

THE NECESSITY OF ACCURACY: INVESTIGATING THE FAILURES OF THE FLINT WATER CRISIS

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Figure 1

Fearful of using the tap water to wash their food, Flint residents Melissa and Adam Mays prepare meals with bottled water | Brittany Greeson



Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

INTRODUCTION

Overview

- In 2014, the Flint government switched its water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River to reduce costs
- Lead leaked into the water due to old pipes and improper corrosion control
- Residents were exposed to contaminated water for 18 months
- Government messaging minimized risk and contradicted observed conditions

Thesis Statement

- Crisis escalated due to inaccurate communication
- Independent scientific research and investigative journalism validated resident concerns and exposed errors
- Inaccurate messaging increased both health harm and reputational damage

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Figure 2

Five-month-old Dakota Eler of Flint gets blood drawn to have her lead levels tested at Carriage Town Ministries in 2016. | Brittany Greeson



Note. From “Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know” By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

BACKGROUND

Events Leading up to the Crisis

- In April 2014, the water source was switched to Flint River for cost reduction
- Immediately after, residents complained of discoloration, odor, taste of water
- In Summer 2014, the government admitted bacterial contamination in the water, prompting boil water advisories
- In 2015, independent studies confirmed lead in water

The Nature of the Crisis

- The crisis was a man-made public health emergency
- Could have been prevented if not for policy failure
- Could have been mitigated if acknowledged sooner
- Exposure was prolonged for 18 months

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CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESPONSE

How the Government Responded

1. Denial: resident complaints were dismissed and overassured that water was safe
2. Minimization: boil advisories were issued, but lead exposure was not addressed
3. Justification: independent research challenged government’s statements
4. Acknowledgement: officially recognized crisis only after scientific and journalistic pressure

Investigating Communication Strategies

- Purely reactive, no proactive management
- Limited engagement with investigative journalists created an adversarial dynamic
- Government eventually lost credibility in public eye, with independent researchers and reporters filling the gaps

APPLYING CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Crisis Classification & Characteristics

- Hermann's Three Characteristics:
 - Partial Surprise — government dismissed citizens' worries
 - Severe Threat — lead exposure has irreversible health problems
 - Prolonged Response Time — inaction for 18 months
- Situational Crisis Communication Theory
 - Defined as a preventable due to harm from negligence
 - Apology and corrective action should have immediately stopped crisis, rather than denial and delay extending it

Media & Information Dynamics

- News Framing Theory: government initially stated that the water was safe, but journalism and research reframed it as a public health crisis
- Crisis News Diffusion: news coverage accelerated the challenging of official statements
- Exemplification Theory: visuals and witness statements provided by Flint citizens backed claims of contamination and suffering

Figure 3

Resident Lorenzo Lee Avery Jr. stands outside of Flint City Hall during a Flint Lives Matter event in 2016 while the city's water crisis left residents dependent on bottled water. | Brittany Greeson



Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

EVALUATING THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Figure 3

Resident Lorenzo Lee Avery Jr. stands outside of Flint City Hall during a Flint Lives Matter event in 2016 while the city's water crisis left residents dependent on bottled water. | Brittany Greeson

Overall Assessment

- Strengths:
 - A state of emergency was eventually declared and water source was reversed
 - As of July 2025, more than 28,000 pipes have been excavated and nearly 11,000 lead lines have been replaced
- Weaknesses:
 - 18 month delay exposing 9,000 children to lead
 - Constant denial of crisis through inaccurate communications

Outcomes

- National news coverage reframed the crisis as environmental injustice and systemic racism against primarily lower-class minority citizens
- Flint residents lost all trust in their government as they were forced to escalate the situation themselves



Note. From "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know" By Denchak, M., 2025, Natural Resources Defense Council.

Figure 4

A Flint Resident Protests Governor Snyder | Source: Photo by Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.



Note. From “Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from Crisis to Opportunity (4th Ed.)” By Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W., 2017, SAGE Publications.

LESSONS LEARNED

Key Takeaways

- Accuracy must take priority over reputation management in crisis communication
- Scientific verification should precede any public safety assurances
- Pre-crisis stakeholder trust directly affects crisis response effectiveness
- Delayed communication and action amplify harm in public health crises
- Independent research can correct institutional misinformation and enforce accountability

Recommendations

- Implement mandatory third-party scientific validation at first sign of risk
- Increase transparency through public-facing data systems and reporting tools
- Build strong stakeholder relationships before crises occur
- Conduct crisis simulations and preparedness planning within government systems
- Shift communication strategy from defensive messaging to evidence-based updates

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CONCLUSION

Synthesis of Findings

- Flint represents a combined failure of technical breakdown and communication collapse
- Lack of corrosion control started the crisis, while inaccurate messaging extended it
- Resulted in public health harm and institutional distrust
- Communication failure compounded operational failure

Final Argument

- Accuracy in communications determines how a crisis will be portrayed
- In public health crises, inaccurate messaging is directly linked to physical harm
- Reputational damage is driven more by perceived deception than initial error
- Delayed truth increases both physical harm and reputational damage
- Effective crisis management requires alignment between evidence, messaging, and action

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THANK YOU!

ANY QUESTIONS?



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