



Human Service Needs and Disaster Displacement

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

As part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Evidence Capacity Support (EvCap Support) project, Mathematica worked with ACF's Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response (OHSEPR) regarding disaster displacement and human services. OHSEPR leads, strengthens, and synchronizes human services to prepare, respond, and recover from emergencies and crises. Mathematica and Child Trends are conducting the EvCap Support project, in collaboration with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in ACF.

The goal of the engagement with OHSEPR is to review, understand, and compile existing literature and available resources on human services and disaster displacement. Specifically, we sought to understand how the literature defines key terms to describe disaster displacement, explores the relationship between disasters and displacement in the United States, describes how people and communities affected by disaster displacement access human services, and identifies outcomes for affected people and communities. Our review focused on human services needs and provision, particularly those for people with low incomes, in areas such as housing, income support, employment, and education. This executive summary describes the methodology, findings, and key gaps identified from the literature review.

In this report, **disaster displacement** refers to the involuntary movement of residents from their home and community because of an external phenomenon for a temporary, short-term, or long-term period.

Methodology

To identify sources for the literature review, the team gathered initial input on the review's scope from five experts with relevant affiliations and backgrounds. The team then conducted a methodical review to identify and select relevant academic and grey literature. After reviewing the selected literature, the team sought to fill in gaps and solicited recommendations of additional literature from authors of key studies. A description of the review process and list of consulted experts are included in the Methodology section of the report. Ultimately, our review included 81 sources. We summarize the reviewed literature in this report.

Background and overview of findings.

Throughout the literature, several terms were used interchangeably to define concepts related to disaster displacement. This variation made it difficult to identify a clear set of commonly accepted terms and definitions. The research reviewed for this report tended to focus on specific, large-scale disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina), instead of analyzing human services processes and patterns across disasters. Further, within the literature on specific disasters, most literature tended to concentrate on specific disaster-related elements or contexts (Boin et al. 2019). For example, findings from the literature generated valuable insights on the post-disaster human services needs of children and families, the experiences of people with low incomes facing long-term displacement after Hurricane Katrina, and recommendations on how government and nongovernmental agencies can better coordinate service delivery. However, none of the resources we reviewed offer a holistic understanding of how people experience displacement in different regions or across type and scale of disaster.

The reviewed resources also did not provide a holistic understanding of the process of delivering and accessing necessary human services for the displaced. The literature addressed post-disaster government support programs, disaster case management, and faith-based and community organizations, but our sources primarily discussed these topics independently of one another. Few resources included examples of how the various support agencies work together, and none provided a clear narrative of how someone might access necessary human services once displaced.

Given these inconsistencies and limitations in the literature, it is a challenge to thoroughly understand disaster displacement in the United States and how the human services field responds to and supports people displaced by disasters. Recognizing these gaps, this report synthesizes key terms and concepts from the literature, including temporary and short-term post-disaster needs of people displaced by a disaster, and the process of accessing and delivering human services within impacted and host communities.

Terms used to define disaster displacement vary, but common concepts include impacted and host communities, short-term and long-term displacement, and disaster recovery.

Based on the available literature, we define a small set of terms for which there is a common definition. We use the following key terms throughout this report:

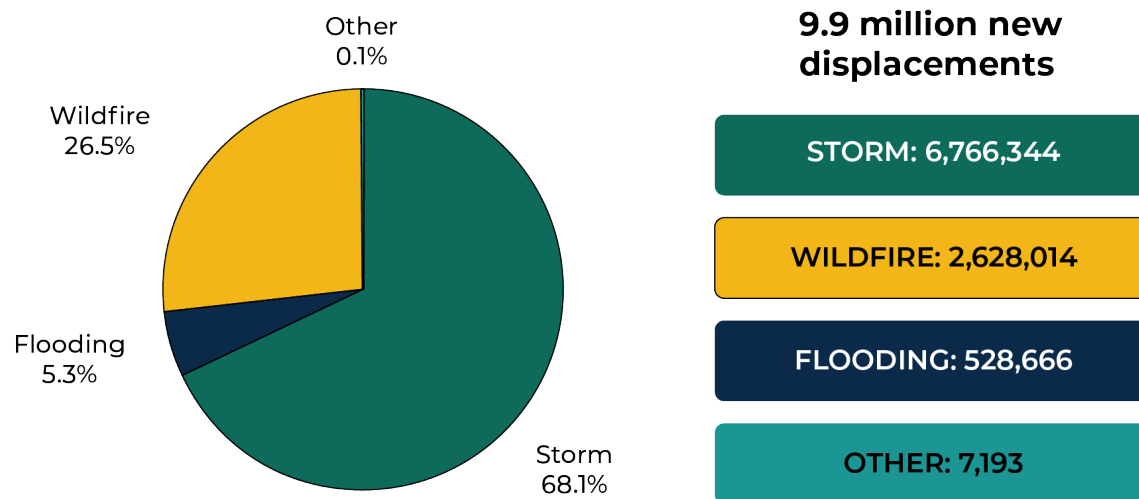
- **Disaster displacement** refers to the involuntary movement of residents from their home and community because of an external phenomenon. This movement can be classified as **temporary**, when the displacement is shorter than three months; **short term**, when displacement lasts between three months and one year; or **long term** when displacement is longer than a year (Black et al. 2012).
- **Impacted community** describes the locality directly affected by a disaster. For example, in a wildfire, this would be the community where fire destroys or damages homes and other structures (Levine et al. 2007).
- **Host communities** describes the localities that the disaster does not directly affect or that sustain less damage but receive and host a significant number of displaced people from the impacted community (Levine et al. 2007).
- **Disaster recovery** refers to the process of restoring jobs and services to the local economy, social and interpersonal connections between individuals, and community activity to pre-disaster levels within the disaster-affected community (Spokane et al. 2013).
- **Sudden-onset disasters** include hurricanes and wildfires and are characterized by a rapid onset combined with a relatively short duration; these disasters last only a few days or weeks (Li et al. 2021).
- **Slow-onset disasters** include sea-level rise or more frequent and intense heat waves, and their cumulative effects can take years to become apparent. Slow-onset disasters are often associated with and precipitated by climate change (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC] and Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC] 2021; Black et al. 2012).¹

¹ Although the reviewed research provided a definition of slow-onset disasters, little research addressed how slow-onset disasters relate to displacement.

Disaster displacement in the United States is primarily caused by storms, flooding, and wildfires.

Storms, flooding, and wildfires are the primary causes of displacement in the United States. Currently, the United States averages more than one million new displacements of individuals a year caused by natural disasters. Among the natural disasters that cause displacement, storms (including associated flooding) and wildfires cumulatively account for 99.9 percent of displacements. This can be attributed to the span and severity of damage these disasters can cause to homes and other structures (IDMC and NRC 2018). Exhibit 1 summarizes disaster displacement in the United States from 2008 to 2020.

Exhibit 1. Number of people displaced by disasters in the United States from 2008 to 2020



Source: IDMC and NRC 2021.

Notes: The storm category includes hurricanes, heavy rains, tropical storms or thunderstorms, tornadoes, and blizzards. These incidents might lead to severe flooding, which could be recorded a second time in the data as either a flood incident or storm, depending on the circumstances and source of the data. That said, the separate flood category also captures independent incidents such as levee breaches and dam failures. The category for “other” includes volcanic eruption, earthquake, wet and dry mass movement (such as mudslides or rockslides), and extreme temperature.

Displacement is a complex process resulting in varying experiences for displaced people.

Disaster displacement typically occurs as a response to evacuation orders before a disaster incident or when damage caused by a disaster renders a family’s home or community unlivable. Several factors contribute to whether a person evacuates before a disaster, including financial resources, personal transportation, and access to a reliable place to shelter outside of the impacted community (Merdjanoff et al. 2019).

Those with adequate resources and connections might find temporary shelter in a hotel or with family or friends. Those with fewer resources often wait out the disaster and are the most likely to rely on evacuation services provided by local emergency management once the disaster risk becomes severe (Fussell and Lowe 2014). Emergency evacuation services use public buses or vans to transport people to a host community where they can access designated disaster shelters or other emergency housing (Bell et al. 2010).

Depending on the severity of the disaster and access to return transportation and other resources, the majority of displaced people return home within days or weeks of the disaster to assess the damage and tend to repairs. The displacement process can be prolonged if the home has been severely damaged, particularly for those who do not own their home because home insurance policies generally do not cover temporary housing for renters (Yabe et al. 2020). Other factors that prolong displacement in host communities include lack of return transportation and damaged public transportation, closed public schools and clinics, and disrupted human services networks in the impacted community. Some people choose to remain in a host community instead of returning, particularly if the social ties, housing and job market, and community resources of the impacted community have changed significantly. Those unable to find stable employment or housing often end up in an in-between space, neither settling in the host community nor returning to the impacted community. Displacement for these people is often long term and is characterized by recurring rehousing and overall housing instability (Fussell and Lowe 2014).

Marginalized populations are most vulnerable to adverse outcomes from disaster displacement.

Research suggests that the people most vulnerable to disaster displacement are those who lack resources before the disaster incident, such as those experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and unemployment, and people from low-income communities and communities of color (Levine et al. 2007; Perls 2020). After being displaced by a disaster, people without access to resources face the additional challenge of navigating complex human services systems, including new and unfamiliar systems in a host community, and are at the highest risk for negative long-term outcomes. This is especially true for vulnerable populations coping with multiple, intersecting needs (Levine et al. 2007). Populations that are particularly vulnerable to displacement and adverse outcomes include older adults and people with health risks, people with disabilities, people without access to personal transportation, and people with low incomes.

Human services for people displaced by disasters are often focused on housing and are delivered by many agencies and organizations.

Housing is the most immediate need for people displaced by disaster. Other critical human services needs include income support, transportation, schools, child care, and jobs. Access to temporary housing that provides safe shelter and a place of belonging is the most immediate need of people displaced by disaster (Lein et al. 2012). When a home is damaged by a large-scale natural disaster, a household is displaced, and the occupants must find temporary or transitional housing (Spokane et al. 2013). In most cases, people prefer to stay in or close to their original community—near their schools, jobs, and neighbors. Staying with relatives or friends outside the affected area is often an ideal short-term solution. However, for people without transportation, financial resources, or connections outside the impacted community, those options are less available. Thus, people with fewer resources are more likely to be displaced to emergency shelters; prefabricated or improvised shelters, such as manufactured housing or modular home; medical facilities; or temporary accommodations, such as churches and other faith-based and nonprofit organizations (Sadri et al 2017; Spokane et al. 2013). In addition to housing, common short-term human services needs described in the literature include income support, transportation, school and child care, and employment opportunities.

Delivery of human services for people displaced by disasters largely relies on federal funding.

Service delivery and coordination are driven by federal government structures for response and recovery. Key federal departments that play a role in disaster response include the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA]), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. These federal

agencies help people displaced by disasters, either directly or through impacted states or localities, and assist state and local recovery efforts. That said, federal post-disaster assistance programs are often not well understood by displaced people, and many people do not know how to access them (Ratcliffe et al. 2019).

Government and nongovernmental agencies administer services at the federal, state, and local level. At the state and local level, emergency management and human services agencies can use federal funding to support their increased administrative needs and to coordinate or adapt critical services for displaced people, such as shelter placement and transportation needs (Spearing and Faust 2020). Federal funding can flow through state and local governments to state or community service providers. It can also flow directly from the federal government to national FEMA partners (FEMA 2021; Ratcliffe et al. 2019).

Faith-based and community organizations help provide human services to people displaced by disasters. Displaced people in need of necessities such as food, water, and clothing are typically referred to one of FEMA’s national relief partners, most commonly the Red Cross. The Red Cross and related partners, such as United Way and the Salvation Army, serve people through FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers and their own local offices within impacted and host communities. Most immediate post-disaster services for displaced people (such as temporary shelter, mass food distribution, emergency first aid, and distribution of FEMA information) are coordinated by a network of faith-based nonprofits and community organizations called voluntary organizations active in disaster (Ratcliffe et al. 2019). Secular and faith-based nonprofits play a significant role in delivering disaster case management—a service that supports the post-disaster recovery process by connecting people to available human services and helping them navigate federal post-disaster assistance programs (Bell et al. 2010).

Disasters and the resulting displacement negatively affect outcomes for individuals and communities.

When a person or family is displaced from their community, social structures, and culture, their ability to cope with stressful events is hindered (Merdjanoff 2013). People who have been displaced by disasters report higher levels of emotional stress and financial hardship in the months and years following the disaster. Children who are forced to miss school or are placed in a new school during periods of disaster displacement often struggle academically and socially (Lowe et al. 2013). These stressors occur for many displaced people and families and present themselves regardless of means and demographics. However, the severity, duration, and eventual outcomes differ greatly if a person has limited social or financial resources before being displaced. For example, people with low incomes who do not own their homes are more likely to experience prolonged periods of displacement and housing instability after a disaster (Merdjanoff 2013). Housing instability—and the associated lack of safety, certainty, opportunity, and community—is widely considered the main impediment to long-term social, emotional, and economic post-disaster recovery (Fothergill and Peek 2015).

At the community level, the employment and economic environments of impacted communities are likely to change in the wake of a disaster. This often includes a depletion of the available affordable housing. Together, these shifts can fundamentally change the impacted community and present challenges during recovery after a disaster. Host communities are frequently overlooked in disaster displacement planning and coordination efforts. The sudden influx of displaced people in host communities following a disaster strains the host community’s infrastructure, including increased traffic and stress on public services and utilities such as water, sewage and power, and school resources (Speier et al 2018).

Recommendations include improving resiliency planning and developing a greater understanding of and investment in the long-term needs of displaced people and the communities affected by disasters.

Research suggests that existing public efforts should increase focus on resiliency planning for high-risk disaster regions, especially those communities with significant populations with low incomes. Disaster resiliency planning is a proactive approach to managing disasters aimed at improving the ability of communities to plan for and recover from future disasters, ultimately reducing the impact of disasters on a community (Kyne and Aldrich 2019; Institute of Medicine 2015). It typically involves establishing communication and collaboration with stakeholders and community members, assessing needs, collaboratively developing a plan before a disaster happens, and reassessing and planning after a disaster.

In addition, public policy efforts to support displaced people could be improved by a greater focus on displacement related to climate change and slow-onset disasters (Ratcliffe et al. 2019; Li et al. 2021); simplifying the process for displaced people to find and access human services after a disaster (Ratcliffe et al. 2019; Institute of Medicine 2015); and providing more supports for host communities, improving coordination between host and impacted communities, and supporting communities just outside disaster declaration zones that act as unofficial support hubs for disaster response and recovery (Spearing and Faust 2020; Yabe et al. 2020).

Significant gaps exist in the reviewed literature.

During this review, the study team identified several notable gaps in the literature on disaster displacement and human services. These gaps, often confirmed by the experts engaged by the team, suggest the field would benefit from further research and from the use of more diverse research methods beyond case studies and a focus on large-scale disasters. Notable gaps in the research include information about the following:

- Needs and resources for delivering human services beyond housing support, such as child care, employment, and education;
- Human services needs and resources for certain marginalized populations, such as people experiencing homelessness before a disaster, people experiencing domestic violence, and people living in foster care systems or institutionalized settings;
- Long-term outcomes for people displaced by disasters;
- Coordination and implementation of human services during and following disasters;
- Experiences, needs, and long-term outcomes of host communities; and
- Slow-onset disasters, such as sea-level rise and frequent heat waves, and their relationship to disaster displacement.

Additional research on these topics could help the field of human services better understand, plan for, and respond to disaster displacement.

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