

# CASE STUDY

## THE FLINT, MICHIGAN, WATER CRISIS

To save money, in April 2014, the state of Michigan decided to switch Flint's water supply from the treated Detroit Water and Sewerage Department water to the Flint River. The Detroit water supply was essentially from Lake Huron and the Detroit River. However, the problem with the switch to water from the Flint River was that officials had failed to employ corrosion inhibitors. The switch was implemented during a time when the city of Flint was in a state of emergency. It was intended to be temporary; a new state-run supply line to Lake Huron was to be connected in approximately two years.

Soon, the residents of Flint began to notice that the water started to look, smell, and taste funny. Some thought it was sewage, but it was actually iron. What made things worse was that residents did not realize that a large number of water lines to their homes were made of lead. Since the water was not properly treated, lead started to leach into the water supply. This continued for almost two years. Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician in Flint's Hurley Medical Center, was noticing more and more frantic parents concerned over their children's rashes and hair loss. By comparing blood lead levels in toddlers, Dr. Hanna-Attisha found that these levels had doubled, in some instances tripled, after switching the water supply to the Flint River. When she released her findings, initially officials denounced her work, accusing her of causing hysteria. A week later, they admitted her findings were correct.

In October 2015, the city switched back to using Detroit water, but this did not address the damage that was done to the lead pipes. The state then responded by distributing filters and bottled water. However, there are potential long-term health consequences. Dr. Hanna-Attisha stated that lead is "a well-known, potent neurotoxin. There's tons of evidence on what lead does to a child, and it is one of the most damning things that

you can do to a population. It drops your IQ, it affects your behaviour, it's been linked to criminality, it has multigenerational impacts. There is no safe level of lead in a child."<sup>1</sup>

In April 2016, criminal charges were filed against three officials:

- Mike Glasgow, Flint's Laboratory and Water Quality Supervisor
- Mike Prysby, a Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) official
- Stephen Busch, Lansing district coordinator for the DEQ's Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance

The various charges against these officials include misconduct in office; conspiracy—tampering with evidence; treatment violation—Michigan Safe Drinking Water Act; and willful neglect of duty.<sup>2</sup>

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For over 30 years, Flint has been steadily declining given that the automotive industry was the foundation of that city. As a result, it has declined in population and employment while experiencing increases in poverty and violent crime.<sup>3</sup> Do you think this could have happened in a more affluent area? As one resident stated, "you can't treat cities the way you treat some corporation that you might just sort of sell off."

### THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Do you think social class could explain how this situation was handled?
2. Do you think this could have happened in a more affluent area?
3. What would be some suggested policies/programs that could be developed that would prevent this from happening again in Flint or any other city?