

THE PROBLEM

How does a city's organizational capacity affect the design and implementation of city policies on water affordability?

BACKGROUND

The cost of water for US consumers has increased 3x since 1990 and 50% since 2010, and water bills are projected to be unaffordable for 36% of US households by 2022 (Kane 2018; Mack & Wise 2017). In 2016, water utilities shut off water in more than half a million households because of nonpayment (Food & Water Watch 2018).



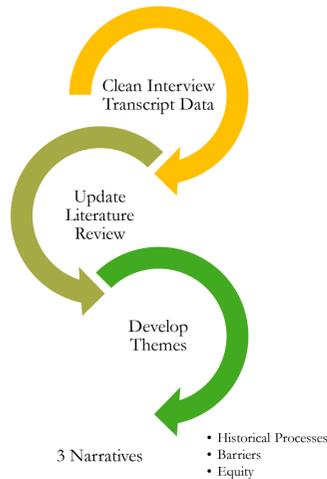
Unaffordable water and shutoffs have many adverse health & social outcomes. Shutoffs can lead to dehydration, water-borne illnesses, and spread of infectious diseases (Amirjadji et al. 2013; Plum et al. 2017). In many cities, residents who cannot pay their water bills are at risk of foreclosure or eviction from their homes (Jones & Moulton 2016). Research shows that municipalities are handling the growing unaffordability crisis differently, where some offer Customer Assistance Plans (CAPs) for those who cannot pay their water bill (e.g. discounts & payment plans; Cook et al. 2020). However, this does not explain why cities choose to offer assistance or not, or how they decide which specific groups (i.e. disabled persons, elderly residents, ESIPA 2016b) should get relief from high water costs.

CITY COMPARISONS

This research focuses on 12 cities in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania divided into 6 categories. The focal cities were selected due to their well-documented problems of water unaffordability and shut offs. Currently, 26 total interviews have been conducted with city representatives and other key informants on the issue to help contextualize the findings.

Focal City: High Poverty, Majority Non-White • Boston, MA • Philadelphia, PA	Large City: High Poverty, Predominantly White • Worcester, MA • Pittsburgh, PA
Large City: Low Poverty, Predominantly white • Cambridge, MA • Bethlehem, PA	Smaller City: High Poverty, Majority Non-White • Chelsea, MA • Harrisburg, PA
Smaller City: High Poverty, Predominantly White • New Bedford, MA • McKeesport, PA	Smaller City: Low Poverty, Predominantly White • Brookline, MA • Perkasie, PA

METHODOLOGY



FINDINGS OF THEMES

What historical policies or organizational processes have led us to our current crisis of water unaffordability?

- **Theme 1: Financial Costs**
 - Economic Realities
 - Bills Coming Due
 - Water Management Modernization
 - Misalignment of Penalties
 - Rate Setting Politics - Misleading Rates

What are the barriers that municipal officials encounter when they are trying to develop or administer CAPs?

- **Theme 2: Organizational Capacity**
 - Lack of Outreach
 - Legal Misinterpretation
 - Administrative Burden
 - Physical Infrastructure
 - IT Infrastructure
 - Siloed Approach
- **Theme 3: Ideological Barriers – Deservingness**
 - Utility's Perception Of Customers
 - Customer Level Factors

What are utilities doing to overcome these barriers and are such solutions equitable?

- **Theme 4: Organizational Learning**
 - Institutional Isomorphism
 - Reliance on Consultants
 - Conferences
- **Theme 5: Community Outreach**
- **Theme 6: Budgeting Process**
 - Use of Enterprise Funds
 - Raising Revenue Through Other Means

RECOMMENDATIONS

