

## Addressing the Water Access Gap in High-Income Countries

In the United States (US) and other high-income countries, millions live in the shadows without water access. While the International WASH Sector gathers in New York City for the UN Water Conference, DigDeep, Pacific Institute, IAPMO, and the Center for Water Security and Cooperation (CWSC) wish to shine a light on the remaining work that high-income countries have in order to reach each and every resident with safe, reliable, and affordable water services.

High-income countries are celebrated for having achieved widespread access to WASH, often without acknowledgement of or consideration for the most vulnerable communities and households who have been left behind and ignored. Yet, millions of people in the US still lack access to safe, running water in their own homes. This number increases when counting other high-income nations, like Canada, Australia, and beyond. These populations are primarily composed of Indigenous communities, First Nations, Aboriginal peoples, Roma populations, Refugees, low-income, and other marginalized groups. Strikingly, Latino and Black US households are twice as likely as white households to lack indoor plumbing, while Indigenous households are 19 times more likely.

Despite the international progress we have seen in both water and wastewater access, change in the US is uneven. Some communities are even backsliding – with households losing access for the first time, in many cases due to impacts from climate change. In the US, frontline communities, those who experience climate impacts the first and often the worst, also commonly lack water and sanitation.

Furthermore, adverse environmental conditions, such as droughts and flooding, threaten to cause further backsliding, especially for low-income, marginalized communities with less resources to prepare and adapt. More work is needed to incorporate climate adaptation into the WASH sector's efforts, in high-income countries, as well as globally. This includes reenvisioning the laws governing access to water, including the laws determining the management and distribution of water resources and provision of drinking water and sanitation services.

The global WASH sector as a whole, and groups working in high-income countries in particular, must identify context-specific barriers and solutions, and build a framework of laws and policies to address the gap. Reports by the CWSC, such as the [American Water Access Survey](#), demonstrate the failure of law to provide the protections to guarantee universal access to water and sanitation, particularly for low-income, BIPOC, and frontline communities.

The water access gap holds real and heartbreaking implications for everyday people as they try to go about their daily lives. If high-income countries do not address the water gap within their borders, people without access to safe and affordable water will continue to experience higher rates of mortality, physical and mental health issues, and economic inequity. Investments in closing this gap have proven to bolster livelihoods for families, energize local and national economies, and fix historic injustices. In 2022, DigDeep published an economic impact study, [\*Draining: The Economic Impact of America's Hidden Water Crisis\*](#), proving a 5:1 return on investment for every US dollar invested into efforts to close the water access gap. Those water and sanitation insecurity in high and middle income countries cannot continue to be ignored.

DigDeep, the Pacific Institute, IAPMO, and CWSC believe high-income governments are responsible for achieving SDG6 within their own borders, and closing the domestic water access gap once and for all. While continuing to support efforts abroad, the US government must also begin to provide resources and funding to address the crisis at home. Many countries have recognized the urgency of this issue by passing resolutions stating that water and sanitation are foundational not just to human well-being, but to human life. As a first step, our federal government should signal its leadership and do the same.

For those marginalized individuals who routinely collect water from contaminated lakes or streams, for households losing access due to drought or contamination, or for those who are forced to ration water in order to meet their basic needs, water access - everywhere, for everyone - is a matter of utmost urgency. Achieving a universal goal of water and sanitation for everyone includes those in our own backyard.

In solidarity,

DigDeep,  
Pacific Institute,  
IAPMO, &  
The Center for Water Security and Cooperation

