

Vulnerable Populations

On its face, natural disasters may seem like great equalizers, in reality disasters do not affect all groups the same way even if they all experienced the same level of flooding or storm inundation. Communities are affected in different ways depending on their social vulnerabilities. Groups with high social vulnerability have a lower capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of a natural disaster.

Vulnerable Population: Low Economic Status

Low-income families are one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to natural disasters. In the United States racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poverty because they're socially and economically marginalized and thus are more vulnerable to disasters. That vulnerability is evident even before the disaster hits. Lower-income people may not have cellphones, broadband or regular use of technology that will keep them up to date of looming danger. And, whereas those with more income have more resources available to purchase supplies and install home protections to prepare for a disaster that is not the case with lower-income families. Furthermore, poorer households are less likely to have access to adequate transportation to facilitate evacuation, they either lack a private vehicle or are in possession of poor quality vehicles, all which hinder their ability to evacuate. Low-income families are more likely to reside in lower-quality housing. Housing that is weaker and less reliable in times of disaster. Substandard infrastructure in affordable housing units and low-income communities place residents at greater risk to the effects of a severe storm. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, low-income neighborhoods were more affected than wealthier ones, as poor families were more concentrated in flood-prone parts of Houston. Thus, the poor suffer disproportionately more casualties and damage.

Additionally, the city's poorest residents are also more likely to live near oil refineries and petrochemical plants and are thus more at-risk to chemical spills and toxic leaks resulting from storm damage. With fewer assets, little insurance, and less diversified income sources, families that are already struggling can be pushed into destitution when disaster strikes. As the frequency and severity of hurricanes and other severe weather events increase, so too will their impact on the poor.

