



Surging Water Costs amid the US Affordability Crisis

Surging Water Costs amid the US Affordability Crisis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary.....2

Key Findings2

Introduction3

Water Rates Vary Across the US4

Corporate Control Raises Water Bills8

Water Bills Are Increasing for Most Households9

Water Bills Grew Faster Than Both Inflation and Household Income10

Water Bills Hit Low-Income Households the Hardest11

Conclusion and Recommendations12

Methodology13

Endnotes.....15

Summary

Households across the United States are grappling with rising drinking water bills, stretching their ability to make ends meet.¹ Food & Water Watch compiled and analyzed water billing data for the 500 largest community water systems in 2025, which collectively served 155 million people (45% of the US). We compared typical household water bills in 2025 to those in 2015, using data from the previous Food & Water Watch investigation.

Key Findings

- From 2015 to 2025, household drinking water bills increased faster than inflation, grocery prices, and median household income. The average community water system increased household drinking water bills by 62%.
- Water bills increased at 1.6 times the overall inflation rate and more than 2 times the rate for groceries.
- Water bills increased 19% faster than the US median household income, forcing households to spend a higher portion of their stretched incomes on water.
- In Louisiana, Maryland, New Hampshire, and West Virginia, water bills grew about twice as fast as their corresponding statewide median household incomes.

Drinking water bills varied widely across the US in 2025

- The average water system charged a typical household \$531 for drinking water service in 2025 (assuming 60,000 gallons of water use).
- The least expensive system charged typical households just \$133, while the most expensive system charged \$1,416.
- The 25 most expensive systems charged households more than \$1,000 for water in 2025, while the 25 least expensive systems charged less than \$260.
- Water bills varied widely by state, with the average West Virginia system charging the highest water bills (\$1,383) and the average Idaho system charging the lowest (\$286).
- Water bills were unaffordable for low-income households in nearly all (93%) of the analyzed water systems.
- Drinking water bills were unaffordable for the median household in West Virginia, where half of households served by the largest systems were charged at least 2.3% of their income for water. For low-income households in the state, water bills amounted to an alarming 11% of their income.
- The worst affordability crisis was in Puerto Rico, where the largest systems charged typical households water bills exceeding 3.5% of their income. Low-income households were charged a dangerous 20% of their income.

Corporate water systems charged more than public systems

- For-profit water corporations charged typical households an average of \$823 for water in 2025, compared to \$494 charged by publicly owned systems. This means water corporations charged \$329 more for water (67% more) than public systems did.
- The average public system charged typical households less in 2025 than what the average water corporation charged a decade ago in 2015 (\$501).
- The gap in pricing between public and corporate water systems widened, with the average corporation increasing water bills by \$157 more than the average public system over 10 years.

Without action to restore federal support for public water systems and rein in corporate water abuses, water bills will continue to increase faster than households can reasonably absorb. Every level of government must take action to ensure safe, affordable, locally controlled water for all.

Introduction

Industrial pollution, aging infrastructure, and federal disinvestment are fueling a crisis for the nation's water systems.² According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), drinking water systems will need \$625 billion in upgrades over the next two decades just to comply with existing water quality standards.³ The agency recognized that this figure is likely an underestimate,⁴ and the American Water Works Association estimated the need at nearly \$1 trillion (\$960 billion).⁵

On top of this, climate change-driven droughts and other severe weather patterns continue to threaten water supplies and infrastructure globally,⁶ generating expenses that will be pushed onto ratepayers.⁷ Continued expansion of water-intensive industries like factory farming⁸ and hyperscale data centers also compound threats on local water supplies.⁹ Big Agriculture, the largest contributor of nutrient pollution in the US,¹⁰ is another driver of drinking water costs in the country¹¹ due to the price tag of treatment and mitigation.¹² The rapid expansion of data centers to fuel Big Tech is expected to require up to \$58 billion in infrastructure upgrades that would primarily burden local communities,¹³ with higher costs passed on to everyday ratepayers.¹⁴

All these factors make upgrading infrastructure both a priority and a critical challenge for many water utilities.¹⁵ Because federal support failed to keep up with the needs of water systems, state and local spending on water infrastructure quadrupled over the past 60 years¹⁶ and forced water systems to fund improvements through rate hikes.¹⁷ While the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law of 2021 provided a five-year infusion of water funding, this support ended in fiscal year 2026.¹⁸ Moreover, in 2025, and again in 2026, the Trump administration proposed eliminating the primary source of federal support for local drinking water and wastewater projects altogether, which would cut \$2.46 billion in funding, leaving a scant \$305 million for states as they “adjust to alternative funding sources.”¹⁹

Given this difficult federal landscape and growing challenges for water systems, water service is likely to become unaffordable for more households. Unfortunately, no federal agency tracks household billing information from drinking water utilities.²⁰ To fill this gap and shine light on the critical issue of water affordability, Food & Water Watch compiled a unique and comprehensive analysis of household water bills for the 500 largest community water systems in the US in 2025. These systems collectively served 155 million

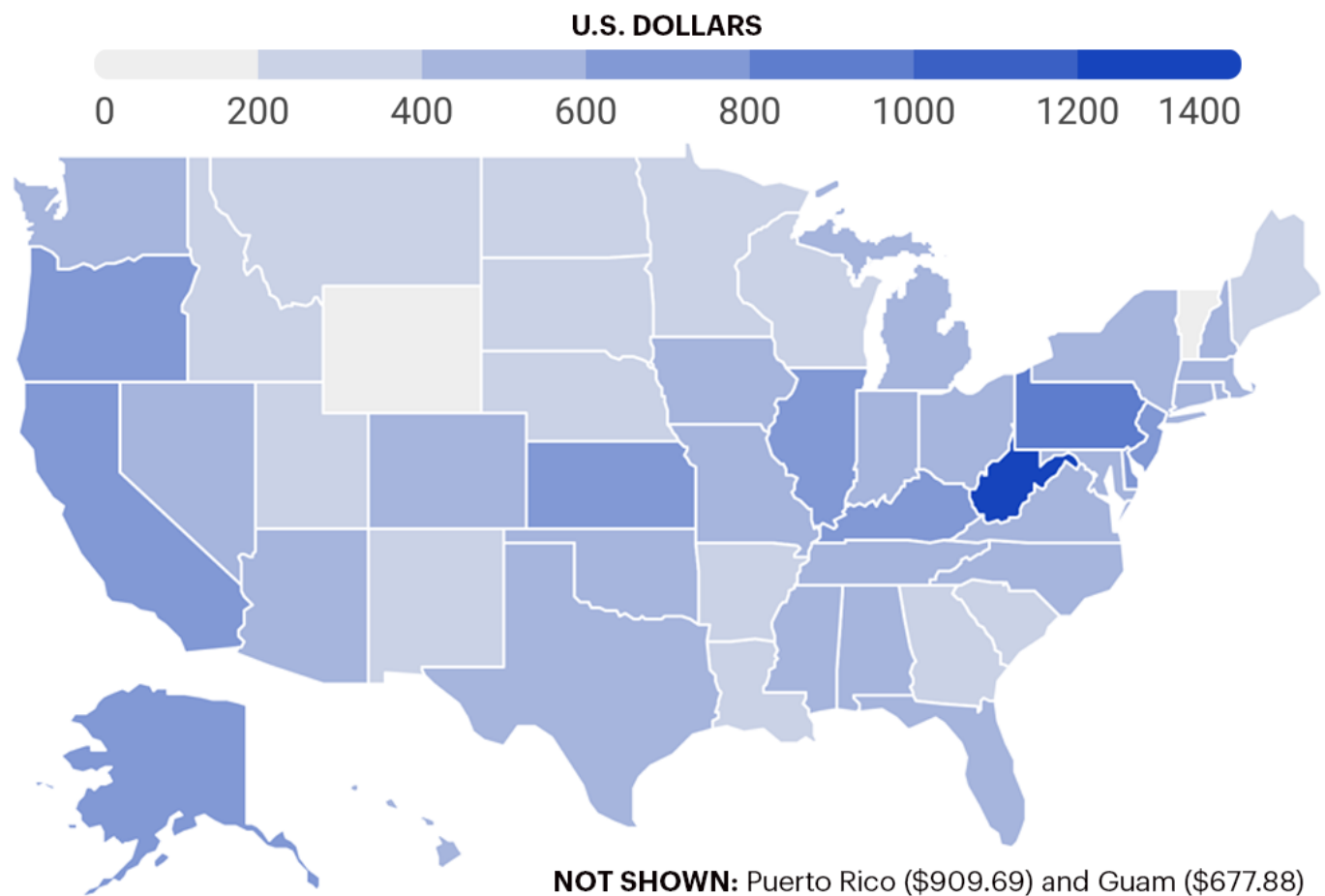
people nationwide (45% of the country). For each system, we calculated the annual water bill for a typical household using 60,000 gallons of water (the estimated annual indoor usage).^{*} The bills do not include wastewater or stormwater charges because many jurisdictions have separate utilities providing those services. (See Methodology for more information.)

Water Rates Vary Across the US

In 2025, the average US water system charged households \$531 a year for 60,000 gallons of water, but bills varied greatly across the country. A public water system in Hempstead, New York charged \$133, while a corporate system in San Jose, California charged \$1,416—a ten-fold difference.

Fig. 1: Where are the most expensive water bills in the U.S.?

State average of annual drinking water bills of typical households (using 60,000 gallons per year)



SOURCE: Food & Water Watch analysis of drinking water rate schedules from the 500 largest community water systems

^{*} For comparison purposes, we used the same measure of household usage (60,000 gallons a year) that was applied in our 2015 analysis.

Drinking water bills also varied widely by state. Idaho had the lowest bills, where its three largest systems charged an average of \$286. West Virginia had the highest bills, where its two largest systems—owned by American Water—charged an average of \$1,383.

In both West Virginia and Puerto Rico, the largest systems charged drinking water bills that were unaffordable for the typical household. Typical water bills exceeded 2.3% of median household income in West Virginia and 3.5% of median household income in Puerto Rico.

Most expensive systems

The 25 most expensive water systems charged more than \$1,000 a year for basic household drinking water service. Key trends include:

- **Corporate systems were overrepresented:** While only 11% of the 500 systems in the dataset were privately owned, 44% of the top 25 most expensive systems and 70% of the top 10 were owned by for-profit corporations.
- **California was overrepresented:** More than half (52%) of the 25 most expensive systems were in California, whereas California systems represented just 18% of the 500 systems in the dataset. Several factors could have contributed to this trend. Coastal cities in Southern California and the Bay Area that pay higher rates purchase their water (directly or indirectly) from the State Water Project,²¹ which pumps water through an extensive network of conveyance and storage infrastructure.²²

In the face of drought and water supply issues,²³ some California systems pursued costly alternative water supply projects like desalination.²⁴ For example, a recent study on drought in Santa Cruz, California, found that droughts and the subsequent costs to improve resilience could double the average household's water bills.²⁵ In areas of dwindling water supply, whether following a drought or not, energy-intensive processes are used to extract, treat, and move water,²⁶ translating into higher costs for utilities and ratepayers.

- **Surface water was often more expensive:** All but one of the 25 most expensive systems relied on surface water, including seven systems that primarily purchased their surface water from other systems. Compared to groundwater wells, surface water is often more expensive because it is more vulnerable to contamination and requires additional treatment.²⁷

Table 1. Top 25 Most Expensive Water Systems in 2025

Typical Household Bills for 60,000 Gallons a Year

RANK	UTILITY NAME	STATE	OWNERSHIP	2025 ANNUAL WATER BILL	PERCENT INCREASE 2015-2025
1	San Jose Water Company	California	Private	\$ 1,416.09	163%
2	American Water - Huntington	West Virginia	Private	\$ 1,396.96	97%
3	American Water - Kanawha Valley	West Virginia	Private	\$ 1,369.57	93%
4	Escondido	California	Local government	\$ 1,359.60	100%
5	American Water - Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	Private	\$ 1,355.71	71%

Surging Water Costs amid the US Affordability Crisis

RANK	UTILITY NAME	STATE	OWNERSHIP	2025 ANNUAL WATER BILL	PERCENT INCREASE 2015-2025
5	American Water - Lake Scranton	Pennsylvania	Private	\$ 1,355.71	71%
5	American Water - West	Pennsylvania	Private	\$ 1,355.71	71%
8	Aqua Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Private	\$ 1,351.09	73%
9	Santa Barbara	California	Local government	\$ 1,316.06	147%
10	Marin Municipal Water District	California	Local government	\$ 1,294.68	202%
11	San Jose	California	Local government	\$ 1,242.04	228%
12	Pittsburgh	Pennsylvania	Local government	\$ 1,222.96	152%
13	Taulatin Valley Water District	Oregon	Local government	\$ 1,209.18	240%
14	San Francisco	California	Local government	\$ 1,175.35	114%
15	Sacramento	California	Local government	\$ 1,167.60	213%
16	American Water - East St. Louis	Illinois	Private	\$ 1,117.45	88%
17	Lynn Water and Sewer Commission	Massachusetts	Local government	\$ 1,116.58	306%
18	American Water - Peoria	Illinois	Private	\$ 1,115.55	88%
19	Oceanside	California	Local government	\$ 1,111.16	109%
20	American Water - Champaign	Illinois	Private	\$ 1,095.16	92%
21	Santa Maria	California	Local government	\$ 1,055.50	66%
22	Vista Irrigation District	California	Local government	\$ 1,041.94	66%
23	Helix Water District	California	Local government	\$ 1,016.72	87%
24	Golden State Water Company	California	Private	\$ 1,013.60	87%
25	Otay Water District	California	Local government	\$ 1,004.48	87%

Least expensive systems

In comparison, the 25 least expensive water systems charged typical households less than \$260 a year for water service. Key trends include:

- **Public ownership dominated:** The 25 least expensive water systems were all publicly owned.
- **Water bills were more affordable:** Typical water bills charged by the 25 least expensive systems made up less than 0.5% of their state's median income in 2024.
- **Many were in the South and included growing cities:** 60% of the least expensive systems were in the South, including many in Florida and Georgia. Many also served rapidly growing cities including Dallas, Orlando, and Phoenix, each of which increased its service population by more than 100,000 people from 2015 to 2025. Some systems may have had water rate structures that relied on revenue from higher water users (e.g., households that water lawns or fill swimming pools).²⁸ In some cases, their rate structures may have included a certain amount of water in the base or meter charge and only charged volumetric rates when that amount was exceeded.²⁹ A study based on our 2015 dataset found

that newer water systems also charged lower bills compared to those in older localities, which have aging systems that require expensive replacements and updates.³⁰

- **They included larger service areas:** The 25 least expensive systems collectively served 30% more people than the 25 most expensive systems, allowing costs to be spread among more users.³¹

Table 2. Top 25 Least Expensive Water Systems in 2025

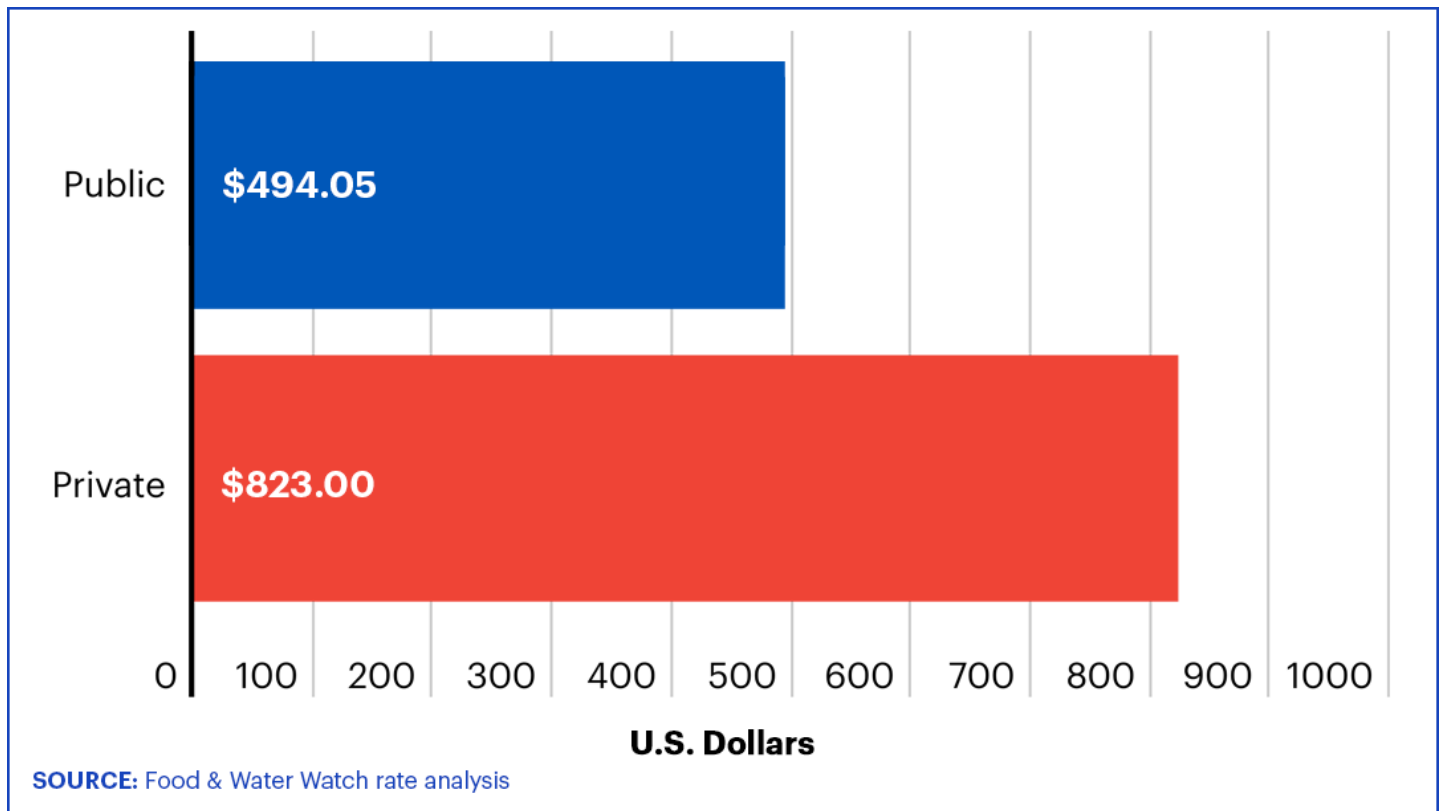
Typical Household Bills for 60,000 Gallons a Year

RANK	UTILITY NAME	STATE	OWNERSHIP	2025 ANNUAL WATER BILL	PERCENT INCREASE 2015-2025
500	Hempstead	New York	Local government	\$ 133.42	31%
499	Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District	Utah	Local government	\$ 139.80	N/A
498	Phoenix	Arizona	Local government	\$ 151.83	80%
497	Greenville Water	South Carolina	Local government	\$ 174.84	30%
496	Savannah	Georgia	Local government	\$ 181.07	28%
495	Orlando Utilities Commission	Florida	Local government	\$ 192.00	38%
494	Meridian	Idaho	Local government	\$ 194.88	N/A
493	Toho Water Authority	Florida	Local government	\$ 199.68	61%
492	Lafayette	Louisiana	Local government	\$ 221.28	51%
491	Orange County Water District	Florida	Local government	\$ 225.36	50%
490	Rochester	Minnesota	Local government	\$ 226.79	82%
489	DeKalb County	Georgia	Local government	\$ 229.44	16%
488	Hernando County	Florida	Local government	\$ 231.48	58%
487	Dallas	Texas	Local government	\$ 233.04	22%
486	Clovis	California	Local government	\$ 234.06	132%
485	Shreveport	Louisiana	Local government	\$ 236.64	-2%
484	Las Cruces	New Mexico	Local government	\$ 238.20	55%
483	Gainesville	Georgia	Local government	\$ 240.18	-9%
482	Grand Strand Water and Sewer Authority	South Carolina	Local government	\$ 240.60	17%
481	Albany	Georgia	Local government	\$ 241.44	29%
480	Miami-Dade	Florida	Local government	\$ 241.97	108%
479	Chandler	Arizona	Local government	\$ 242.70	20%
478	Orange County Water District	Florida	Local government	\$ 243.36	62%
477	Downey	California	Local government	\$ 247.66	3%
476	Clark Public Utilities	Washington	Local government	\$ 256.40	N/A

Corporate Control Raises Water Bills

Corporate control of water systems is associated with higher water bills. Among the nation's 500 largest systems, for-profit, corporate-owned systems charged on average 67% more than public systems. Local governments charged an average of \$494 for water service in 2025, while water corporations charged \$823—or an additional \$329.

Fig. 2. Household water bills are more expensive with for-profit private systems
Average annual household water bills among 500 largest community water systems, by ownership



The impact of corporate ownership varied by state. In Illinois and Indiana, the average corporate-owned water system charged more than twice as much as the average local government system. For example, local government systems in Illinois charged an average of \$529 in 2025, compared to \$1,109 by water corporations. And in Indiana, the average local government charged \$444 compared to \$900 by corporate systems.

Each state has a utility regulatory agency, often called a Public Utility Commission, that oversees the rates charged by for-profit water corporations. A study based on our 2015 report found that private water systems in states with corporate-friendly regulatory environments were statistically more likely to have higher household water bills and less affordable water. That study found that private ownership was the biggest factor associated with higher costs—outstripping aging infrastructure and drought.³²

Since 2015, the cost of corporate control has only gotten higher. Between 2015 and 2025, the average corporation increased water bills faster than the average local government (67% compared to 62%).

In addition, water corporations were already charging higher rates in 2015, and this difference widened by an additional 12%. In fact, the average local government charged less in 2025 (\$494) than the average corporate system charged in 2015 (\$501).

Water Bills Are Increasing for Most Households

Household drinking water bills rose 62% over the last decade, adding nearly \$200 a year onto household water costs.[†] The 25 most expensive systems increased bills by an average of \$637 in the past decade, a 124% rate hike. The 25 least expensive systems increased bills by \$58, or 44%.

The top three states with the highest average rate hikes were New Hampshire (177%), Oregon (114%), and West Virginia (95%).

Rate changes among individual systems ranged from a 308% increase in Daly City, California, to a 26% decrease in Orange County, Florida. In the latter case, the Reedy Creek Improvement District dissolved, and the system was taken over by the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District in 2022.³³ This marked an end to Disney's private, self-governing status and a transition to public governance.³⁴ In total, nine systems nationwide lowered typical water bills over the last decade likely due to changes in rate design.

Various factors drove rate increases in different communities. For example, New Hampshire's largest water system, Manchester Water Works, saw its debt payments nearly double (75% increase) and its water treatment chemical purchases almost triple (143% increase) from 2015 to 2023.

Nationally, water infrastructure is aging, and water pipes are reaching the end of their life expectancy. Utilities feel the strain of expensive replacements as federal financial support has been stripped down over the last several decades.³⁵ Federal and state regulation is attempting to catch up to growing public health concerns about contaminants like PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances)—or “forever chemicals”—but in the absence of dedicated federal support, the financial burden has fallen on utilities and ratepayers.³⁶

Corporations responsible for the PFAS crisis went unchecked for decades while polluting local waters.³⁷ Despite known harms, these corporations ultimately expanded the reach of PFAS into everyday life, to the point where virtually everywhere today is grappling with PFAS water contamination.³⁸ Cleanup costs are estimated to go into the billions.³⁹

Utilities must grapple with the cost of adapting to climate change. In 2024, utilities ranked increasing their resilience to climate extremes and uncertainties as a top priority.⁴⁰ The upgrades needed to face a volatile climate will require substantial investments in order to avert the potential billion- to trillion-dollar costs of long-term climate disasters.⁴¹ The American Water Works Association estimated that these climate-specific needs would cost drinking water utilities up to \$617 billion over the next 25 years.⁴² In Oregon, water systems in Portland and in the Tualatin Valley Water District recently moved forward with million-to-billion dollar water projects in the name of long-term resiliency and infrastructure overhauls funded by major rate increases.⁴³

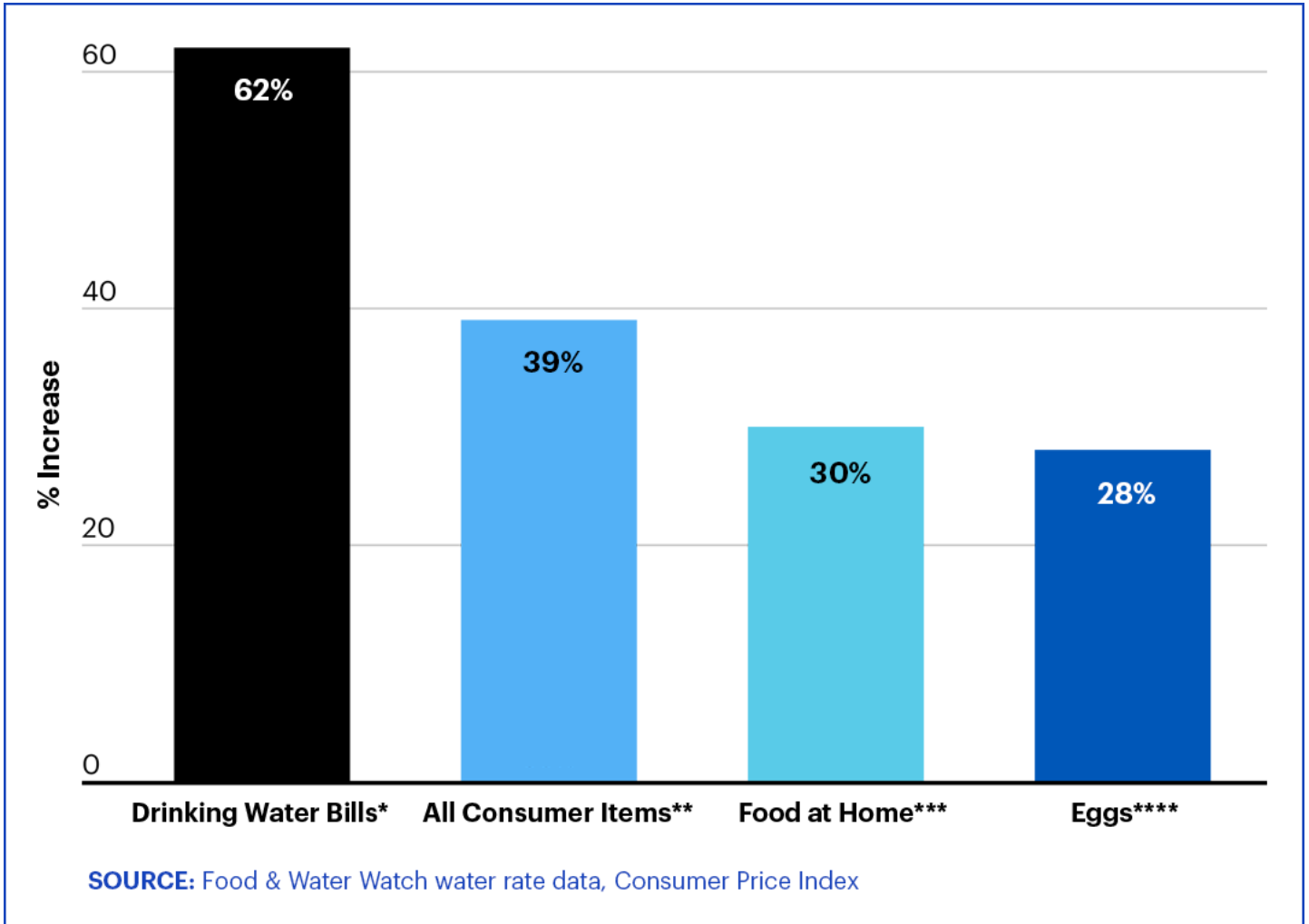
[†] Not every system that made the top 500 in 2015 also made the rankings in 2025. See Methodology for more information.

Water Bills Grew Faster Than Both Inflation and Household Income

The average utility increased typical water bills 1.6 times faster than inflation from 2015 to 2025. While consumer prices rose 39%, water bills soared 62%.⁴⁴ Water bills similarly outpaced the inflation of basic essentials, growing over twice as fast as groceries (30% inflation) and eggs (28% inflation).⁴⁵

Fig. 3. Water bills are increasing faster than other essentials

Average price increases from January 2015 to December 2025



* This is the average of increases in drinking water bills among the 452 systems included in both 2015 and 2025 rate surveys. Largely because of changes in service population over time, 48 systems are different between the two surveys.

** All items in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted

*** Food at home in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted

**** Eggs, grade A, large, per dozen in U.S. city average, average price, not seasonally adjusted

Typical water bills increased 19% faster than the national median household income. From 2014 to 2024, the median household income in the US increased 52%[‡]—not enough to keep up with rising water bills. In Louisiana, Maryland, and West Virginia, water bills grew about twice as fast as state median household incomes, while in New Hampshire, they grew nearly five times faster.

A handful of states saw their median household incomes grow faster than household water bills, including Georgia, Idaho, Montana, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Washington. For example, South Dakota's median household income rose 51%, while water bills rose 18%.

Water Bills Hit Low-Income Households the Hardest

Water affordability is a deepening crisis for low-income households, which paid a higher portion of their income on drinking water service. Affordability is a complicated metric. The California State Water Board uses a threshold of 1.5% of household income as a standard of affordability; however, the threshold is based on median household income,⁴⁶ which does not capture affordability concerns for low-income households. This assessment takes a similar approach by using half of what the EPA considers to be a high water burden for low-income households (1.5%) and applying it against lowest-quintile income.[§]

Water bills were unaffordable for low-income households in nearly all (93%) of water systems in the study. These systems charged water bills that exceeded 1.5% of household income for the poorest fifth of households in the state. In only two states, Idaho and Utah, the average water system charged water bills that were affordable for low-income households.

While utilities face many external challenges beyond their control that contribute to unaffordable water service, some systems also make financial choices that exacerbate the problem for low-income households. Some utilities have begun relying more on fixed charges and fees rather than on tiered consumption charges, a move that has contributed to worsening water affordability over time.⁴⁷ Temporary bursts of capital support and comparatively small amounts of federal funding do little to ameliorate the issue.⁴⁸

Making water less affordable forces households to make hard decisions about what essential expenses to cut back on, such as food or education. This can lead to families forgoing necessary medication and experiencing hunger and mental health declines.⁴⁹ When households cannot afford to pay their water bills, utilities may pursue punitive collection measures like shutting off water service or sending a home to tax sale.⁵⁰ Without access to affordable water, households may struggle to meet basic needs like cooking, cleaning, and sanitation.⁵¹

Water crises in Puerto Rico and West Virginia

Puerto Rico and West Virginia—which are in the middle of serious water crises—had the most unaffordable systems by far in 2025. In Puerto Rico, typical low-income households were charged 20% of their household income for water service. West Virginia's largest systems charged typical low-income households 11% of their household income for basic water service. These charges were simply unaffordable by any metric.

[‡] 2025 data was unavailable. See Methodology for more information.

[§] See Methodology for more information.

Infrastructure projects are expensive, especially in poorer states like West Virginia where depopulation means fewer customers available to spread costs for upgrades.⁵² This is especially true when projects are financed by for-profit corporations that earn a rate of return on their investments.⁵³ A report prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission estimated that fixing West Virginia's drinking water infrastructure would cost around \$1.73 billion.⁵⁴

For the past three decades, Puerto Rico's primary public water service authority, PRASA, has staggered from one crisis to the next.⁵⁵ These persistent infrastructure troubles are a manifestation of colonial neglect and disinvestment.⁵⁶ Despite being subject to all of the same federal regulations as states are, Puerto Rico receives less federal support and resources to meet these standards,⁵⁷ leaving it struggling to pay for personnel and infrastructure upgrades while receiving millions of dollars in fines from the EPA.⁵⁸

Structural inequities craft a crisis that is not felt equally. Unaffordable water service disproportionately impacts low-income households, rural and other underserved service areas, and communities of color.⁵⁹ In addition to the already deteriorating access to water, largely due to systemic racism and redlining,⁶⁰ these communities face higher instances of unaffordable water bills,⁶¹ years of underinvestment,⁶² involuntary service shutoffs,⁶³ more exposure to lead service lines,⁶⁴ and higher rates of many diseases and illnesses from dirty or toxic water.⁶⁵ Several studies also confirm how systems serving communities of color are more likely to experience drinking water violations in addition to experiencing inadequate enforcement of the federal water quality regulations.⁶⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

The US faces a water affordability crisis. Water bills will continue to increase faster than households can keep up, unless all levels of government take action to stop corporate abuses and support water affordability.

Local and state governments should:

- Ban water privatization and repeal pro-privatization legislation.
- Support local control of water systems and municipalization of corporate-owned systems.
- Prohibit public subsidization through water bills and the build-out of intensive industries controlled by billionaires in the technology, fossil fuel, and agriculture sectors.
- Hold polluters accountable for drinking water contamination and prevent new contamination from large corporations, including factory farms, fossil fuel corporations, hyperscale data centers, and the chemicals and plastics industries.

Congress and the federal government should:

- Hold polluters accountable for drinking water contamination and prevent new contamination from large corporations, including factory farms, fossil fuel corporations, hyperscale data centers, and the chemicals and plastics industries.
- Reject cuts to safe and clean water and restore federal funding to address the nation's water affordability crisis.

- Fully fund safe and clean water in every community. Legislation like the WATER Act would create a trust fund to provide federal support at the level necessary to comply with federal drinking water quality laws.

Every person deserves access to safe, affordable water service, and families deserve action from their elected officials. Public officials must support safe, affordable, and locally controlled drinking water for every community in the country.

Methodology

Rate Survey

This survey compared the residential water prices of the 500 largest investor-owned utilities and local government-owned utilities. This work builds on a previous Food & Water Watch survey conducted in 2015.

We identified the largest community water systems based on service population using the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Safe Drinking Water Federal Information System.⁶⁷ We excluded systems that are primarily bulk water sellers (serving large populations but fewer than 100 customers), Federal or Native American-owned systems, and those not located within US states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

We compiled water rates from utility websites and local government ordinances, if available, for the month of December 2025. When rates were not available on websites or archived on the public Wayback Machine, we obtained information by calling or emailing the utilities' customer service. We retained copies of all source documents.

We calculated annual water bills under the assumptions that a typical household uses 60,000 gallons each year for indoor use and has a 5/8" (or smallest size) water meter. For the purposes of comparison (to focus on changes in water costs, and not water usage), we used the same estimate for typical household usage (60,000 gallons a year) that was used in our 2015 analysis. This estimate was calculated based on the industry standard of basic indoor usage of 50 gallons per capita a day.⁶⁸

For systems with water budgets, which charge different rates based on allowances for household water use, we assumed all water use was indoor. We weighted seasonal rates to arrive at an annual average. We calculated rates for the main service division or inside jurisdiction (i.e., "In-City"). The annual bill also includes special water-related fees and surcharges (i.e., infrastructure, monthly administration, miscellaneous customer charges, etc.), any taxes on water utility bills, and public fire protection charges that applied to all households serviced by the system (excluding private fire service protection lines and hydrants). We applied special elevation surcharges where applicable after evaluating a given service area map to determine where the majority service lies.

We only included periodic fees, and excluded fees applied only once (such as one-time surcharges or connection fees). If any fixed fees applied to both water and sewer services, per the baseline assumption, we only included half of the charges in the calculation for water service. This is because many utilities only provide one service, and we sought to compare systems on equal parameters and to exclude wastewater and stormwater rates.

Comparing data from 2015 and 2025

We calculated the change in individual water bills between 2015 and 2025 for the 452 community water systems appearing in both surveys. The 48-system gap is mostly due to the changes in service populations. For example, many of the most expensive systems in the 2015 survey lost enough population to knock them off the 2025 survey.

Notably, the water system in Flint, Michigan, (the most expensive in our 2015 survey) saw a dramatic population drop from 124,943 to 81,252, bumping it off the 2025 survey. Several months after our 2015 survey was completed, Flint's water rates were lowered after a judge found that an emergency manager had illegally hiked them.⁶⁹ For fiscal year 2026, Flint charges a typical household \$840 a year for water service, which would put its system around the 58th most expensive one in the current study.

Additionally, five community water systems included in 2015 were inactive in 2025 due to system consolidation (e.g., San Francisco merged its water systems into a single system). The 2025 survey also included US territories that had been excluded in 2015. Because the 2015 report was about trends in water privatization, it excluded state-run and territory-run systems and focused on comparing bills between local government and corporate systems in states. Among new inclusions in the 2025 analysis are five systems from Guam and Puerto Rico.

Census Data

We used the latest data year available from the US Census Bureau (2024) and compared it to a decade earlier (2014), to keep the analysis of change over time within a consistent ten-year window.

Affordability Thresholds

The EPA considers households that spend 3% to 4.5% of their income on drinking and wastewater bills as experiencing high water burden.⁷⁰ Since this report only looks at drinking water bills, we used a conservative 1.5% threshold to designate a high water burden. We calculated water burdens for those at both the statewide median household income (MHI), which represents the midpoint of community income, and the lowest quintile income (LQI), which is the top range for the lowest 20% of incomes.

Endnotes

- 1 *Understanding Water Affordability Across Contexts: LIHWAP Water Utility Affordability Survey Report* (Office of Community Services, 2024), 4–5, 22, 31.
- 2 *Drinking Water: 2025 Infrastructure Report Card* (American Society of Civil Engineers, 2025), 60, 62, 66; Nadia Gaber et al., “The Devil They Knew: Chemical Documents Analysis of Industry Influence on PFAS Science,” *Annals of Global Health* 89, no. 1 (2023): 2, 11, <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.4013>; Michael Hawthorne, “Great Waste in the Great Lakes: How Plastic Pollution Is Clogging Our Waters,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 2026; Kurtis Alexander, “California’s Water Shortages Partly Due to Climate Change from Big Oil and Gas, Study Finds,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 2026.
- 3 *Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey & Assessment: 7th Report to Congress*, EPA 810R23001 (US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 2023), 6.
- 4 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment: Report to Congress*, EPA 830R24015 (EPA, 2024), 5.
- 5 J. Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era: Balancing Compounding Infrastructure Needs with Household Affordability* (American Water Works Association, 2026), 3.
- 6 Weronika Rosińska et al., “Climate Change’s Ripple Effect on Water Supply Systems and the Water-Energy Nexus: A Review,” *Water Resources & Industry* 32 (2024): 1, 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wri.2024.100266>.
- 7 Jennifer Skerker et al., “Urban Water Affordability Crisis Exacerbated by Climate Change,” *Nature Sustainability*, (2026): 1–2, 4, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-026-01890-z>.
- 8 *Factory Farm Nation: 2024* (Food & Water Watch, 2024), 2–3.
- 9 *The Urgent Case Against Data Centers* (Food & Water Watch, 2026), 5–6.
- 10 Meredith M. Brehob et al., “The US EPA’s National Nutrient Inventory: Critical Shifts in US Nutrient Pollution Sources from 1987 to 2017,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 59, no. 51 (2025): 27836, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.est.5c08196>.
- 11 “Nutrient Pollution: The Effects: Economy,” EPA (website), updated March 12, 2026, <https://www.epa.gov/nutrientpollution/effects-economy>.
- 12 Gemma Del Rossi et al., “The Economics of Nutrient Pollution from Agriculture,” *Annual Review of Resource Economics* 15 (2023): 113–15, 117–18, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-resource-111820-021317>; Astrid Cullman et al., “External Costs of Water Pollution in the Drinking Water Supply Sector,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 107, no. 2 (2024): 527, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajae.12490>.
- 13 Yuelin Han et al., “Small Bottle, Big Pipe: Quantifying and Addressing the Impact of Data Centers on Public Water Systems,” Working paper (arXiv, 2026): 4.
- 14 Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era*, 10.
- 15 *2025 Infrastructure Report Card*, 60, 66.
- 16 *2025 Infrastructure Report Card*, 62; Jonathan L. Ramseur, *Wastewater Infrastructure Funding: Background and Affordability Issues*, R48565 (Congressional Research Service, 2025), 6–7; Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era*, 22–23.
- 17 *Understanding Water Affordability*, 4; Sarah Kaplan, “Water Costs Are Rising Faster Than Inflation—and Sending Bills Soaring,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 2026.
- 18 Elena H. Humphreys, *Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs: Background & Issues for Congress*, R47878 (Congressional Research Service, 2023), 1; *2025 Infrastructure Report Card*, 62.
- 19 Russell T. Vought to Susan Collins, Chair, Committee on Appropriations, US Senate, “Major Discretionary Funding Changes,” May 2, 2025, 14–15, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>; *FY 2027 EPA Budget in Brief*, EPA-190-R-26-001 (EPA, 2026), 6.
- 20 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 22.
- 21 “Water Source Map,” San Jose Water, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.sjwater.com/water-source-map>; “State Water Project,” Santa Clara Valley Water District, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.valleywater.org/your-water/where-your-water-comes/imported-water/state-water-project>; California State Water Boards, “A Momentous Occasion: State-funded, Innovative Wastewater Recycling Plant Opens in Escondido,” news release, August 28, 2024; “Water Supply,” City of Santa Maria, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.cityofsantamaria.org/services/departments/utilities-department/water-services>; *2025 Water Quality Report* (City of Oceanside, 2025), 10, 11; “SWP Contractors,” California Department of Water Resources, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://water.ca.gov/programs/state-water-project/management/swp-water-contractors>; “Water Treatment,” Helix Water District, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.hwd.com/258/Water->

Surging Water Costs amid the US Affordability Crisis

- Treatment; "Water Information," Otay Water District, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.otaywater.gov/about-otay/water-information>; "Central Basin West," Golden State Water Company, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.gswater.com/central-basin-west>; "Our Water," Vista Irrigation District, accessed August 12, 2026, <https://www.vidwater.org/our-water>.
- 22 *California's State Water Project* (State Water Contractors, 2019), 1.
- 23 Noah Garrison et al., *Free Water While It Lasts: An Analysis of Wholesale Water Pricing in the Lower Colorado River Basin States* (UCLA Institute of the Environment & Sustainability, 2025), 10.
- 24 Patrick McDonough and Courtney Brown, "Why Is Your Water Bill So High? The Story Behind San Diego's Rising Rates," *San Diego Coastkeeper*, April 23, 2026; Drew Tuma and Tim Didion, "California's Water Crisis Driving Higher Interest in Desalination as a New Source," *ABC7 News*, June 21, 2026.
- 25 Skerker et al., "Urban Water Affordability Crisis," 3, 6.
- 26 Rosińska et al., "Climate Change's Ripple Effect," 9.
- 27 Eva Horváthová, "Analysis of Drinking Water Treatment Costs—with an Application to Groundwater Purification," *One Ecosystem* 7 (2022): 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.3897/oneeco.7.e82125>.
- 28 Brahm Resnik, "'Make Changes Now': Phoenix Water Users Face Higher Bills If They Don't Conserve," *12 News* (AZ), March 20, 2023.
- 29 Ahmed Rachid El-Khattabi et al., "Keep Your Head Above Water: Explaining Disparities in Local Drinking Water Bills," *PLOS Water* 2, no. 12 (2023): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pwat.0000190>.
- 30 X. Zhang et al., "Water Pricing and Affordability in the US: Public vs. Private Ownership," *Water Policy* 24, no. 3 (2022): 508, <https://doi.org/10.2166/wp.2022.283>.
- 31 El-Khattabi et al., "Keep Your Head Above Water," 13.
- 32 Zhang et al., "Water Pricing and Affordability," 508.
- 33 "About Central Florida Tourism Oversight District," Central Florida Tourism Oversight District, accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.oversightdistrict.org>.
- 34 "Gov. DeSantis Signs Law, State Takes Control of Disney's Reedy Creek District," *CBS*, February 27, 2023.
- 35 *2025 Infrastructure Report Card*, 60, 62.
- 36 Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era*, 11, 12.
- 37 Gaber et al., "Devil They Knew," 2, 11.
- 38 Erika Ryan et al., "PFAS 'Forever Chemicals' Are Everywhere. Here's What You Should Know About Them," NPR, updated June 23, 2022; *PFAS and the Chemistry of Concealment* (Food & Water Watch, 2023), 3–4.
- 39 *2025 Infrastructure Report Card*, 63, 65.
- 40 *State of the Water Industry: 2024* (American Water Works Association, 2024), 10.
- 41 Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era*, 8.
- 42 Mastracchio et al., 8.
- 43 Wright Gazaway, "Tualatin Valley Water District Makes Progress on \$1.6B Water System Project," *KATU2 ABC* (OR), April 19, 2024; Daniel Kool, "Portland Water District Approves Largest Rate Increase in 10 Years," *Portland Press Herald*, updated November 28, 2025; Wright Gazaway, "Portland Water Rates Could Double Within a Decade Due to Bull Run Filtration Site," *KATU2 ABC* (OR), April 27, 2026; Lauren Bishop, "Comment Period for Significant TVWD Rate Hike Open Until Aug. 24," *Your Oregon News*, August 18, 2023.
- 44 "All Items in U.S. City Average, All Urban Consumers, Not Seasonally Adjusted," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, data from 2015 to 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/CUUR0000SA0>.
- 45 "Food at Home in US City Average, All Urban Consumers, Seasonally Adjusted," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, data from 2015 to 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/CUSR0000SAF11>; "Eggs, Grade A, Large, per doz. in US City Average, Average Price, Not Seasonally Adjusted," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, data from 2015 to 2025, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/APU0000708111>.
- 46 Kristyn Abhold et al., *2023 Drinking Water Needs Assessment* (California State Water Resources Control Board, 2023), 10.
- 47 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 8.
- 48 Mastracchio et al., *Beyond the Replacement Era*, ES-2.
- 49 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 9.
- 50 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 9, 45.
- 51 Public Library of Science, "Millions of US Households May Struggle to Afford Basic Water Services," *PHYS*, May 10, 2023.

Surging Water Costs amid the US Affordability Crisis

- 52 Caitly Coyne and Lori Kersey, "10 Years After Chemical Spill, Concerns Remain for Future Incidents," *West Virginia Watch*, January 9, 2024.
- 53 Zhang et al., "Water Pricing and Affordability," 511.
- 54 Ahmed Rachid El-Khattabi et al., "A Twenty-Year Review: Revisiting the Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Funding Needs and Gaps in the Appalachian Region," CO-21646-24 (University of North Carolina and Virginia Tech, 2025), 68, <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Appalachia-Water-Infrastructure-2025.pdf>.
- 55 Manuel Guillama Capella, "A Crisis in Broad Daylight: AAA's Journey to Today's Emergency," *El Nuevo Dia* (PR), August 7, 2026; Sarah Mattalian, "In Rural Puerto Rico, Water Systems Depend on Volunteers—and Threatened Federal Grants," *Inside Climate News*, August 1, 2025.
- 56 Carlos de Loera, "With Puerto Rico's Water Crisis, Climate Change Meets Ineptitude," *De Los—LA Times*, August 14, 2025; Coenia Sanchez, "Congress Has a Responsibility to Reverse the Water Crisis It Caused in Puerto Rico," *In These Times*, August 10, 2026.
- 57 Jane C. Timm, "Report: Puerto Rico's Drinking Water at Brink of Crisis," *NBC News*, May 10, 2017.
- 58 Mattalian, "Rural Puerto Rico"; "Puerto Rico Aqueduct & Sewer Authority Settlement," EPA, updated July 1, 2026, <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/puerto-rico-aqueduct-and-sewer-addedauthority-settlement>; US Department of Justice, "Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority to Spend More Than \$195 Million on Improvements to 126 Drinking Water Plants," news release, May 4, 2010.
- 59 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 6, 10; Joe Brown et al., "The Effects of Racism, Social Exclusion, and Discrimination on Achieving Universal Safe Water and Sanitation in High-Income Countries," *The Lancet Global Health* 11, no. 4 (2023): e609–10, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(23\)00006-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(23)00006-2); *Rural Water Infrastructure: Better Agency Coordination Could Help Unserved Communities Address Their Needs*, GAO-26-107355 (Government Accountability Office, 2026), 1, 13.
- 60 Katie Meehan et al., "Urban Inequality, the Housing Crisis and Deteriorating Water Access in US Cities," *Nature Cities* 2 (2025): 93, 95, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44284-024-00180-z>; Brown et al., "Effects of Racism," e607–10.
- 61 Sandhya Kajeepeta et al., *Water/Color 2023: An Update on Water Crises Facing Black Communities* (Thurgood Marshall Institute, 2023), 4.
- 62 Brown et al., "Effects of Racism," e607.
- 63 Brown et al., e610; Mariana Sarango et al., "The Colour of Unaffordable Household Water: Racial/Ethnic Inequalities in Bills and Shutoffs Across Local Water Districts in Nine Urban Areas of the United States," *International Journal of Justice & Sustainability* 31, no. 8 (2026): 1383–84, 1396, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2025.2566516>.
- 64 Anne E. Nigra and Anna Navas-Acien, "Racial Inequalities in Drinking Water Lead Exposure: A Wake-Up Call to Protect Patients with End Stage Kidney Disease," *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* 32 (2021): 2419–20, <https://doi.org/10.1681/ASN.2021060793>.
- 65 Brown et al., "Effects of Racism," e610; Kajeepeta et al., *Water/Color 2023*, 6, 8, 9; Catharine Smith, " 'If White People Were Still Here, This Wouldn't Happen': The Majority-Black Town Flooded with Sewage," *Guardian* (US), February 11, 2021; Brenna C. Kelly et al., "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Risk from Industrial Surface Water Pollution in the United States, 2011–2021," *Health & Place* 89 (2024): 2–3, 7–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2024.10334>.
- 66 David Switzer and Manuel P. Teodoro, "Class, Race, Ethnicity, and Justice in Safe Drinking Water Compliance," *Social Science Quarterly* (2017): 2, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12397>; Yolanda J. McDonald and Nicole E. Jones, "Drinking Water Violations and Environmental Justice in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 10 (2017): e3–e4, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304621>; Maura Allaire and Sarah Acquah, "Disparities in Drinking Water Compliance: Implications Incorporating Equity into Regulatory Practices," *AWWA Water Science* 4, no. 2 (2022): 9, 10, <https://doi.org/10.1002/aws2.1274>; Junghwan Bae et al., "Drinking Water Injustice: Racial Disparity in Regulatory Enforcement of Safe Drinking Water Act Violations," *Race and Justice* 15, no. 3 (2025): 338–39, 344, <https://doi.org/10.1177/21533687231189854>.
- 67 SDWIS Federal Reporting Services (database), EPA, https://sdwis.epa.gov/ords/sfdw_pub/r/sfdw/sdwis_fed_reports_public/200.
- 68 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 79.
- 69 Steve Carmody, "Flint Water Rates Falling—by Court Order," *Michigan Public* (NPR), September 1, 2015.
- 70 *Water Affordability Needs Assessment*, 2.