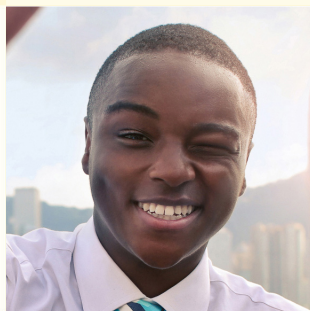




# FLINT WATER CRISIS STUDY GUIDE

## *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint*

Report of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission  
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In January 2015, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency in the city of Flint over high lead levels and other health concerns related to the city's water. It had been a brewing public health concern for months.

The declaration of emergency does not stand alone in this history. It was neither the beginning nor the end of the crisis. Hundreds of news articles and television stories appeared in the months before and after the declaration was made. Each explored different parts of the crisis: What treatments for the water should have been used? What were the goals and standards around lead testing? Would changing out the lead and copper lines have prevented the crisis?

The governor also appointed a committee to look at the entire chain of decision making. Who made which decisions and when? What impact did each decision have on the water system, on individuals, on the social life of the community?


While reporters chased those questions, the Attorney General began his investigation into possible criminal wrongdoing. In all of these reports and investigations, the focus has been on who should bear the blame, particularly as it relates to the decisions made and actions taken over the course of several years. There have been private lawsuits filed that are also seeking to find and hold accountable those who made the decisions which caused the immediate crisis. There have also been criminal charges brought against several state and local officials.

In 2016, The Michigan Civil Rights Commission did not wish to wander down the paths already worn bare by reporters and attorneys. The Commission believed that understanding the crisis required a broader historical review. To understand the crucible that forged this crisis, we need to consider and understand the historical roles of race and segregation.

The Commission found that underlying the water crisis in Flint is a legacy of decades of systemic issues dating back more than a century. The issues were created by policies and laws that treated people differently based on race. While those policies and laws may no longer be in effect today, they gave birth to inequities and residential segregation based on race that continues in Genesee County to this very day. The impact of this history is far-reaching. It impacts where people live, where they get their education, and whether or not they can or could get bank loans to purchase homes.

The Commission's final report, *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint*, found that those systemic failures played a crucial role in the crisis. The report did not find that the inequitable outcomes for residents of the city were intentionally created because Flint is a city made up mostly of people of color. Instead, the Commission found that decades of systemic racism had been built into the city's policy decisions. These policies led to financial issues and ultimately the placement of an Emergency Manager.

The report found that under the Emergency Managers, the community was not allowed to fully engage with the city's decision makers. The lack of community engagement under the laws highlighted the different treatment experienced by a community like Flint, where most of the residents are African American, and other local communities



where most of the residents are white. The report found that racial policies of the past had created a proverbial tale of two cities: the mostly white suburban communities with adequate financial resources and the mostly minority, urban, cash-strapped community of Flint. The stark differences between majority minority and majority white communities point to the broader systemic differences such as access to housing and health care.

Flint was cash strapped, in part, because of the exodus of the auto industry. As a result, the city had lost much of its industrial tax base. Without industrial tax revenues, the economic situation became critical and led to state authorities appointing an Emergency Manager to run the city. When the state took over the management of Flint but did not address the economic inequities between suburban Flint and urban Flint or accept any input from the residents of Flint, the residents lost trust in their government.

## Using the Study Guide

This study guide has been developed to promote discussion, debate, critical thinking and reflection on the many reasons inequities based on race contributed greatly to the Flint Water Crisis. Those same ideas can be explored in other communities and neighborhoods as well. Applying this sort of critical thinking as it relates to policy making will help move us consciously toward the process of cutting out those underlying structures and ideas that played a role in creating this crisis.

This study guide is not intended as a comprehensive review. It is meant only to start conversations and the exploration of the historical and cultural issues that fed the crisis.

## Words Matter

The Flint Water Crisis requires that we review some common terms and definitions used throughout the report.

Here are key terms and definitions:

**Racial Equity Lens:** As we look at policy issues today, it is important to view them through the policies and laws that were in action in the past. That means it is necessary to look at previous policies and laws related to race and how those impact a community today. We call that “looking through a racial equity lens.” A racial equity lens removes barriers to inclusion, highlights areas of exclusion and provides opportunities for full participation. Reviewing policy decisions through a racial equity lens gives us guidance on who needs to be involved in policy decisions and why their experiences matter.

**Bias:** The process of prejudging in favor or against someone or something. This is often experienced as unfair by the those who are excluded.

**Explicit Bias:** Explicit means open, direct or seen. This form of bias is the type most of us recognize immediately, as it is an expression of attitudes and beliefs we have about someone or something on a conscious level. For instance, Jim Crow laws are an example of explicit bias because they were designed to deliberately enforce racial segregation, primarily in the southern United States.



**Implicit Bias:** Implicit means hidden, secret or unseen. All of us carry unconscious ideas about the people around us. Often, we are not even aware of these ideas. Because we do not know these ideas are there, they lead us to make associations about ourselves and others which we act on every day. Implicit bias can impact the way we talk about, address and solve policy questions.

**Structural Racism:** The history of race-based laws and policies in the United States has created a framework that has resulted in an implicit set of rules based on race and skin color. For example, racial disparities in income, wealth and access to quality education and healthcare originated from a combination of historic factors including the history of slavery, Jim Crow laws and educational or governmental policies which created access for some and barriers for others.

**Racial Disparities:** People of color in the United States often have very different outcomes than white Americans. These differences are the result of policies, practices and decision-making processes influenced by institutionalized implicit biases. These disparities may influence the distribution of wealth, power and life opportunities for people based on their race or ethnicity. For instance, women of color have significantly higher early births and infant mortality rates than white women. That points to a significant underlying difference between the two races. How? Women of color have historically been treated poorly by the white medical community and many have limited or no access to prenatal care. These and other conditions specific to women of color have led to disproportionate negative outcomes for women of color, and an inherent bias against medicine as a threat to people of color.

**Color Blind or Race Neutral:** These two terms assume policy decisions can best be made without taking race into consideration. Unfortunately, because we all have implicit biases, many decisions are made with unconscious deference to biased racial ideas. Neither concept is intentionally put forth as a way to ignore history and its impact on today's realities. However, both miss the key issue that our racial history and unconscious biases are at play in our decision-making processes.

**Racialized Societal Messages:** These are messages that shape how we view ourselves as well as understand ourselves and others.

**Marginalization:** This is the treatment of a person, group or concept as not important.

**Discrimination:** This is the unjust treatment a person, group or concept. For instance, refusing financial lending services to persons of color because of the neighborhood they live in is a form of prejudicial understanding or treatment of differences. Human beings discriminate based on the most trivial categories and racial discrimination is influenced by racialized messages.

**Prejudice:** This is a preconceived opinion of a person, group or idea that is based on limited information, and often not based on reason or actual experience.



**Diversity:** Is the act of acknowledging that people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds live and work in the United States. Diversity simply points to difference, and diversity can drive innovation, strengthen creativity and broaden perspectives. Just because a group of people is diverse, however, does not mean it is inclusive. For instance, if in a work group of men and women of various races, ethnicities and religions, women are excluded from making decisions, that work group is a diverse space, but it is not inclusive or including of everyone.

**Inclusion:** This is the act of valuing diversity because it drives innovation, strengthens creativity and broadens perspectives. Inclusion works to assure that all voices are brought forward, empowering those who traditionally have not been heard.

**Segregation:** The act of keeping people separated based on group characteristics is segregation. In the Jim Crow south, we saw racial segregation at work with separate facilities for people of color and white people. Even though the laws which enforced and created segregation have been removed, the impact stemming from decades of deliberate legal segregation continues as the result of implicit bias.

**Racial Isolation:** This type of isolation is shaped by a history of racialized practices that molded neighborhoods and created an “us vs. them” mindset of division.


## Conversation Starters

With our common vocabulary in place, consider the following questions as they relate specifically to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission’s findings on the Flint Water Crisis, and to other aspects your life. Understand that these questions are not comprehensive and are intended to foster an expansive conversation about the crisis.

1. What is structural racism?
2. How did the report connect the role of race and structural racism as a factor in the Flint Water Crisis?
3. The report was clear that while racism played a role in the crisis, racism was not intentional. What is the phrase used to explain intentional and obvious racism? What is the phrase used to explain hidden or unconscious racism? Provide examples of each.
4. The report highlighted something called cognitive dissonance and how it related to the crisis. Cognitive dissonance is where what we believe and value is contradicted by our actions stemming from implicit bias. What did the report recommend in combating cognitive dissonance? What are the report’s recommendations to combat implicit bias in decision making?
5. The report offers numerous recommendations to avoid another crisis like the Flint Water Crisis. What are some of those suggestions for dismantling structural racism?



6. How does structural racism impact education?
7. Disparities in outcomes are rarely the result of explicit, or overt, acts of racism. More often, those disparities are the result of a system that limits access to opportunities for some people but not others. How does the report illustrate the impact of structural racism? What were some of the consequences of the structural racism underlying the Flint Water Crisis? Identify at least three instances in the report where structural racism played a role in the crisis.
8. The report looks back more than a century to explore laws and policies of the past and connect them to the present. What were some of those laws and policies? How did the past impact outcomes for people based on race? How do those laws continue to impact communities today?
9. What is racial equity?
10. The report highlighted how explicitly racist policies and laws impacted the growth of urban and suburban Flint. What were some of those laws and policies? How are these laws and policies continuing to impact Flint to this day? Are these new issues?
11. Did the contamination of Flint's water with high lead and copper levels influence higher discipline rates for students from Flint attending K-12 schools? Why or why not?
12. Many Michiganders believe the State of Michigan was responsible for the Flint Water Crisis. What are some of the factors that led residents to reach that conclusion?
13. Flint residents and many Michiganders believe the state should help address the ongoing public health issues related to the Flint Water Crisis. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
14. Thinking in the context of structural racism and the Flint Water Crisis report, how did historic laws that prevented people of color from living in certain neighborhoods have an impact on the crisis?
15. Again, thinking in the context of structural racism and the Flint Water Crisis report, what role did historic laws that prevented people of color from living in certain neighborhoods have on the accumulation of wealth for families of color? Is the lack of wealth accumulation important to the root causes of the Flint Water Crisis? Why or why not?
16. How did those long-erased policies and laws that restricted people of color to certain parts of the city contribute to the disparate outcomes for people of color in Flint?
17. What is redlining? Is it still happening today? If so, explain. If not, explain why you think it is not occurring.
18. Despite federal laws and rules requiring an end to segregated schooling, Flint schools continue to be segregated. What are the reasons the report identified that contributed to this segregation?

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- 19.** Some residents of Flint told the Commission the Flint Water Crisis was an example of environmental injustice. What is environmental injustice? Do you agree with those residents that the Flint Water Crisis is an example of environmental injustice? Why or why not?
  - 20.** How do you define the concept of trust as it relates to your personal life? How does that idea relate to your interactions with your neighbors? How does trust relate to your interactions with local, state and federal government?
  - 21.** How important do you think it is to have trust in government?
  - 22.** Some residents of Flint said they will never be able to trust local and state government again. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your reasons.
  - 23.** What steps could governments take to restore trust in them as institutions in the wake of the Flint Water Crisis?
  - 24.** What are examples from the report that show how residents lost trust in the government agencies that were responding to the crisis?
  - 25.** The Commission's Flint Water Crisis report was critical of the state's Emergency Manager law. What specific issues did the report highlight as it relates to the law and what were the recommended solutions?
  - 26.** What were some of the historic situations that underlie the city's fiscal emergency and the state's takeover of Flint under the Emergency Manager law? Have those issues been addressed and solved?
  - 27.** How racially diverse are (were) your neighborhood and school?
  - 28.** What messages have you received throughout your life about race?
  - 29.** How has race shaped your life?
  - 30.** How have racialized messages impacted the way you see yourself and others?
  - 31.** What strategies have you put in place to deconstruct the learnings that shape and influence your own racial biases?



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