

WATER, SANITATION, AND HEALTH IN URBAN DISADVANTAGED UNINCORPORATED COMMUNITIES

Abby Vidmar¹, Madeleine Zheng², Nora Awad³ and E. Christian Wells¹

¹University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, USA

²Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

³Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, USA

Water and sanitation (WatSan) challenges continue to escalate worldwide due to climate change, environmental degradation, and socio-political instability. While interventions are often aimed at low HDI countries, communities in the global north also experience high levels of WatSan insecurity, for example, those in rural and indigenous areas. Recent research in the United States has revealed that many urban disadvantaged unincorporated communities also lack consistent access to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation. In Florida, these environmental justice communities often originated as unregulated subdivisions of unincorporated land and, as such, lack adequate public investment in WatSan infrastructure. In these settings, some households have access to centralized water treatment and delivery systems, while others rely on private drinking water wells and on-site wastewater treatment such as septic systems. In both cases, water quality and wastewater infrastructure can be insufficient to protect human health. Our research draws on social science methods—including participant observation, rapid field assessments, and in-depth interviews—to examine local residents' perceptions and experiences with water and sanitation, focusing on the University Area Community located on the northern unincorporated edge of Tampa. We also explore the broader regulatory context of water and wastewater infrastructure at both the municipal (Tampa) and county (Hillsborough) levels through interviews with WatSan utilities administrative staff and engineers. We find contrasting perceptions of WatSan problems and notions of risk between these stakeholder groups, which have contributed to misunderstandings and miscommunications about problems and potential solutions to WatSan challenges. Our research also reveals potential interventions to these challenges in how interlocal agreements are negotiated between cities and counties regarding water and wastewater service provision. Finally, our research allowed us to develop a community-based, participatory rapid assessment tool for assessing household WatSan insecurity that helps us identify households in the community at greater risk for WatSan insecurity.

PRESENTER BIO: Abby Vidmar is a graduate student in Applied Anthropology at the University of South Florida researching the nexus of water and sanitation insecurity and environmental justice. She is currently the student representative to the governing council of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology.