

Flint water crisis demonstrates value of social networks

February 21 2023, by Jim Hanchett



Flint residents protest outside of the Michigan State Capital in January 2016.
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The size, strength and makeup of people's social networks are key indicators of how they will respond to the health consequences of an environmental disaster, according to a new Cornell study that focused on the Flint, Michigan, water crisis.

People with large networks of friends and associates, especially networks with women, were more likely to get blood-level screenings and take other actions to protect their health when the public water supply in Flint was found to be contaminated in 2014.

Among Flint residents, the size, quality and inclusion of women in social networks was linked to better physical and mental health, including fewer reported symptoms of skin rashes. Residents with more close ties reported fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, the study found.

That's a particularly useful finding for a majority-Black community overlooked by government such as Flint, the researchers said. The study suggests that state and [federal agencies](#) will have much more success if they partner with local groups and listen to those who know a city best.

"Community contexts and connections matter," said researcher Jenna Shelton, a doctoral student affiliated with the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. "Community leaders know better than anyone what their [community needs](#) and how to access resources."

An article about the findings—"The Cultural Dimensions of Collective Action During Environmental Hazards: Assessing Race, Gender and Social Support Network Dynamics in the Flint Water Crisis"—was

published Feb. 15 in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*.

Shelton and researchers Elizabeth Chase of the University of Michigan School of Public Health, Babatunde Patrick Ajayi '25, Joyce Armstrong '25 and Jerel Ezell, assistant professor of sociology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine and director of the Cornell Center for Cultural Humility, worked with a Flint-based survey team to question 331 residents at a range of times and locations and with a special focus on cultural sensitivity.

The survey upheld research that shows that people are more inclined to listen to others who share similar demographics. Black women are among the strongest advocates of their community in Flint and, when working collectively, can have the most success communicating key information. Some of that will happen naturally, as it did in Flint, but outside agencies can also benefit, the researchers said.

"Federal, state and local governments must collaborate with community members and their broader networks to get upstream of potential crises," Shelton said. "They also must be prepared, as a downstream measure, to provide efficacious, trusted, and culturally tailored support for diverse communities during crisis."

More information: Jenna L. Shelton et al, The cultural dimensions of collective action during environmental hazards: Assessing race, gender, and social support network dynamics in the Flint Water Crisis, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijdrr.2023.103565](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2023.103565)

Provided by Cornell University

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