

# Accountability and Transparency Diluted in the Flint Water Crisis: A Case of Institutional Implosion

## Debilitamiento de la transparencia y la rendición de cuentas en La crisis del agua Flint: un caso de implosión institucional

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines two major institutions widely touted in the United States as servants to communities and the general public: the government and the news media. The Flint water crisis is a textbook case in which these two institutions failed to live up to their responsibilities of accountability and transparency. The authors examine the major events during the water crisis, looking at it through the lens of government actions and how the press covered them, conducting qualitative context analysis during the first five months of the crisis. The analysis includes the actions of federal, state, and local agencies and the reporting of national, state, and local newspapers. Their findings show that the institutions completely imploded, with an impact on thousands of residents, many of whom happened to be minorities.

**Key words:** Flint, water crisis, accountability, transparency, news media, watchdog function, public health, lead contamination

### RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza la labor de dos grandes instituciones que prestan servicio a las comunidades y a la sociedad en general en Estados Unidos: el gobierno y los medios de comunicación. La crisis del agua Flint es un caso de libro de texto que muestra cómo estas dos instituciones incumplieron sus responsabilidades de transparencia y rendición de cuentas. Los autores examinan los principales sucesos ocurridos durante la crisis del agua, observándolos a través de la lente de las acciones gubernamentales y la cobertura que les dio la prensa, realizando un análisis cualitativo de contexto de los primeros cinco meses de la crisis. Tal estudio incluye las acciones de las agencias federales, estatales y locales, y cómo fue tratado en la prensa a nivel nacional, estatal y local. Los hallazgos muestran que hubo una absoluta implosión institucional que impactó a miles de residentes –muchos de los cuales resultaron pertenecer a minorías–.

**Palabras clave:** rendición de cuentas, transparencia, gobierno prensa, crisis agua.

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## INTRODUCTION

The city of Flint is a typical example of the de-industrialization and economic decline experienced by several U.S. cities after decades of prosperity in the last part of the twentieth century (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; High and Lewis, 2007). Flint was an icon of the U.S. automobile industry as the place where General Motors (GM) Corporation was originally founded. The city expanded from the mid-1940s until the late 1970s, as GM generated thousands of auto manufacturing jobs for unskilled workers. However, from the 1980s through most of the 1990s, Flint began its steep decline due to closures and the relocation of thousands of General Motors manufacturing jobs (Highsmith, 2014). As a result, Flint has lost population and experienced high unemployment rates and low income levels, compared not only to the rest of Michigan but to the rest of the country.

Flint's socio-demographic indicators show the social and economic impacts. First of all, total population declined from 1960 to 2010 by almost half (48 percent). However, the percentage of black population increased from 17.5 percent in 1960 to more than half (56.6 percent) in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Secondly, Flint unemployment rates increased in just ten years by 7 percent, from 16.1 percent in 1990 to 23.2 percent in 2010, which was higher than the state as a whole and the metropolitan area (MSA) (Doige et al., 2015: 8).

And thirdly, the average annual household income from 2010 to 2014 in Flint was US\$24,679, which is much lower than the state level of US\$49,087, and less than half that of the national level of US\$53,482 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Closely linked to this figure is the percentage of the population living below the poverty level, which has increased from 16.9 percent in 1980 to 31.1 percent in 2010; this is more than double the rate for Michigan (15.5 percent) and the country as a whole (15.1).

As result of these conditions, tax revenues declined while local services continued to cost the city money, causing significant fiscal stress to the Flint local government (Scorsone and Bateson, 2011: 1; Doige et al., 2015: 13). The city was so financially weak that Governor Rick Snyder appointed an emergency manager (EM) on November 8, 2011,<sup>1</sup> with enough power to determine the city's financial functioning. This displaced democratically-elected public officials by appointing a non-elected official to manage the city.<sup>2</sup> The functions and operations of the EM as conceived

<sup>1</sup> According to a congressional act (MHR 436 of 2012), an emergency manager (EM) was designated in order to face a deficit of US\$14 621 546 (Snyder, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> "The EM shall have broad powers in receivership to rectify the financial emergency and to assure the fiscal accountability of the local government and the local government's capacity to provide or cause to be provided necessary governmental services essential to the public health, safety, and welfare" (Sec. 9.2 of Act 436 of 2012[1]).

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