flint, Michigan, an example of it? Students explore these questions in two readings, with discussion questions and an extension activity.

**To the Teacher:**

Early this year a state of emergency was declared for the city of Flint, Michigan, because of alarmingly high levels of lead in the city's water. Currently, more than 100,000 people do not have access to safe drinking water in this struggling city. Studies have shown that a substantial percentage of children in the city have elevated levels of lead in their blood, which represents a serious public health crisis.

The disaster in Flint has opened up a debate about what is known as "environmental racism." This term is used to describe the way communities of color are disproportionately impacted by pollution and environmental disasters. For some, the situation in Flint is a prime example of environmental racism and discrimination. The majority of the city's residents are African-American, and almost half live in poverty.

This lesson consists of two readings designed to encourage discussion about the situation in Flint and to introduce students to the concept of environmental racism. The first reading describes the concept of environmental racism and explains why it provides a useful lens for making sense of many environmental problems. The second reading discusses how this concept applies to the crisis in Flint. Questions for discussion follow each reading.

**Reading 1  
What is "Environmental Racism"?**

"Environmental racism" is a term used to describe how communities of color are unfairly impacted by pollution and environmental disasters. It refers to "the disproportionate exposure of Blacks to polluted air, water and soil," writes [*New York Times*](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/us/a-question-of-environmental-racism-in-flint.html?_r=1) reporter John Eligon. "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."

First coined in the 1980s, "environmental racism" remains a useful way to talk about how exposure to pollution and environmental hazards varies according to a person's race, economic status, and political power. The concept is also useful in discussing the impact of climate change, which tends to disproportionately affect people of color and low-income communities around the world.

In his *New York Times* article, Eligon provides some concrete examples of environmental racism:

Many [civil rights] advocates assert that environmental racism is a major reason Black people in Louisiana's factory-laden "Cancer Alley" contract the disease at higher rates, or why the most polluted zip code in Michigan is in a southwest pocket of Detroit that is 84 percent Black.

Many also say that environmental racism left Blacks confined to the most flood-prone parts of New Orleans, and that the government was slow to respond to the agonies immediately after Hurricane Katrina. President George W. Bush staunchly rejected that assertion.

Environmental decisions are often related to political power. In some cities, garbage incinerators have been built in African-American neighborhoods that do not have the political clout to block them.

Recent scientific research confirms the existence of racial disparities in exposure to environmental risk. In an April 17, 2014, article for [ThinkProgress.org](http://thinkprogress.org/health/2014/04/17/3427918/why-air-pollution-is-a-racial-issue/), reporter Carmiah Townes discussed a University of Minnesota study that revealed a strong connection between race and the effects of air pollution:

A study produced by the University of Minnesota concluded that race is a determining factor in who is most affected by air pollution. Specifically, non-white people breathe air that is substantially more polluted than the air that white people breathe.

According to Julian Marshall, who led the University's research, race outweighed income in regards to who is most affected by poor air quality. When low-income white people were compared to high-income Hispanic people, the latter group experienced higher levels of nitrogen dioxide. Altogether, people of color in the U.S. breathe air with 38 percent more nitrogen dioxide in it than their white counterparts, particularly due to power plants and exhaust from vehicles.

"We were quite surprised to find such a large disparity between whites and nonwhites related to air pollution," Marshall told the Minnes

ota Post. "Especially the fact that this difference is throughout the U.S., even in cities and states in the Midwest."

Other evidence has also pointed to disproportionately high levels of air pollution in low-income and non-white communities. A 2012 study conducted by Yale University researchers revealed that "potentially dangerous compounds such as vanadium, nitrates and zinc" exist in locations with high concentrations of people of color, including African- Americans, Hispanics, and Asians....

Dirty air is linked to asthma, kidney damage, heart disease, and cancer. Drawing on data from 2009 to 2011, State of the Air concluded that 42 percent of people living in the U.S., alone, reside in areas with "pollution levels [that] are too often dangerous to breath." 

Activists around the country are organizing against environmental racism and for "environmental justice." The [Environmental Protection Agency](http://www3.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/) defines environmental justice as

...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. EPA has this goal for all communities and persons across this Nation. It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

For many years, people of color and the poor have suffered far more than other populations from the degradation of our environment. Thanks to the work of environmental justice advocates, the concept of environmental racism has given people a way to talk about this phenomenon and has motivated them to fight back against it.

**For Discussion**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what is environmental racism?
3. When we talk about environmentalism, many people think about forest and wilderness areas rather than densely populated cities. How does the concept of environmental racism help us to redefine environmentalism to apply to urban areas?
4. What does environmental racism have to do with climate change?
5. According to the reading, what is the concept of "environmental justice"? Why is this concept important?

**Reading 2  
Flint Water Crisis: Environmental Racism?**

Early this year, officials declared a state of emergency for the city of Flint, Michigan, because of alarmingly high levels of lead in the city's water.  Currently, more than 100,000 people in Flint do not have access to safe drinking water.

Although the issue has only gained significant media attention in recent months, the water crisis in Flint has been going on for nearly two years. In April 2014, a state-appointed emergency manager tried to cut costs by switching the city's drinking water from the Detroit water system to the Flint River—the former dumping ground of General Motors, which had auto plants in Flint. A study released in September 2015 revealed that since the time when the water source was switched, the percentage of children under age five in Flint with elevated levels of lead in their blood has nearly doubled.  This was because the corrosive, polluted water from the Flint River caused lead to leach from the city's old pipes. This leaching could have been avoided if the water had been treated.

In a January 20, 2016, article for the [*New Yorker*](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-crisis-in-flint-goes-deeper-than-the-water), staff writer Evan Osnos described the widespread indifference and denial among Michigan officials in the face of a mounting crisis:

Last July, after more than a year of public complaints about the drinking water in Flint, Michigan—water so pungent and foamy that a local pastor had stopped using it for baptisms— reporters were calling the state's Department of Environmental Quality. The response from the department was of limited urgency. In an internal e-mail to colleagues, a spokeswoman, Karen Tommasulo, wrote, "Apparently it's going to be a thing now."

The D.E.Q. tried to stop the water from becoming a thing, partly by downplaying concerns. A memo from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warned that the city's use of a new water source was exposing the public to unsafe levels of lead, but Brad Wurfel, the department's lead spokesperson, told a reporter, "Let me start here—anyone who is concerned about lead in the drinking water in Flint can relax." Even after a group of Virginia Tech researchers found unsafe levels of lead, Wurfel disputed the importance of the findings because, he wrote, the group "specializes in looking for high lead problems. They pull that rabbit out of that hat everywhere they go." He added that "dire public health advice based on some quick testing could be seen as fanning political flames irresponsibly. Residents of Flint concerned about the health of their community don't need more of that."

As it turns out, the residents of Flint needed much more of that. The state's inept response is now a full-blown national scandal. President Obama has declared an emergency in Flint, making available five million dollars in federal assistance. Much of the blame falls on Governor Rick Snyder, who acknowledged, on Tuesday, that he had run out of excuses. "I am sorry; we will fix this," he said, in his State of the State address. He thanked the whistle-blowers, and promised to seek millions more in state funds for bottled water, health care, and infrastructure fixes. Facing calls for his resignation, he told the people of Flint and elsewhere, "You deserve accountability. You deserve to know that the buck stops here, with me. Most of all, you deserve to know the truth."

Governor Snyder, a Republican, has nevertheless denied that the water crisis in Flint, a predominantly Black and poor city, is an instance of environmental racism. As Scott Bixby reported in a January 22, 2016, article for the [*Guardian*:](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/22/flint-water-crisis-michigan-governor-says-environmental-racism-not-to-blame)

Michigan's embattled governor, Rick Snyder, declared on Friday morning that despite assertions to the contrary, the Flint water crisis is "absolutely not" a case of environmental racism.

In an interview on MSNBC's Morning Joe, the Republican governor acknowledged "major failures" on the part of the state's government in addressing the lead contamination that has poisoned thousands of residents of Flint, Michigan, but strongly resisted charges that racism was one of those failures.

"I've made a focused effort since before I started in office to say we need to work hard to help people that have the greatest need," Snyder said. "This was a terrible tragedy. These people work for me. And that's why it was important to accept responsibility, and my focus is on fixing this problem."

For many observers, however, Governor Snyder's characterization of the situation as simply a bureaucratic problem does not add up. Despite overwhelming evidence of a serious problem, state officials took no action while the residents of Flint were poisoned. Skeptics have asked, "Could this have happened in an affluent white suburb?" As journalist Jaimee Smith argued in a January 24, 2016, article for [theGrio.com](http://thegrio.com/2016/01/24/flint-water-environmental-racism-Blacks/), the crisis in Flint fits into a broad, nationwide pattern of systemic neglect for the health and safety of people of color and the poor:

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is more than just a natural disaster or a series of unfortunate, environmental events—it is an inexcusable, egregious human and health rights violation against a majority Black city, where 56 percent of the population is African-American....

Unfortunately, Flint is not the only city where African-Americans and people of color are suffering from the onslaught of environmental racism and discrimination. Detroit schools are so heavily infested with rats, roaches and mold that more than 85 schools closed on Wednesday, as teachers staged a sickout in protest to the deplorable conditions. In Baltimore, the levels of lead poisoning among children is three times the national rate. Before Freddie Gray became a victim of racialized state violence in Baltimore, he too was a victim of lead poisoning as a young child; tests showed that his blood lead levels were as high as seven times the reference level given by the Centers for Disease Control.

Based on such evidence, advocates of environmental justice conclude that if future cases of environmental racism are to be prevented it will require community members coming together to demand change.

**For Discussion  
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1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read
2. Governor Rick Snyder does not see the Flint crisis as a case of environmental racism. What is his position?
3. How do advocates of environmental justice respond? Why do they see environmental racism at work in this instance?
4. If officials are working to address the crisis in Flint, does it matter whether we call it "environmental racism"? Why or why not?
5. Do you think that understanding the concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice make it more likely that we can prevent crises like that in Flint in the future?

**Extension Activity**

Assign students to research charges of environmental racism in their community or region.  Ask them to come to the next class with a brief description of the concern, and a list of what groups, if any, are working to address it.

When the class reconvenes, ask students to share what they've learned. Guide the class in selecting one of the charges of environmental racism to research.  Help them develop research questions and a strategy for answering those questions.  This might include interviewing activists who are organizing on the issue.  Once students have completed their research, encourage them to publicize their findings.

Original Assignment posted by the Morningside Center: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/flint-water-crisis-environmental-racism-work>