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**Not All Americans Have Enough Access to Water  
*Among the deprived are 1 percent of blacks in several Southern states. Meet one community.***

By Katti Gray

Full text and photos online at <http://www.theroot.com/views/not-all-americans-have-enough-access-water>



Robert Martin, Lewis Carson, Jenise Davis (Photo by Katti Gray)

Word came last October that the federal government had earmarked more than half the required financing to hook up 10 homes on a Mississippi back road to the municipal water system in the city of Ruleville, six minutes away by car. As lead hell-raiser in the 7-year-old battle to get potable water piped to his snatch of Drew-Ruleville Road ever since the local well gave out, Robert Martin was glad to hear the news. But he didn't get overly optimistic.

Time and again, he and his neighbors had had their entreaties to get municipal water rebuffed. In part, they were told it was not cost-effective for either a public water supplier, or any of the private ones that accommodate wealthier residents in Mississippi's countryside, to service a handful of outlying households in Sunflower County.

"We haven't heard from nobody. Nobody has contacted us. There must be some kind of holdup," says Martin, 71, a retired laboratory maintenance worker.

Ninety-seven percent of residents in Mississippi are connected to a water system. The residents of Sunflower County belong to the other 3 percent. More broadly, they are counted among the roughly 2 million people that the [Rural Community Assistance](#)

[Partnership](#) (RCAP) estimates have insufficient water or no running water at all. "It's a real problem when you have 2 million people in one of the wealthiest nations in the world who are without complete access to indoor plumbing facilities ... and water services," says Stephen Gasteyer, a Michigan State University sociologist and international researcher on water resources. That population includes more than 1 percent of blacks in Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia. Montana has the largest proportion of blacks without adequate services, 4 percent. (The urban poor in substandard housing also lack water.

"You have this hidden population of people who never got access to these facilities ...," adds Gasteyer, who is formerly the RCAP's director of research and policy. He cited the threat of potentially deadly water-borne illness faced by those without access to safe water. "Add to that the human dignity part of this. Imagine not being able to take a shower because you don't have water, not being able to flush your toilet because you don't have water."

Though one-third of households without adequate water live below the federal poverty level, geographic isolation and a lack of political will also are factors, Gasteyer says. He has collaborated on research with the Environmental Protection Agency, which, with the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, is charged with oversight, funding and development of water systems. "For people who work in these agencies, water access is a priority," Gasteyer says. "In terms of national [legislative] priorities, we've seen the number of grants for water and sanitation come down precipitously since the 1970s ... The policy people will say we made a choice as a nation to allow communities to be autonomous. There are communities where choice is severely restricted. They end up making choices by default."

As for Robert Martin, with no follow-up from officials since hearing about last fall's allocation of federal funds-\$414,000 of \$677,000 slated to be drawn from federal, state and local coffers to link in a total of 70 homes-he extracted \$15,000 from his own pension to pay industrial well-diggers to tap a reservoir he presumes is on his land. An earlier, 800-foot well he dug in his yard became clogged seven years ago with Mississippi sand, cutting off the water it had provided for his home and, through a jury-rigged network of underground pipes, the homes of his neighbors. "That old well just gave out," says Martin, who moved in 1978 to Drew-Ruleville, where his brick abode sits among a mish-mash of clapboard homes, trailers and such. Before he arrived, the three homes that were there subsisted on shallow wells.

Until that new well in his yard is flowing, the 10 families of Drew-Ruleville are fending for themselves. They buy bottled water from big-box stores. They fill jars and jugs at relatives' taps and at a self-service laundry in Ruleville. Those who can afford to do so purchase 40-pound bags of water softener to pour into the waste-high treatment machines sitting outdoors. "When my grandchildren visit, I'm steady warning them not to drink water from the faucet," says Jenise Davis, who, despite a ruptured disk in her

back, hauls 40-pound bags of salted water softener from a market in Greenville, 50 miles away, to her house on Drew-Ruleville. "If you don't (soften the water) ... it's going to turn brown in your bathtub."

Spottily, the 10 households also get water from another neighbor, Jeanine Watson, who dug a temporary well in her yard after Martin's first well ran dry. Atop her 100-foot well is a 10-foot water storage tank insulated by fiberglass and electrician's tape.

"When you look at the fact that everybody else around us has running water, what is happening makes no sense," says Watson, a nurse. Meanwhile, retiree Martin says, he and his neighbors will remain resolute and make do.