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Less Water, More Risk: Exploring National and Local Water Use Patterns in the U.S.

Amidst a rising number of extreme weather events, service fluctuations, and other investment concerns, America's water infrastructure is at a crossroads. Frequently overlooked and taken for granted, water is not just vital for life, but also provides an economic foundation for millions of businesses, farms, power plants, manufacturers, and households that depend on a reliable supply each day in the United States.

Despite seeing declining levels of water use in recent years, the U.S. still depends on nearly 355 billion gallons each day, an enormous total speaking to the breadth of uses nationally. Water use remains high in many cases, but it is also falling across the board as new conservation measures and technologies have been introduced. Utilities must confront several competing needs as a result: fixing aging, brittle infrastructure systems in service of a productive economy while generating less predictable revenues from lower levels of water use. Rising water bills, in turn, are helping to cover these costs and are often hitting lower-income households and other vulnerable users the hardest.

To provide reliable, cost-effective service, utilities—alongside local planners, economic development officials, and other leaders—need more detailed metrics and a better understanding of how regional water needs are shifting. By providing a comprehensive comparison of metropolitan and non-metropolitan water use, this report helps to meet this need. It not only highlights the scale and complexity of how users in different areas depend on water, but it also points to difficulties these users—and providers—face managing this scarce resource in an economically efficient and equitable way.

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The Brookings Institute

by Joseph Kane

Senior Research Analyst and Associate Fellow - Metropolitan Policy Program

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