NRDC

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When the faucet runs dry

From the polluted groundwater in California to the toxic tap water in Flint, barriers to safe water access are everywhere. But the true scale of the issue is invisible, as communities across the country bear hidden burdens of contamination, shut-offs, and water debt.

On the gritty streets of Detroit, community organizer Sylvia Orduño has been working to help the city's most vulnerable residents for over twenty years. "There's one family that sticks in my mind," she says. "He was a disabled former police officer. He had so many health problems that they couldn't keep up with the bills, so their water was shut off. His wife and daughter were hauling water in bottles to bathe him."

The story Orduño shared should be an isolated, tragic occurrence — but it's not. The struggle of life without water is a daily reality for many households throughout the United States, a problem highlighted by the pandemic: A study by Cornell University estimated that water shut-offs may have contributed to 9,000 additional deaths in the United States during the COVID-19 crisis. Shut-offs by local utilities, water laced with lead or other contaminants, and crushing water debt have left people across the country without access to a substance essential for survival.

In Detroit, a city known in advocacy circles as ground zero for water shut-offs, Orduño works with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and the People's Water Board Coalition. They have been engaging in water access and affordability issues for decades – but they're fighting an uphill battle. While there are many government aid programs aimed at helping at-risk households access food, power, and even telephone and internet plans, there are currently no permanent national or state-wide aid programs for water. Somehow, water has been left out of the basic social safety net.

Larry Levine, director of urban water infrastructure with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), says: "Historically, water was an afterthought because the cost of it was so low." But in the last two decades, he explains, water and sewer rates have been rising a lot faster than inflation, beyond many households' ability to pay. "Many local water and sewer utilities can't generate enough to invest in improving their systems, so it's a vicious cycle," he says.

The unwieldy system of treatment plants, pipes, and pumps that delivers water to and from homes is managed by a vast national network of water utilities – across the United States, there are over 50,000 drinking water and about 15,000 wastewater utilities. For the vast majority, customers' rates — and customers' rights — are unregulated at the state level, overseen instead by local officials and boards with standards that vary from region to region. "Water is different than energy. Most energy utilities are regulated by a state commission," says Levine. "But there's no regulatory body that can rope together all the water systems across a state to ensure everyone has a minimum level of access."

Fragmentation and lack of oversight has only exacerbated the situation. Currently, there's a dearth of comprehensive national data on how much people pay for tap water, and the same is true about the number of households that

have been disconnected from a city's water supply. But the existing data suggests an extensive and often hidden problem: The few utilities that publically report disconnections reveal shockingly high numbers of shut-offs. In California, for instance, a study by the non-profit Pacific Institute found that over a year, six water utilities had disconnected between 7% and 30% of the households they served.

When customers can't pay their bills, utilities sometimes use alternative programs that effectively serve as disconnections. At the height of the pandemic in North Carolina, the utility serving the Cape Fear region proposed a policy to encourage water payments, modeled on a similar program in Arizona. "For people who were late on their bills, they were going to put a restrictor device to slow water flow, to the point that it would take 30 seconds to fill a glass," says Al Ripley, a director with the North Carolina Justice Center. He was part of a local advocacy effort that ultimately killed the poorly designed measure. But that didn't put an end to the problem: While only a fraction of North Carolina water utilities disclose shut-off data, the utilities that serve just 11% of the state's population reported that they disconnected the water to 1,845 households during the first four months of 2021.

Jeremy Orr, a senior attorney with NRDC's Safe Water Initiative, knows first-hand what it's like to live without water. "I grew up in Detroit and both my parents worked full-time jobs, but there were times when we still couldn't afford our water bills," he says. "Our water was cut off. That was in the 1990s, and rates have just kept rising — water has been unaffordable for a long time now." As water costs have increased, water bills can spiral out of control quickly: When Orduño's organization began asking Detroit residents how much they owed, the answers were shocking. "We asked people to bring us copies of their bills, and the biggest one we saw was $29,000," she says.

Corinne Bell, a program attorney with NRDC, sees those same affordability struggles unfold across the country. "Something that surprised me when I first started working on water issues is how big these bills can become — they just balloon!" She explains that even after a utility shuts off a customer's water, their bill may still be growing with late payment fees. "In some places, they can put a lien against your house for an unpaid water or sewer bill, and you can lose your home."

While the federal government did enact a temporary water bill relief fund during the pandemic, it's just a drop in the bucket. "It's a band-aid program," says Jonathan Nelson, an advocate with the Community Water Center in California. "The amount of water debt in California alone would more than use every dollar that the relief program allocated to the country as a whole."

Nelson often works in farming communities – many of them low-income and undocumented – in California's Central Valley. Because of aging water systems and contamination from agricultural chemicals, the water in many Central Valley communities is unfit to drink. The farmworkers who put food on tables across the country sometimes pay for water twice: Once to maintain the connection for the toxic water coming to their tap so they can flush toilets and wash clothes, and again for bottled water to drink. "When there was a run on bottled water here at the beginning of the pandemic, mothers and grandmothers had to take to Facebook to try and find water for their families," he says.

It's not a problem limited to California; issues with unsafe and aging water delivery systems are widespread. NRDC estimates that the United States still has up to 12.8 million toxic lead service lines delivering drinking water to households. Decrepit infrastructure causes other issues too. Aging and corroded metal pipes can hinder water treatment and lead to an increase in levels of bacteria, and other contaminants, and waste large quantities of water through leakage. Meanwhile, antiquated sewer systems also send raw sewage into rivers, streets, and basements.

Data show that communities of color are more deeply impacted by water access and quality issues than any other. A report by the NAACP Legal Defense fund found that they have been disproportionately impacted, due to redlining and other racist policies. More recently, an analysis by a water utility in Cincinnati, Ohio, found that their shut-off practices were not fairly distributed: the city often left the water of non-payers in wealthier communities connected, but disconnected water services for non-payers in communities of color.

But despite these systemic issues, advocacy work is making progress. NRDC's successful lobbying with partners around the country led many states to enact residential water shut-off moratoriums during the COVID crisis and illustrates how organizations can intercede to help vulnerable households – and the

response they received signals that some states may finally be taking safe water access seriously

The city of Philadelphia is leading the charge. In 2017, they became the first city in the nation to scale water costs to household income and began offering assistance with water bills to families in crisis. Other cities are now working toward similar models. California recently began requiring water utilities to report how many households have been disconnected and passed a shut-off protection law in 2018, as well as a temporary moratorium by executive order in 2020.

Progress is happening on other fronts too. In Illinois, NRDC partnered with Little Village Environmental Justice Organization and other local organizations to draft a bill to eliminate all the lead water delivery pipes in the state – it was signed into law in late August. That same law directs the agency running the state's low-income energy assistance plan to create the nation's first statewide low-income water assistance program. NRDC's Orr, who worked on the bill, says, "Over this last year, we've realized that safe water is an absolute necessity. The pandemic has highlighted water as a human right."

While the current draft of the federal infrastructure bill includes some funding to upgrade the country's aging and unsafe water infrastructure, recent legislative efforts still fall far short of what's needed for water affordability and debt assistance programs. As part of COVID-19 relief packages, $1.1 billion has been made available for water assistance, but more permanent measures are sorely needed. As the White House attempts to "build back better," returning to a pre-pandemic status quo for water access is insufficient. The essential workers who kept communities running during the pandemic also need to have running water.

As NRDC's Bell says, "The people most affected by this are the same people who have been on the front lines during the COVID crisis, like cashiers, home health aides, and the people delivering food. They should be able to wash their hands when they get home."