SAVE BIG ON CAR INSURANCE NOW—HERE'S HOW

BEST DRIP & POD COFFEE MAKERS ▪ TOP TV DEALS THIS FALL

CR Consumer Reports®

Almond, Oat & Soy Milk

35 PRODUCTS TESTED & TASTED

■ SPECIAL REPORT

Is Bottled Water Safer?

It may not always be as pure as you think—and your tap water may be cleaner than you realize. **What you need to know.**

NOVEMBER 2019 CR.ORG
Please display at checkout and mainline until November 4, 2019

$6.99US $7.99CAN
11>
0 74470 08251 4

REVIEWS & RATINGS

Cameras ▪ Ranges ▪ Space Heaters
Wireless Routers ▪ Cookware Sets

What's in Your Water?

MOST OF US tend to take for granted that we can access a safe glass of drinking water simply by turning on our kitchen tap. But for many Americans, whether by choice or due to health concerns, bottled water has become a ubiquitous household item. This month, we're diving into the data and perceptions about drinking water to help you understand whether or not purchasing bottles is always a better option.

Our nation's aging water infrastructure, a lack of running water in some communities, and high-profile water crises like those in Flint, Mich., and Newark, N.J. (my hometown), mean that for some consumers, deciding between the faucet and bottles might not feel like a choice at all. But many of us who do have easy access to safe drinking water are nevertheless opting for bottles—to the tune of $31 billion in 2018. Both for individuals and for society at large, it's worth asking whether all that spending and all that plastic are worthwhile.

This month, we report on the integrity of our public water supply, and share the water sources used by major bottled water companies (you may be surprised), as well as the findings of our national survey about consumer attitudes and behaviors. We also look at the big picture, talking to experts about what needs to be done in the short term to ensure that every community can access safe drinking water—as well as what sustainable solutions there are for the long term.

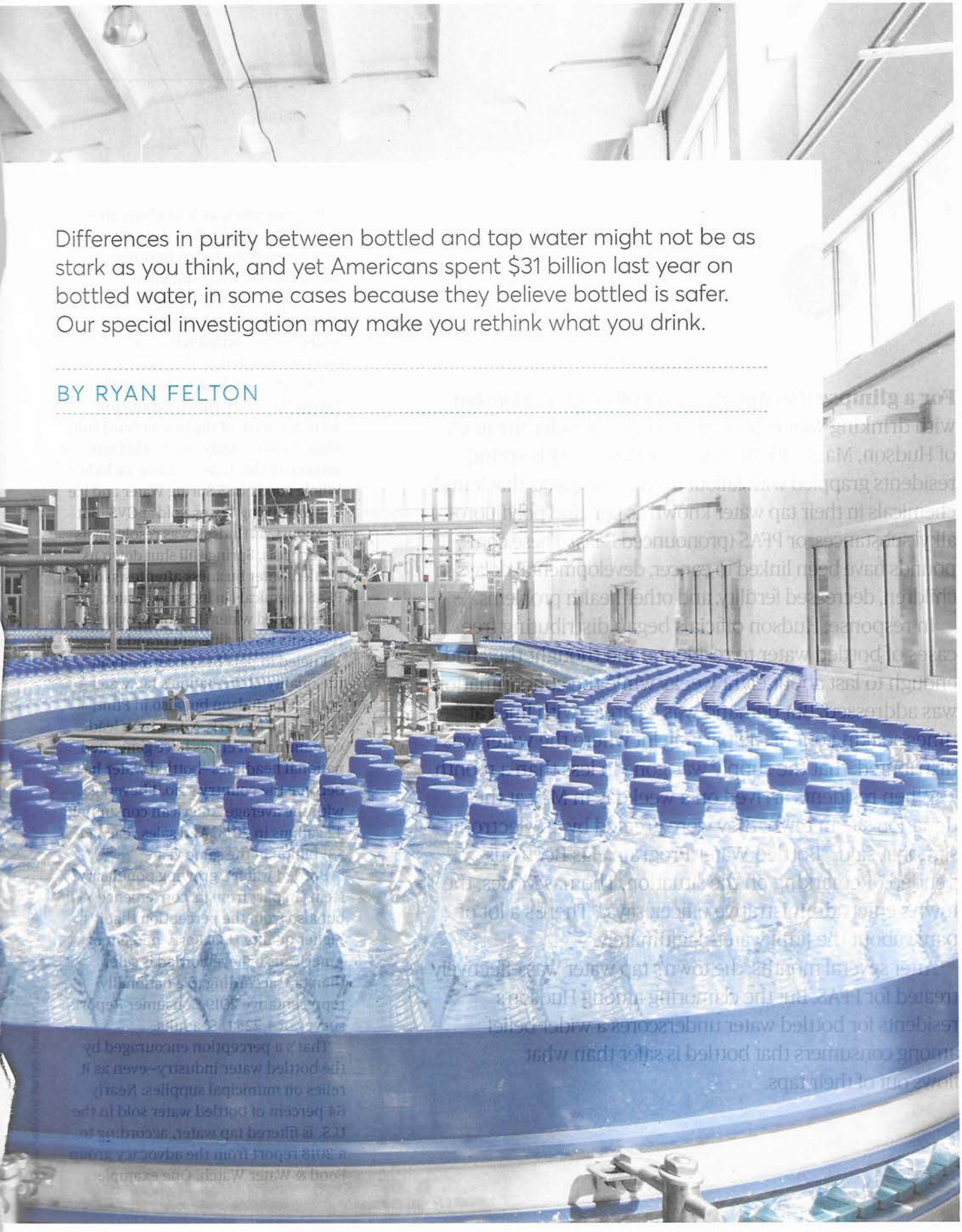
Nearly 50 years ago, CR's reporting on the failures of water purification systems in the face of rising pollution helped spark new consumer protections, including the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974. As bottled water reaches new highs in popularity, the need for reliable information about drinking water is as important as ever—which is why we're going back to the well to get you the answers you need today.

Marta Tellado

Marta L. Tellado,
President and CEO
Follow me on Twitter
@MLTellado

PHOTO: MELANIE DUNEA

SHOULD WE BREAK OUR BOTTLED WATER HABIT?



Differences in purity between bottled and tap water might not be as stark as you think, and yet Americans spent $31 billion last year on bottled water, in some cases because they believe bottled is safer. Our special investigation may make you rethink what you drink.

BY RYAN FELTON

For a glimpse into America's complicated relationship with drinking water–bottled and tap–consider the town of Hudson, Mass., 40 miles west of Boston. This spring, residents grappled with fallout from routine tests that found chemicals in their tap water known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS (pronounced P-fas). These compounds have been linked to cancer, developmental delays in children, decreased fertility, and other health problems.

In response, Hudson officials began distributing free cases of bottled water to residents, and thought they had enough to last about eight weeks while the contamination was addressed. But demand was so great, with lines at times snaking out of the parking lot where the water was distributed, that the supply was gone in less than a month.

When residents arrived on a weekday in May at the donation site in town, they were greeted by an electronic sign that said, "Bottled Water Program Has Been Suspended." Remarking on the situation, Thomas Moses, the town's chief administrative officer, says, "There's a lot of panic about the [tap] water–legitimately."

After several months, the town's tap water was effectively treated for PFAS. But the clamoring among Hudson's residents for bottled water underscores a wider belief among consumers that bottled is safer than what flows out of their taps.

In some cases, as in Hudson, that is true. But a Consumer Reports investigation finds that information about bottled water quality is hard to find, oversight of the industry is inconsistent, and as with tap water, some bottled water can be contaminated.

For evidence, look no further than Spring Hill Dairy Farm, a company 40 miles north of Hudson in Ward Hill, Mass. Until recently, it provided water to several bottled water brands, including Whole Foods' 365 Spring Water and Ice Canyon Spring Water, sold at CVS. But in August, as Hudson was resolving its water crisis, Spring Hill shut down its bottled water business after tests found PFAS chemicals in its spring water. (The bottled water Hudson provided residents was a different brand.)

Fueled in part by concerns about the quality of the nation's tap water–not just in Hudson but also in Flint, Mich., and Newark, N.J., where lead contamination crises have generated national headlines–bottled water has become the country's No. 1 beverage, with the average American consuming 42 gallons in 2018. And sales reached $31 billion in the same year.

Bottled water's growing popularity stems in part from its convenience but also from the perception that it's higher-quality H_2O. Forty percent of Americans believe bottled is safer than tap, according to a nationally representative 2019 Consumer Reports survey of 4,225 U.S. adults.

That's a perception encouraged by the bottled water industry–even as it relies on municipal supplies: Nearly 64 percent of bottled water sold in the U.S. is filtered tap water, according to a 2018 report from the advocacy group Food & Water Watch. One example:

PHOTO, PREVIOUS SPREAD: 123RF. ILLUSTRATIONS: ELIAS STEIN

Earlier this year, Cott, which sells several brands of water, told investors, "We intend to capture new customers as we capitalize on favorable consumer trends," including "concerns about deteriorating municipal water quality."

But even as bottled water sales have risen, tap water quality overall doesn't appear to be getting worse. Since 2013, the percentage of the U.S. population serviced by community water systems with at least one reportable health-based quality violation has stayed below 10 percent, according to the most recent data from the Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates tap water. These systems provide water to more than 90 percent of Americans, according to the EPA. "The United States provides some of the safest drinking water in the world," an agency spokesperson says.

To be sure, the vast majority of bottled water sold today also appears to be safe. But it isn't necessarily better overall than tap, and there are some reasons for concern, CR found.

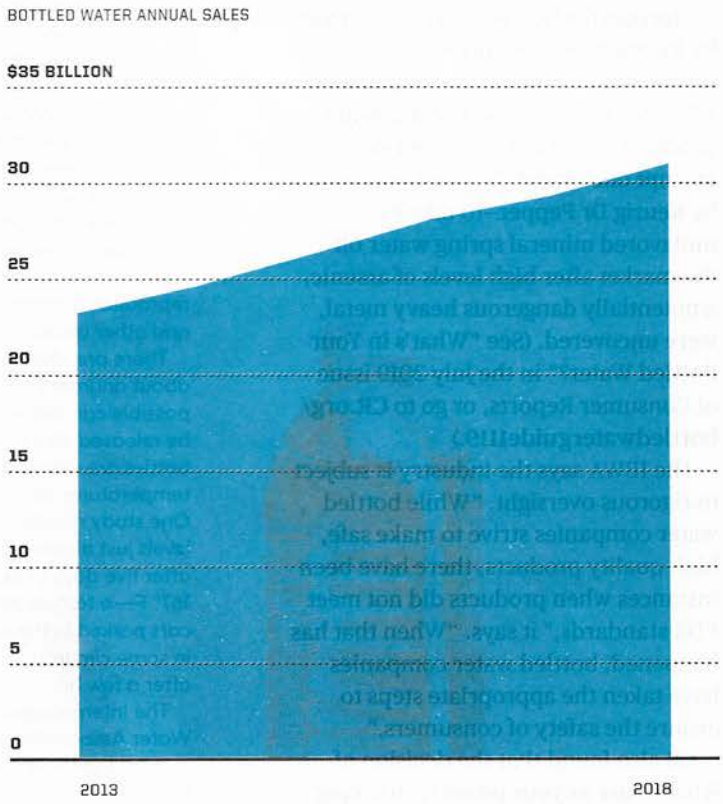
In response, Jill Culora, vice president of communications for the International Bottled Water Association, a trade group, says many Americans drink both bottled and tap and decide "what type of water is best for them," based on taste, convenience, and quality.

Over the past year, CR has interviewed more than 50 experts and state and federal regulators, and amassed thousands of pages of regulatory filings, lawsuits, consumer complaints, and government documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests. CR's investigation shows that safety inspections of water bottling facilities by the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates bottled water,

PHOTO: MASAHIRU YOSHIMURA/GETTY IMAGES

The Surge of Bottled Water Sales

Bottled water sales have risen steadily in recent years, as shown in the chart below. That has been driven in part by consumer concerns about the quality of tap water. But despite serious problems in places such as Flint, Mich., and Newark, N.J., the overall quality of the nation's tap water appears to be stable. More than 90 percent of Americans on municipal water get it from systems that have no reported health-based quality violations, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency.



Source: Beverage Marketing Corp.

have declined over the past 15 years.

An FDA spokesperson says the agency takes "prompt action" when it obtains evidence that a product poses a safety risk, adding that federal regulations ensure that bottled water is "safe, wholesome, and truthfully labeled."

But while the FDA requires companies to test the quality of their products, the agency typically doesn't conduct its own tests. And companies aren't required to make the results of their tests available to the public, and often don't: CR was able to get reports from just 133 bottled water brands, barely half of those we identified.

Moreover, when tests are performed by independent organizations, problems can emerge. For example, CR's spot tests of three bottled water products in April 2019 helped to prompt one brand–Peñafiel, owned by Keurig Dr Pepper–to take its unflavored mineral spring water off the market after high levels of arsenic, a potentially dangerous heavy metal, were uncovered. (See "What's in Your Bottled Water?" in the July 2019 issue of Consumer Reports, or go to **CR.org/bottledwaterguide1119**.)

The IBWA says the industry is subject to rigorous oversight. "While bottled water companies strive to make safe, high-quality products, there have been instances when products did not meet FDA standards," it says. "When that has happened, bottled water companies have taken the appropriate steps to ensure the safety of consumers."

CR also found that the decision of what to use as your primary drinking water depends on where you live, the health of your municipal supply, and the pipes in your home.

And the long-term solution isn't for more Americans to turn to bottled water, but to fix the nation's water infrastructure, advocates say. The EPA says that over the next 20 years, fixing and maintaining the nation's reservoirs, treatment plants, and pipes would cost about $24 billion annually–$7 billion less than what Americans spent on bottled water last year.

"Bottled water is not an acceptable substitute," says Mary Grant, director of the Public Water for All Campaign at Food & Water Watch. "We need to build resilient water systems."

CAN PLASTIC WATER BOTTLES MAKE US SICK?

Some research suggests that the plastic used for bottled water could pose some risks, though the evidence isn't conclusive.

One concern is microscopic pieces of plastic, which may leach chemicals into water. A 2019 study found that people who drank only bottled water consumed, on average, an additional 90,000 microplastics annually, compared with 4,000 for those who drank only tap water. Chemicals in microplastics could potentially contribute to reproductive problems, obesity, and other issues.

There are also concerns about antimony trioxide, a possible carcinogen that could be released into water if plastic bottles are exposed to hot temperatures long enough. One study revealed antimony levels just above federal limits after five days of exposure at 167° F—a temperature that cars parked in the sun could, in some circumstances, reach after a few hours.

The International Bottled Water Association, a trade group, says there's no known health risk from water with "occasional small breaches" of antimony limits. But if you regularly drink bottled water, you should store it carefully. Or fill your own nonplastic water bottles with tap water.

The Fate of Public Water

The vast majority of Americans appear to have access to safe tap water–but some communities face real problems. In Hudson, for example, town administrator Thomas Moses spelled out a quandary communities such as his face. While the EPA currently offers voluntary guidance on PFAS chemicals–two common ones should stay below 70 parts per billion–there is currently no federal mandatory limit.

Without federal standards, states and municipalities are left to decide on their own whether to look for the chemicals, and what to do if they find them. Hudson, for example, began testing for PFAS chemicals in 2016 and discovered alarming PFAS levels earlier this year.

It's easier for public water suppliers to address contaminants that have established limits, Moses says. But emerging threats such as PFAS will always come along. "In the next year, next two years, next decade, it will be something else," he says.

The concern among Hudson's residents about the town's water supply reflects a common view across the U.S. In some places, water infrastructure appears to be at a breaking point, with

some lawmakers seeking an additional $35 billion per year to maintain it.

The lack of investment is widespread: Detroit public schools shut off all drinking water last year because of high copper and lead levels. A town in West Virginia has been on a boil-water advisory since 2002 because its system is in a state of disrepair. And some Americans live without running water at all: As of 2018, nearly 340,000 homes in the U.S. didn't have access to running water, according to a CR analysis of federal census records.

What's more, 34 percent of Americans—or 110 million people—say they regularly avoid drinking tap water at home because of safety concerns, according to CR's recent survey. About one-sixth say they don't drink their home tap water at all.

Part of the issue could be a lack of information. Under EPA regulations, people on community water systems

$31 BILLION

HOW MUCH AMERICANS SPENT ON BOTTLED WATER IN 2018

$24 BILLION

ANNUAL COST OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS TO FIX AND MAINTAIN THE U.S. PUBLIC WATER SUPPLY

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOW FEAR FLOWED FROM FLINT

A Flint, Mich., resident loads water into vehicles in April 2019. Nearly 30 percent of Americans who say they are aware of this city's lead contamination crisis started drinking bottled water, purchased a water filter, or made other changes to their water-drinking habits as a result, according to CR's survey.

should receive an annual copy of their Consumer Confidence Report, which spells out the quality of their tap supply. But more than 5,000 such systems were recently cited for violating that rule, EPA data show. Almost 80 percent of people with municipal water say they've never received a CCR, and 60 percent have never heard of it, CR's survey found.

Pushing Back on Plastic

Just 20 miles from Hudson, the town of Concord, population 17,000, has had a different experience with bottled water. Several years ago, it became the first community in the U.S. to ban the sale of single-use plastic bottles of water. In making their case, supporters emphasized the environmental toll of the billions of bottles Americans dispose of each year, as well as the town's long history of safe tap water.

Still, it took supporters more than three years to persuade Concord's residents to support the ban. "We were up against 30 years of marketing by an industry" with endless resources, says Jill Appel, a Concord resident who aided the effort.

As concerns about the environmental harm from plastic water bottles spread, the industry is responding in part by starting to package water in, for example, cardboard cartons. Indeed, you can now buy water in such containers in Concord.

The War Against Tap Water

Even a quarter century ago, buying water in any kind of bottle would have seemed "ludicrous," says James Salzman, environmental law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of the book "Drinking Water: A History" (Harry N. Abrams, 2012).

Eventually, bottled water came to be seen as chic, Salzman says, in part because of celebrity endorsements. (That trend continues: In the past year, Dwayne Johnson and Gwyneth Paltrow, among others, have partnered with bottled water brands.)

But it wasn't until 1990, when Nestlé introduced the convenience of the single-use PET bottle, that bottled water caught on with the public, according to "Bottled and Sold" (Island Press, 2010), a book by Peter Gleick, cofounder of the Pacific Institute, an environmental group. Over the following decade, the growth of bottled water was also spurred by industry efforts to play up the purity of its new product.

By 1999, consumers browsing the IBWA's website may have seen this question: "Does bottled water contain any harmful chemicals that can pose a threat to human health?" The IBWA's answer: "No." But federal records show that in the 1990s there were around 50 recalls of bottled water for excessive chlorine, mold, and fecal coliforms. The IBWA still defends its statement, saying that it was meant to be "general in nature" and that many of the recalls posed "no meaningful health risk."

Yet independent tests at the time had found contamination. A 1999 study by the National Resources Defense Council of more than 100 brands found that nearly 1 in 4 violated California limits for arsenic or other carcinogenic compounds. And tests CR conducted in 2000 found samples at or above the arsenic limit of 10 ppb, a standard that was finalized in 2005.

The industry's adversarial stance toward tap water intensified from there, a trend documented in Gleick's book. "At the time," Gleick tells CR, "there was a really explicit campaign to demonize tap water." He quotes Robert Morrison—who was then soon to be chairman of Pepsi's North American Beverage and Food Division—as saying in 2000, "The biggest enemy is tap water ... it just has its place. We think it's good for irrigation and cooking."

The next year, Coca-Cola, which sells Dasani, generated controversy after it was revealed that the company worked with Olive Garden restaurants on a campaign called "H2NO" to push money-making beverages instead of tap. (Notably, Coca-Cola uses public water as its primary source for Dasani.)

Bottlers continued to take shots at tap water, as in a 2006 Fiji ad Gleick also covered in his book: "The label says Fiji because it's not bottled in Cleveland." Cleveland officials later tested the city's public water as well as a bottle of Fiji, and found that the Fiji water contained arsenic while its water did not. (Fiji reportedly said it was only a joke.)

The industry has since tried to dial back the anti-tap rhetoric, framing bottled water as a healthy alternative to sugary drinks. But even now, records show that bottlers view the deterioration of the nation's public water infrastructure in the context of their business prospects.

Some, such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi, have said in public filings that tap water quality problems could hurt their bottom line by jeopardizing the safety of a primary ingredient for their businesses.

Others see tap problems as a potential boon. Earlier this year, Primo Water, which produces purified bottled water that can be filled at self-service dispensers, wrote in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission,

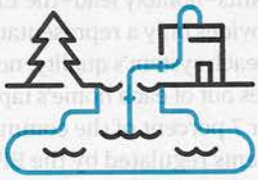
Where Does the Water in Your Bottle Come From?

The answers may surprise you—and with growing concerns about access to affordable, safe water, they may raise some thorny questions about who controls, and makes a profit from, the water we drink.

MUNICIPAL WATER

Aquafina and Dasani

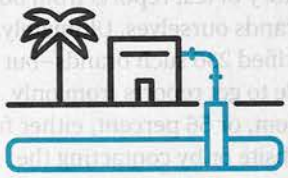
Dasani (owned by Coca-Cola) and Aquafina (Pepsi) primarily use tap water from public water supplies, which is also the source for nearly 64 percent of the bottled water sold in the U.S. Both obtain water from several cities, then treat the water. It appears to be a highly lucrative business model. For example, based on documents obtained through public records requests, we estimate that in 2018 Coca-Cola and Pepsi combined paid Detroit at least $1.4 million for 198 million gallons of water. Coca-Cola confirmed to CR that the company returns about half the water as waste. (Pepsi did not respond to questions about its wastewater.) At an industry average of $1.07 to $2.49 per gallon, that would make the water worth a potential $110 million to $256 million—or as much as $21 million per month.



SPRING WATER

Poland Spring and Zephyrhills Natural Spring Waters

The water in these Nestlé brands comes from springs in the U.S.—eight in Maine for Poland Spring and five in Florida for Zephyrhills Natural Spring Water. But, at least for Poland Spring, Nestlé doesn't gather this water from the mouth of a running spring; rather, it bores into underground supplies that feed its springs. That's central to an ongoing lawsuit alleging that Poland Spring isn't spring water. (Nestlé denies the claims.) The company also generated controversy in Florida over plans to obtain more than a million gallons of water per day, in part for its Zephyrhills Natural Spring Water, from an aquifer that feeds a popular recreation spot. In response, Nestlé has said its springs are sustainably managed. But critics say it benefits a big business while depleting the springs' supply of water.



ARTESIAN WATER

Fiji Water

Artesian water comes from a confined aquifer, an underground source that, unlike spring water, can be reached only through a well. The water is bottled and filtered at the source, in Fiji, an island nation in the South Pacific. A chief criticism: the environmental and economic cost of not only harvesting the water but also shipping it several thousand miles across the ocean. Water is Fiji's biggest export.

"We believe the market for purified water continues to grow due to evolving taste preferences, perceived health benefits, and concerns regarding the quality of municipal tap water."

Maria Mullen, Primo's vice president of consumer experience, says that many consumers choose bottled water as an alternative to sugary drinks and that the company isn't "choosing to make municipalities the bad guys." Rather, it's "reacting" to the market. "You have to have your head in the sand if you don't see there are growing issues related to the quality of municipal tap water," Mullen says.

Back in Hudson, town administrator Moses says that even with test results showing that Hudson's tap water is safe, some residents just can't be persuaded to drink it. "The water that we're producing meets all current regulations and health advisories," he says. "I mean, that's all you can say."

The H_2O Information Gap

Government regulators generally don't test bottled water themselves, and bottled water makers aren't required to publish their own test results. So over

the past several months, CR assembled a repository of test reports from bottled water brands ourselves. Ultimately, we identified 236 such brands–but were able to get reports from only 133 of them, or 56 percent, either from their website or by contacting the manufacturer directly.

Information on the safety of tap water is also limited. For example, the EPA doesn't regulate private wells, which supply water to 14 percent of Americans, according to CR's survey. And for some contaminants–notably lead–the EPA's testing provides only a representative sample of each system's quality, not what comes out of each home's tap.

Just over 7 percent of the community water systems regulated by the EPA had at least one instance of violating a health-based standard, recent EPA data shows. That includes exceeding a drinking water contamination limit.

When it comes to bottled water, precise figures can be even harder to come by. But the reality is that contamination in bottled water exists. It's just difficult for consumers to find out about it.

CR's review of water quality test reports we gathered from companies and regulatory agencies, combined with our spot tests of bottled waters, found that 6 percent of brands had a contaminant that exceeded state or federal limits.

CR also reached out to all 50 states on their bottled water requirements, and 32 provided responses. Of those, only 14 say they require bottlers to notify regulators immediately about test results showing excessive contaminants.

When instances of contamination are documented, regulators can be slow to respond. The lax enforcement contributes to scenarios such as Keurig Dr Pepper's two-month delay earlier this year in pulling Peñafiel from the market, even after the company temporarily suspended production following CR's tests showing arsenic at almost twice the legal limit.

And information about these kinds of problems is not always widely shared. For example, Starkey Water (owned by Whole Foods), withdrew its bottled water twice in 2016 and 2017 because of high arsenic levels. But neither instance shows up in CR's review of archives of company and FDA press releases. (CR tests last spring found Starkey still has about 9 ppb of arsenic, just shy of the federal limit of 10 ppb. Starkey said earlier that it tests every production run of water before it is sold and would "never sell products that do not meet FDA requirements.")

New Jersey regulators have also found bottled water with antimony

WHY CARBONATED WATER OFTEN GETS EVEN LESS OVERSIGHT

Consumers can't get enough water, especially aerated versions, such as seltzer and sparkling water. Demand for plain water's bubbly counterpart is rising fast, with 2018 sales of $1.98 billion. That's up 39 percent from a year prior, compared with a 6 percent increase for regular bottled water.

But in the eyes of the Food and Drug Administration, most artificially carbonated water—think Bubly and Polar—isn't bottled water. Instead, the FDA treats it as a soft drink.

That's crucial: As soft drinks, these beverages are exempt from the federal quality standards that apply to bottled water. The reduced oversight means companies usually don't have to adhere to the same federal contaminant limits.

The exceptions: naturally carbonated waters and artificial ones with labels that include certain terms—such as "mineral," "artesian," and "spring"—that the FDA says are covered by federal bottled water standards.

So, for example, Perrier Carbonated Mineral Water is regulated as a bottled water, but LaCroix Sparkling Water is not.

Making matters more confusing, there are lots of kinds of carbonated waters and the terms are sometimes used differently depending on the company.

To sort out what's what, CR provides this general guide.

Carbonated or Sparkling Water
Catchall terms that usually refer to unsweetened or unflavored water that had carbon dioxide injected during production.

Seltzer
This often refers to artificially carbonated water without anything added other than, sometimes, flavors.

Club Soda
An artificially carbonated water, typically with baking soda, potassium salts, or both to provide a tang that goes well with many alcoholic drinks.

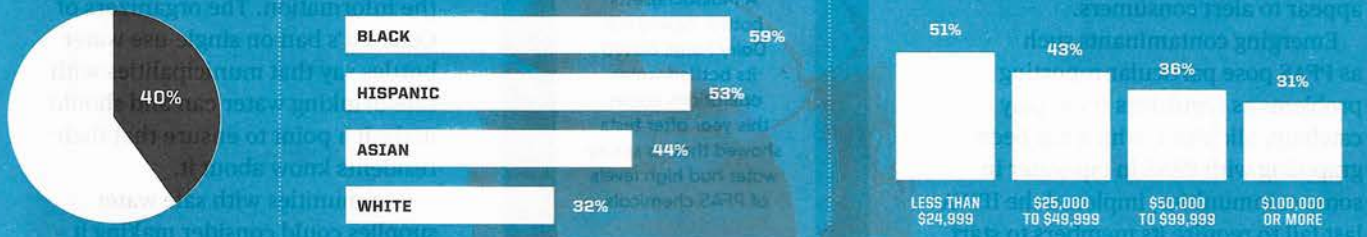
Tonic Water
Another classic mixer, tonic is made with carbonated water and quinine, as well as sugar or artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame. Note that the FDA limits how much quinine can be added.

FACING PAGE: MASAHIRE YOCHIMI/GETTY IMAGES

Who's Worried About Water?

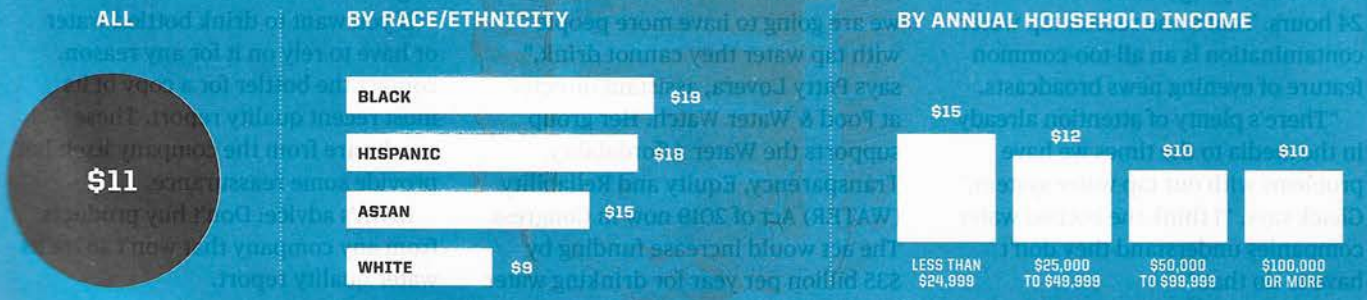
A lot depends on race, ethnicity, and income, according to CR's recent nationally representative survey of 4,225 Americans. How much people know about their drinking water and how much they spend on bottled water also vary based on those factors.

Percentage of people who think bottled water is safer to drink than tap water.



Percentage of people on municipal water who received a water quality report from their tap water supplier.

Median amount spent each month on bottled water, per household.



Note: Race categories (white, black, and Asian) include only respondents of non-Hispanic ethnicity and exclude those who identify as more than one race.

(a potentially harmful heavy metal) at five times the federal limit, arsenic at double the limit, and radium (a radioactive metal), but none of these results appear to have been widely publicized. Massachusetts published a link on its website about the recent contamination of Spring Hill bottled water with PFAS but did not otherwise appear to alert consumers.

Emerging contaminants such as PFAS pose particular reporting problems as regulators try to play catch-up. Michigan, which has been grappling with PFAS in tap water in some communities, implored the IBWA last fall to require its members to start testing for the chemicals. The state's representative said, in a letter obtained through a FOIA request, that it had conversations with unnamed bottlers and that PFAS contamination didn't appear to be a problem. But, the letter added, "that statement is only true of those specific bottlers."

The IBWA says it now requires members to test for PFAS, but it doesn't represent all bottlers. Spring Hill, for one, is not a member.

By comparison, oversight of tap water is more standardized and rigorous, says Gleick at the Pacific Institute. For example, when a community water system discovers a level of a contaminant that potentially poses an immediate health threat, it must notify regulators within 24 hours. That's one reason tap water contamination is an all-too-common feature of evening news broadcasts.

"There's plenty of attention already in the media to the times we have problems with our tap water system," Gleick says. "I think the bottled water companies understand they don't have to do that."

64
PERCENT

THE AMOUNT OF BOTTLED WATER SOURCED FROM MUNICIPAL (OR TAP) WATER

▼

A SPRING SHUTS DOWN

A Massachusetts bottler, Spring Hill Dairy Farm, closed its bottled water operations earlier this year after tests showed that its spring water had high levels of PFAS chemicals.

PHOTO: BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES

The Future of Drinking Water

Going forward, two things seem certain: The bottled water market will continue to grow, and bottled water is not a long-term solution to the nation's drinking water problem. "If we don't invest in our water infrastructure, we are going to have more people with tap water they cannot drink," says Patty Lovera, assistant director at Food & Water Watch. Her group supports the Water Affordability, Transparency, Equity and Reliability (WATER) Act of 2019 now in Congress. The act would increase funding by $35 billion per year for drinking water and wastewater improvements.

Another key step: Community water systems need to ensure that the people they serve get easy-to-understand annual water quality reports. In CR's survey, a quarter of people on municipal water who tried to learn about the quality of their local water said they couldn't find the information. The organizers of Concord's ban on single-use water bottles say that municipalities with safe drinking water can and should make it a point to ensure that their residents know about it.

Communities with safe water supplies could consider making it easier for people on the go to refill their own water bottles. That's what Concord did, and today the town has a robust network of businesses in town providing free tap water to anyone who comes in and asks for it.

Hudson's experience suggests that addressing problems with tap water works, too. The town invested in a new filtration system capable of removing PFAS. And testing last August didn't detect any PFAS in the town's water.

For homes, a number of filters that remove toxic substances, such as lead, are available. Pricier options, such as reverse osmosis systems, can be installed, and professional water testing can be performed for as little as $20. State or local health departments might also offer free water test kits.

If you want to drink bottled water or have to rely on it for any reason, contact the bottler for a copy of its most recent quality report. These results are from the company itself but provide some reassurance.

IBWA's advice: Don't buy products from any company that won't share its water quality report.

Ratings > **Pitcher Water Filters** These filters are meant mainly to improve the taste and smell of water in relatively small amounts. Only two of those we tested remove lead.

Recommended	Rank	Brand & Model	Overall Score	Price	Test Results: Flavor and odor reduction	Test Results: Flow rate	Test Results: Clogging	Features: Cost per year	Features: Certified to NSF standard for reduction of lead	Features: Certified to NSF standard for reduction of chlorine
✓	1	**Brita** Stream Rapids OB55	81	$30	⌃	⌃⌃	⌃⌃	$42		●
✓	2	**Pur** Ultimate With Lead Reduction PPT711W	77	$30	⌃⌃	⌄	⌃⌃	$66	●	●
	3	**Pur** Basic PPT700W	67	$17	⌃	!	!	$48		●
	4	**ZeroWater** Ready-Pour ZD-010RP	67	$30	!	⌃	⌃⌃	$90	●	●
	5	**Up & Up** (Target) 10 Cup Water Filtration Pitcher 1026418	65	$28	!	⌃⌃	⌃⌃	$30		●
	6	**Brita** Everyday OB46	53	$27	⌄	⌃⌃	⌃⌃	$42		●

HOW WE TEST: For **flavor and odor reduction,** CR's expert tasters assess how effectively a filter removes flavor and odor taints added to plain water. **Flow rate** assesses how long it takes to filter 1 quart of water. **Clogging** shows whether and how much a filter's flow rate slows as the cartridge reaches its capacity. **Cost per year** is the price of expected filter replacements. If a pitcher is **Certified to NSF standard for reduction of lead or chlorine,** we tested to make sure that it removes that compound. **Overall Score** is based on the performance of the product in all our tests.

HOW TO TEST YOUR TAP WATER

It's important to know your local results to decide whether you need to filter your water

How safe is your tap water? Finding out can take some time, effort, and money, but it's worth doing.

Most people on municipal water who pay their own bill should receive an annual water quality report called a CCR, or Consumer Confidence Report. If you don't receive yours, call your local water supplier. And if you rent, contact your landlord.

Systems with 100,000 or more people must also post reports online. You can find them on the Environmental Protection Agency website at epa.gov/ccr.

In the report, look for a summary that shows whether any contaminants were found above government cutoffs and, if so, what the potential health risks are, what is being done to fix the problem, and what you should do in the meantime. For questions, call your local supplier or the EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800-426-4791.

If you're on well water, you won't get a CCR, so you should get your water tested. That's also a good idea if your home was built before lead-free pipes were mandated in 1986: Even if your CCR says that the municipality's water is free of lead, it can leach into your water from the pipes in or leading to your house.

Many kits are available for do-it-yourself tap testing, but it's not always clear what they test for or how accurate they are. The EPA recommends using a certified lab. Find one at epa.gov/dwlabcert. Testing typically costs $20 to $150; your community might provide test kits free of charge.

Once you know what's in your water, choose a filter that suits your needs.

For multiple or high levels of contaminants, reverse osmosis filters are often best. They can remove lead, arsenic, bacteria, and other contaminants. But they take up a lot of space (typically under your sink), require additional plumbing, and often go through several gallons of water for every gallon of filtered water. They're pricey, too, some costing $1,000 or more. You might also have to pay a professional to periodically service the system.

For improving taste or odor, or dealing with less serious contamination, a carbon filter can help. But it might not remove all lead.

Regardless of which filter you choose, make sure it's certified to NSF International standards by an independent lab—such as the CSA Group, Underwriters Laboratories (UL), or the Water Quality Association (WQA)—for removing the contaminants you're concerned about.

A pitcher filter is good for drinking water. A filter that attaches to your sink is a good choice for that as well as for water used to cook and wash dishes.

—Perry Santanachote