

Mapping the Uneven Geography of Water Disconnection Policy in Central Illinois

Research Summary

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In the United States, water affordability concerns have been on the rise. Over ten percent of American households face unaffordable water bills, a figure that is expected to continue to rise as water infrastructure ages and becomes less efficient. Rising water rates most adversely affect low-income households who must dedicate a larger portion of their income to water bills. There is significant variation in how punitively utilities respond to late payments. Unlike other utilities (e.g., gas, electricity), there are no national programs to support low-income households in maintaining water access. The degree of leniency offered to those behind on their bills is a matter of local decision-making. While geographers have recently studied the uneven geographic patterns of water rates (Mack & Wrase, 2017) and water infrastructure (Deitz & Meehan, 2019), the geography of service disconnection policy has not been deeply studied.

This research seeks to understand the geography disconnection policy and its relationships with forms of socio-spatial inequality (e.g., spatial concentration of poverty, racialized spatial inequalities, etc.). What variation exists in billing and disconnection policies across space? To what extent are these policy changes reinforcing existing patterns of socio-spatial inequality (e.g., with respect to race, income level, etc.)?

To research these questions, we developed a disconnection policy index to facilitate the comparison of communities' policies. This index was comprised of the following policy factors such as the number of days a bill must be overdue for disconnection to be performed, whether payment plans are offered to customers, whether late fees are charged for overdue bills, and whether customers are charged a fee to have water service restored after disconnection. This policy information was pulled from local community water ordinances as well as from a survey of local utility officials for cities, towns, and villages in a 23-county area of central Illinois.

This research found significant variation in the billing and disconnection policies throughout the study area. For example, in some communities, a service disconnection can be performed when a bill is overdue by seven days, while in other communities, customers have 90 days to make payment. Service disconnection fees can range from \$15 to \$150. These stricter policies can make it more difficult for low-income households to maintain or restore water service if they fall behind on their bills. By analyzing the policy index data against census data, this research has been able to identify “disconnection hotspots,” places where there are high rates of people living at or below the poverty line, which also have highly strict disconnection policies. These hotspots are communities where low-income households may face disproportionately high challenges with maintaining water access. Further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to understand people's experiences of water access in these communities.