Older Adults’ Understandings of the Flint Water Crisis

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Across the life course, exposure to drinking water contaminants can differently impact physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Harmful effects of lead exposure can be exacerbated by challenges of social isolation, frailty, and comorbidities that many older adults face. This paper draws on data from an ongoing ethnographic study of older residents of Flint, Michigan (n=33, data collected between December 2016 and present). Our sample consists of African American and white Flint residents of varying socioeconomic status. This paper explores efforts to maintain and improve health, finding two key domains of everyday practice in which older adults experience the water crisis’s effects. The first consists of activities to access clean water at home (e.g., water testing, maintaining filters, procuring water bottles), and the second of activities related to water usage (e.g., meal preparation, personal hygiene). This study highlights the ongoing, labor-intensive activities that older Flint residents perceive necessary to maintain health. As older residents work to sustain practices that ensure clean water, they are simultaneously creating, maintaining, and transforming social relations, including those with kin, community-based institutions serving older adults, government employees, and volunteers. Given the context of mistrust and uncertainty for the future, these findings suggest a need for continued research on older adults’ experiences and multiple approaches to disseminating research findings.

Other members of the research team include Dr. Kimberly Seibel, Colleen Linn, and Maxwell Smith. In 2017, the research team received the Betty J. Cleckley Minority Issues Research Award for the manuscript entitled, Health Maintenance in Challenging Times: Older Adults’ Experiences in the Flint Water Crisis, from the Aging and Public Health Section of the American Public Health Association.

Dr. Jessica Robbins is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Gerontology and Department of Anthropology at Wayne State University. As a medical and sociocultural anthropologist, she studies how individuals' experiences of aging – especially of health and illness – are part of broader social, cultural, political, economic, and historical processes.

Dr. Tam Perry is an assistant professor at Wayne State University School of Social Work. Her research addresses urban aging from a life course perspective, focusing on how underserved older adults navigate their social and built environments in times of instability and change.

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