CUAHSI Voices of the Future Award
2020
Undergraduate Student Awardee

Madison Coleman
Columbus State University

The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status and Access to High Quality Water Resources
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Consortium of Universities for the Advancement of Hydrologic Science Proposal
Clean water is an undeniable and inherent right to which every individual is entitled. Throughout history, numerous legislations have been passed in the United States to assert this right, claiming water equality for all. There is a clear disparity, however, between legislation and reality. The reality is this: water quality has never been equal across the communities of the United States of America. The degradation of water quality is not a new concept, and discussions and decisions have taken place to rectify water quality issues. These conversations, however, often fail to include communities whose socioeconomic statuses silence them. Wealth, status, and race are all key factors that have kept water quality laws such as the Safe Drinking Water Act from becoming reality to all.

A prime example of the correlation between marginalized groups and degraded water quality is California’s San Joaquin Valley. According to research conducted by the Safe Water Alliance (SWA), Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW), and the International Human Rights Law Clinic (IHRLC) in California, a positive relationship was determined between “communities with a higher proportion of minority residents” and higher levels of water contaminants (2014). Other studies of the San Joaquin area support the assertions of the SWA, EJCW, and IHRLC, stating “there is no direct causal path between race and class and disproportionate burdens; rather, race and class are imbricated in almost all the factors and actors that have historically combined, and still combine, to produce this composite burden” (Balazs and Ray 2014). Both studies clearly dictate that although the path between socioeconomic status and water inequality may not be linear, the two are without a doubt tied to one another. As shown by the case studies of San Joaquin Valley, the combination of poorer wealth, lower status, and the mere existence as a minority race often results in lower quality of water.

The issue of water inequality is not limited to California. Across the country is another example, shedding even further light onto the environmental injustices faced by marginalized areas. Flint, Michigan has struggled with water quality violations since 2014. Flint received attention and support via the media initially, with the hopes of bringing justice to the area. However, Flint is still experiencing water contamination and inequality in the year of 2020. For most, it may be difficult to understand how so little
has been solved in the six years since Flint’s water crisis began. The Natural Resources Defense Council, however, explains in their report that “water systems that serve the communities that are the most marginalized are more likely to be in violation of the law—and to stay in violation for longer periods of time” (2020).

In addition to the higher and longer exposure to contaminated drinking water, lower socioeconomic households experience even more strain due to the ‘double cost’ of their water supply. Not only must they pay utility fees for unusable water, these communities must also adhere to the cost of buying and transporting usable water. Financially, this drives poorer areas into intensified monetary burden, lowering their socioeconomic status even more. In contrast, communities with higher status and wealth—typically Caucasian—simply pay for water that is properly monitored, with no additional concern or cost. These financial and health stressors combined create a weight that simply cannot be placed upon the shoulders of these communities any longer.

The environmental injustices faced by marginalized socioeconomic groups are not limited to the United States. However, in an age where the United States is considered a leader in economic, social, and environmental standards, it must be highlighted that these standards are not upheld across the nation. As shown by the aforementioned research, the fact that marginalized areas are being subjected to low-quality water—causing both physical and financial burden—can no longer be denied. Now that these injustices are being brought to light, the conversation must turn to solutions. The first and foremost step towards justice, as discussed in this paper, is to have an honest conversation simply admitting the presence of environmental inequality faced by society. Secondly, the factors and reasoning behind the infringement of water quality rights must be addressed and analyzed. This situation can only be remedied by a complete revision of previous water quality legislation, in which marginalized communities are given a chance for their experiences to be heard. Increasing transparency and communication between those facing oppression and those inflicting oppression is key to enacting positive change.

Within the undeniable right to clean water are two other rights: the right to know, and the right to be known. As Rachel Carson, author of groundbreaking novel *Silent Spring* once said, “If, having
endured much, we have at last asserted our "right to know," and if by knowing, we have concluded that we are being asked to take senseless and frightening risks, then we should no longer accept the counsel of those who tell us that we must fill our world with poisonous chemicals; we should look about and see what other course is open to us”. It is time for marginalized communities to assert their right to know and be known in the pursuit of a new course, in which their rights to clean water are no longer infringed upon.
References


