

The history of environmental policy can well be told by place names. Love Canal – hazardous waste. Los Angeles – air quality. The Cuyahoga River – water quality. And, most recently, Flint – drinking water. The tragedy in Flint, Michigan, entered the 24/7 national news cycle five years ago, led President Obama to visit the city, and resulted in over a dozen criminal indictments. Flint is undoubtedly the most publicized drinking water story in U.S. history and continues to influence funding and policy decisions.

What has happened since Flint became national news? In the tradition of former soap opera and sitcom stars, where is Flint now?

The history of the crisis is now well known. Under the direction of a governor-appointed Emergency Manager, Flint had switched its water source from Detroit to save money. Flint intended to get its water from a new pipeline under construction. In the interim period before the pipe was completed, the city re-started its own treatment plant and took water from the Flint River. The main problem started when, for reasons that are still uncertain, the plant did not add a buffer – orthophosphate – that would neutralize the water's acidity. As a result, the water corroded the lead water service lines to houses and lead levels in the water (and children's blood lead levels) shot up.

Despite concerns raised by residents and scientists, the local and state officials steadfastly denied for months there were any problems. Once the story became national news, there followed a wave of resignations, lawsuits, and criminal indictments.

Once the truth came out, the city stopped providing Flint River water and switched back to the Detroit system. Flint became the most heavily tested water system in the country. Congress [sent upwards of \\$120 million](#) to remove lead service lines and upgrade the system. In February, 2018, after 30,000 water tests, Michigan declared Flint's water quality "restored": samples were coming in well below the Safe Drinking Water Act's standard for lead. The state stopped providing free bottled water. Not surprisingly, local residents have been skeptical about government claims of safe water.

The Michigan Attorney General formed an independent review to recommend enforcement actions. In all, criminal charges were brought against fifteen people. The director of Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services was charged with involuntary manslaughter. Other charges were brought against the state's chief medical executive, state officials accused of falsifying lead test results, two former Flint emergency managers, as well as Flint city officials and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality employees.

Despite this show of prosecutorial strength, no one has been convicted. In the case brought against the former chief of the state's water quality unit, for example, charges were dropped in exchange for a misdemeanor of disturbing a lawful meeting. In all, seven of the accused accepted plea deals and [charges were dropped](#) against the remaining eight. Not surprisingly, local residents were outraged. As one person [told a reporter](#), "This is not justice. It just seems like a political ploy. The only thing it tells me is that our lives don't matter."

Despite the lack of convictions, the Flint crisis has fundamentally changed the nation's views on drinking water. When I published my book on the [history of drinking water](#) in 2012, it was a topic of popular interest but not seen by many as a pressing matter of public policy. Flint changed all that. My publishers asked for a second edition with a new chapter on Flint and the city's name has taken on a special meaning. People know my point when I talk about water quality and mention Flint.

Indeed, whenever I give public lectures on drinking water, there is always a question along the lines of: "[How many Flints are out there?](#)" This is a fundamental question and, to me, it is really two questions. The first is asking about lead levels in drinking water. Concerns have since been raised about high lead levels in a number of cities, including [Newark](#) and [Baltimore](#). People pay much closer attention to lead in drinking water than they used to, and that's a good thing.

The second level of asking how many Flints are out there goes much deeper, though. The Flint story makes clear that the provision of safe water to our poorer, politically weaker communities cannot be taken for granted. We depend on government agencies to defend our interests in so many aspects of our daily lives—food safety, drugs, and, of course, water. And almost all of the time this trust is rewarded. Government officials work hard to protect the public health and safety, and we benefit as a result.

But, as Flint demonstrated, not all the time or in all places. The real lesson of Flint may well be that our roles must change from drinking water consumers to drinking water citizens, demanding a sustained focus by government officials on provision of safe drinking water to all citizens all the time.