

Jackson Water Crisis and Higher Education

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- **Residents** of Jackson, Mississippi have been without clean water since August of 2022
- **Colleges and universities** adapted to the crisis, and have taken various approaches including delaying classes, and transitioning to online learning
- **Institutions** like Alcorn State University, Mississippi Valley State University, the University of Mississippi, and Mississippi State University invested in their own water well systems to avoid unstable water supply
- **Mississippi** is set to receive more federal funding, but it is not estimated to be enough to fix years of aging water infrastructure

Background

The Jackson water crisis began in late August of 2022 when major flooding damaged a pump at the O.B. Curtis Water Plant, leaving nearly 150,000 residents of Mississippi's capital city without drinkable water. Jackson has experienced issues with their water system dating as far back as 2010, and Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba explains that decades of lack of maintenance, understaffing, and ignored equipment failure are to blame for Jackson having such rampant and continuous water problems.

Water Crisis and Higher Education

With the water systems out of commission, colleges and universities in Jackson decided to send students home and/or return to virtual learning to give students more flexibility and alleviate some of the complications in classroom buildings with no water. Similar to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, families are struggling to support their children when home from school.

For higher education institutions such as **Jackson State University**, **Belhaven University**, and **Millsaps College**, move-ins got delayed, and classes moved from the classroom to students' personal devices. Students have taken matters into their own hands, organizing fundraisers to buy pallets of water to give to peers and residents of the community to supplement the pallets given by the government. Among other things, schools have had to follow mandates to boil water and have faced issues of Wi-Fi and computer access.

This crisis sparked political debates surrounding racial discrimination, infrastructure neglect, and much more as people of color and those from lower socioeconomic statuses are disproportionately impacted. Jackson's population is 82.5% Black and Mississippi has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. The state also receives the third highest amount of federal funding based on need. This has raised questions of why government authorities have not addressed the systemic and structural issues of this water system before now, particularly with the number of past crises.

Tougaloo College has not been as affected by the water crisis, as they have their own water well system. This is a luxury that institutions across the state have invested in, including **Alcorn State University**, **Mississippi Valley State University**, the **University of Mississippi**, and **Mississippi State University**. Both Millsaps College and Jackson State University are exploring options for building their own water systems in the future to combat the unreliability of the city's supply. This crisis has forced students at JSU, Millsaps College, and Belhaven University to use portable toilets and has restricted student access to basic necessities like showers and laundry services.

Looking to Flint, Michigan can be a useful comparison as Jackson faces its current water crisis. In Flint, Michigan, a similar water crisis has overwhelmed the city system, including the University of Michigan-Flint. Starting in April 2014, Flint residents began reporting sickness that traced back to high lead levels in the drinking water. Amid

the crisis, the city of Flint distributed free bottled water to residents. This change in water safety undoubtedly changed the experiences of University of Michigan-Flint students and although it has been under control since 2018, studies show that students' academic performance have been negatively impacted by the lack of clean water available.

While the issue in Jackson is ongoing and will likely take years to resolve completely, the state is set to

receive \$400 million in the next five years as a part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law signed by President Biden in November 2021. Similarly, Jackson State University is on track to receive \$2.25 million from the American Rescue Plan to work on contingency plans and projects to keep clean water for the university. While both of these funding plans will assist with the issue, critics estimate that neither will be enough for complete long-term solutions to the frail and crumbling Mississippi water infrastructure.

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