

# Over 2 million Americans don't have access to indoor plumbing or water, report finds

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A new report titled “Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan,” published last month by two non-profit groups, DigDeep and U.S. Water Alliance, estimates that over 2 million Americans in 2019 do not have access to running water. The report drew its conclusions based on survey data from the American Community Survey and the US Census Bureau in addition to research conducted by Michigan State University.

Unlike other modern capitalist countries, the American federal government does not keep detailed records on lack of water access. The authors note that “datasets in the United States are incomplete, and official data collection efforts undercount vulnerable populations like communities of color and lower-income people.”

The authors also note that the available census data doesn't provide a complete picture of the problem; while the survey asks if a household has running water or indoor plumbing, which includes a toilet, tap and shower, the survey doesn't ask if the water service is affordable or safe to consume. As seen in cities throughout the United States, including Flint, Newark, Baltimore and Milwaukee, it is patently clear that the water flowing through corroding lead pipes and into the homes and schools of millions of Americans is not safe to drink.

In order to compensate for the limitations provided by the survey data, researchers for the report gathered qualitative data including interviews with residents in six specific regions within the US that “face water and sanitation access challenge.” These regions include the Central Valley in California, the Navajo Nation which covers parts of northeastern Arizona, southeastern Utah, and northwestern New Mexico, Texas *colonias* near El Paso, rural southern communities in Mississippi and Alabama, McDowell County, West Virginia and finally, the US territory of Puerto Rico.

Residents in most rural communities are forced to build septic systems and dig wells in order to survive. The costs

associated with the maintenance and repair of these private systems in order to ensure cleanliness and reliability are too high for many. Often wells have to be redug if they are contaminated with toxic runoff from nearby farms. Residents who have tried to speak out regarding water issues face reprisals from corporations, including service shutoffs, eviction, or immigration raids.

In the Texas *colonias* residents are forced to make use of unmonitored private wells. Hector and Juana, who live in a *colonia* called Laura E. Mundy, told researchers that they drank their well water for 20 years before they were both diagnosed with *H. pylori*, a water-borne infection that can cause cancer. With no other choice they are forced to still use well water to shower and clean, but Hector is “very, very afraid” that the well may run dry as nearby farms compete for groundwater.

Several of the *colonias* are located less than a mile from working service lines, but residents are told by government officials that there is “no money” to extend the lines and provide service. Many moved to the area originally on the promise from developers that once the community grew, roads would be paved and the lines would be extended, but this never came to fruition.

In McDowell County, previously clear streams now run black with runoff from fracking and mining operations. In addition to dirty water contaminated from years of extraction companies violating what pitiful regulations were put in place, local municipalities are unable to afford the equipment needed to repair old run-down coal camp water systems. These private systems were constructed by the coal companies to serve their workers and were abandoned when the companies left.

While these areas are in acute crisis, the report notes that every state in the US has entire communities, not isolated individuals, without access to plumbing. Generally, those living in urban areas which invested in and built public sanitation projects in the early 20th

century are still able to access running water. Over 5 percent of residents in Alaska are unable to access any public water works; in New Mexico it is 1.6 percent and just under 1 percent of the population in Arizona and Maine.

Given the survey results and their own research, the authors concluded that over 2 million Americans “live without basic access to safe drinking water and sanitation.” Within that group, 1.4 million people in the continental US and 250,000 Puerto Ricans “lack access to indoor plumbing.” The authors estimate an additional 553,000 homeless people within the US also do not have access to indoor plumbing.

As the authors note in the report, these numbers are vast under-representations of the true scale of the social crime perpetrated by the ruling class on the most exploited sections of the population.

“Water access issues disproportionately affect lower-income people, people of color, undocumented immigrants, and people who do not speak English, ... all groups that are considered Hard to Count (HTC) populations and are underrepresented in the census,” the report notes.

In a shocking testament to capitalism's inability to guarantee the basic rights of the working class, six states, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota and the US territory of Puerto Rico saw increases in the number of people within them that lacked access to water between 2000 and 2014.

In addition to losing access the report estimates that over 44 million Americans, over an eighth of the population, are currently being served by water systems that had recorded Safe Drinking Water Act violations. Private wells, which many rural and underserved communities are forced to rely on for water, are extremely susceptible to contamination. The United States Geological Survey found contaminants, including arsenic, uranium, nitrates, and E. coli in 23 percent of the wells tested for the report.

While overall the report's authors found a slight decline in the population without complete plumbing access from 1.6 million in 2000 to a slightly lower 1.4 million in 2014, very nearly within the margin of error, even this “decline” is much less than in previous decades. Between 1950 and 1970 the percentage of the US population that didn't have access to running water decreased from 27 percent to 5.9 percent.

The authors correctly point out that this decrease was due to robust public investment in public water systems.

“In 1977, 63 percent of total capital spending for water and wastewater systems came from federal agencies; today that number is less than nine percent.” It is clear from the report that billions of dollars are needed to either rebuild or construct new pipes and sanitation systems to combat this growing health crisis.

In order to guarantee access to clean water and sanitation services for every human being on the planet, the immense resources monopolized by the top 1 percent—every race, ethnicity, gender and nationality—must be put under the democratic control of the international working class, the class that creates all of society's wealth. This is not, however, the solution the authors of the report put forward.

Instead, drawing from the Democratic Party-aligned “Advisory Council” which had a hand in creating the report, including Derrick Johnson, President and Chief Executive Officer, NAACP and Pia Orrenius, vice president and senior economist of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, the report recommends further privatization of public services, promoting “collaborative collaboration” to “bring market expertise to the water access challenge.”

This also explains the report's elevation of race as the primary factor in determining water access. In the “Five Major Findings from the National Analysis,” the authors determine that race is the strongest predictor of water and sanitation access. While it is true that there are racial disparities, the report notes that Native Americans, due to living on remote rural reservations, are “19 times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing,” these disparities are not rooted in skin pigmentation, but class.

Poverty and social inequality, which the report attempts to downplay, are the key obstacles to clean water. Despite the shortcomings of the authors' conclusions, the report is valuable in highlighting the severity of the water crisis in America and the urgent necessity on the part of workers, students and youth to fight for a socialist solution that addresses the water access needs of the world's population.



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