

Barriers to equitable disaster recovery in the United States

When 32% of citizens cannot cover a \$500 emergency expense from their savings, how do we successfully navigate the increasing occurence of disasters within the United States, particularly for marginalized communities?

This research brief provides a practical review of disaster recovery literature from the last 25 years, identifying the specific barriers to disaster recovery that vulnerable communities face in the US and highlighting key recommendations and insights for policymakers and practitioners working in the disaster recovery space.

Research background

Disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity across the US. Marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by these disasters, facing the most barriers to recovery following a disaster, not only because systemic oppression has forced these communities to live in hazard-prone areas, but also because they have many pre-existing vulnerabilities. Disasters therefore tend to push marginalized communities into a downward spiral of accelerated resource losses and further marginalization¹⁻³.

In an attempt to help prevent these downward spirals of resource loss, CEDR carried out a rigorous literature review to identify specific barriers that historically marginalized populations face when trying to access disaster finances and resources in the United States. Repeated patterns in disaster recovery programs and responses in the US across the last 25 years were examined, from which 29 key barriers to disaster recovery were identified, which fell under 5 main themes. This brief examines these themes in greater detail, proposing the concept of a 'social stratification sieve', which highlights how delays in funding aid exacerbate differences in recovery outcomes over time and repeated disasters. Key recommendations to improve disaster recovery in marginalised communities in the US are also provided.

Key insights from the research

- A range of barriers to disaster recovery still exist. These disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Latine, limited English proficiency (LEP), differently-abled, and undocumented populations.
- Barriers need to be addressed through locally-appropriate perspectives and insights.
- There is an urgent need to be more inclusive of historically marginalized populations in each step of disaster recovery. This includes presenting relevant information clearly and simply in different formats and language options.

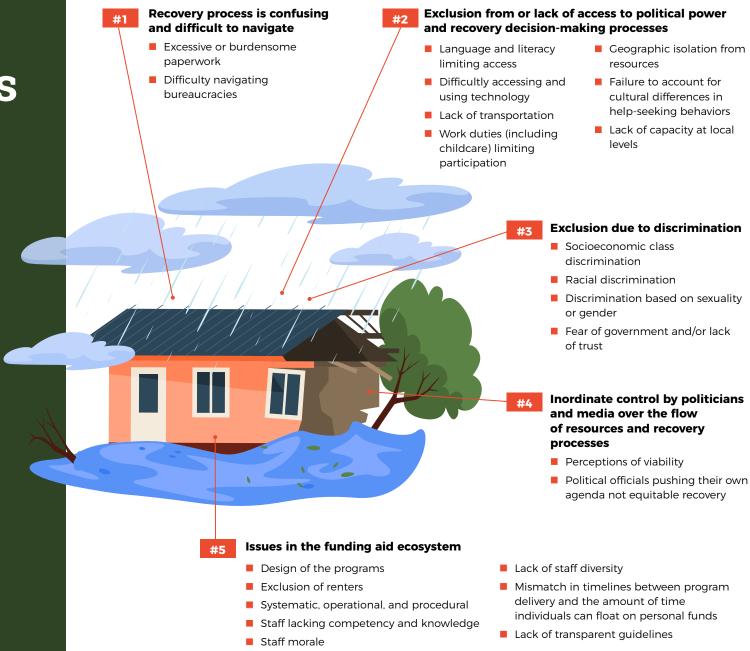
- The existence of multiple recovery processes with differing rules and timelines often makes disaster recovery unnavigable. The burden of weaving together disparate resources should not sit on the community.
- Agency representatives must be empowered to serve applicants first and foremost, not solely to seek compliance.
- In order to move away from the idea of deservedness, the shared experience of disaster recovery must be collectively shown, with areas of solidarity and community identified. Sharing stories and case studies can serve to show the experiences that disaster survivors have and the barriers that they must struggle to overcome.

Key findings

Our research identified 29 specific barriers to disaster recovery, from which five interconnected themes emerged. These are expanded upon over the following pages.

Many of the barriers identified are interacting and have compounding affects⁵¹, making different paths to recovery post-disaster either easier or more difficult to navigate, depending on the social stratification of the community in question (e.g. wealth, income, race, education, ethnicity, gender, occupation, or social status).

Often these barriers are co-occurring, making some of the paths in question more deeply potholed than others.





#1 Recovery process is confusing and difficult to navigate

- **Too much paperwork** that is too complicated^{4,5}.
- Too many stages in application processes^{5,6}.
- Too many programmatic changes⁷.
- **Too little collaboration and coordination** between recovery programs, which creates too many touch points for individuals who become increasingly confused as they try to navigate the piecemeal recovery efforts^{2,8}.
- Poor communication about available aid or ability to appeal determination decisions paired with pressing needs results in participants being forced to make life-altering decisions hastily without all the facts, which ultimately results in outcomes that are frequently not in their best interest⁹.



#2 Exclusion due to discrimination

Discrimination in it's various forms was one of the most prominent themes in the literature. The literature reviewed primarily centers on discrimination based on **race^{16,17}** and **class¹⁸**, while gender, sexuality, and disability are mentioned rarely, if at all. This, however, appears to reflect a gap in research rather than a gap in discrimination, as the little literature that does exist suggests discrimination occurs on these fronts as well¹⁹.





Exclusion from or lack of access to political power and recovery decision-making processes

- Language and literacy barriers limit access to important recovery processes¹⁰.
- Lack of transportation^{11,12} and lack of access to/unfamiliarity with technology^{13,14} leads to exclusion.
- Resources or decision-making processes being available only during certain times means those who can't take time off work or find childcare are excluded^{6,15}
- There is a disconnect between messaging channels used by emergency managers (i.e., technology) and those used by historically marginalized communities (i.e., trusted personal networks)².



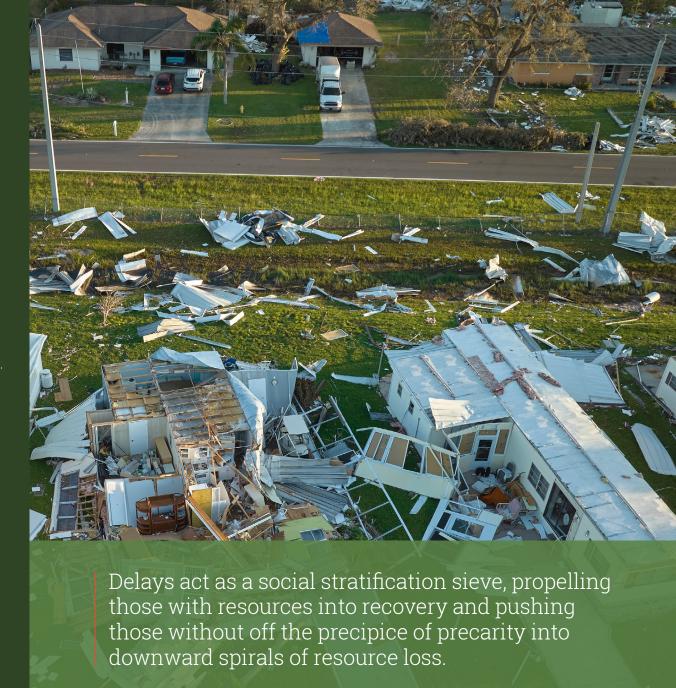
#4 Politicians and media have an nordinate amount of control over recovery processes

- Politicians have huge amounts of influence on recovery resource flows, which has profound implications for communities that have historically been, and continue to be, excluded from said systems and power^{20,25}.
- Politicians often direct flows of resources based on personal interests rather than need. In fact, "nearly half of all FEMA disaster relief is explained by political influence rather than actual need" ²⁶.
- A lack of transparent guidelines allow conscious and unconscious biases to proliferate and direct resource flows²⁰.



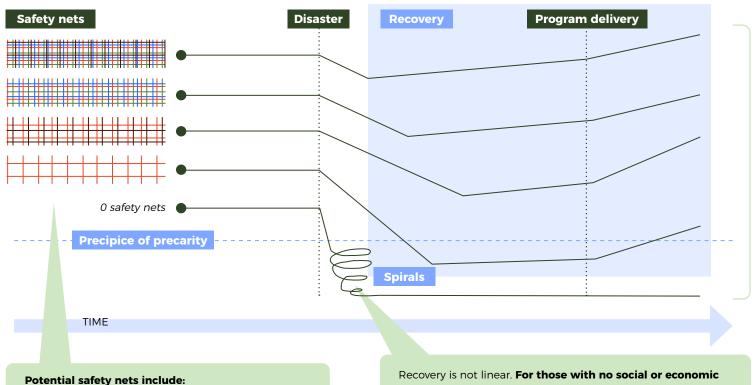
#5 Issues in the funding aid ecosystem

- **Staff morale** is often overlooked as a variable in recovery outcomes, but it plays a key role^{5,22}.
- The quality of services impacts recovery time more than quantity of emergency managers involved²³.
- **Delays** in aid are a significant barrier for marginalized communities, acting as a social stratification sieve that propels those with resources into recovery and pushes those without off the precipice of precarity into downward spirals of resource loss²⁰²¹.
- Scaling requires new staff; adequate training needs to be provided to prevent confusion and delays^{3,5,24}.



Unpacking the social stratification sieve

The social stratification sieve effect highlights how the difference in recovery outcomes grows over time and with repeated disasters.





and family





Flexible employment



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capital, the downward spiral becomes exacerbated. As the conservation of resources theory suggests, loss/gain spirals are asymmetrical (i.e., it takes far longer to gain resources than it does to lose them)⁵² so that the further one goes down the spiral, the harder it is to get back up. At first resource loss occurs slowly, but it accelerates the further one gets down into the spiral.

Delays in program delivery increase the vast gap in equitable outcomes between the "haves" and the "have **nots".** Program delivery delays occur often^{22,29,47,48} and can last from months^{15,44} to years^{44,49,50} (5-10 years in some cases⁴⁰). Those with many or all protective factors get by nearly unscathed by program delivery delays as their many safety nets ensure they can remain in limbo until programs allocations occur. This has been called the "immunity of the privileged"41. Repairing or strengthening a safety net prior to a disaster may mean individuals don't fall off the precipice of precarity if program delays occur.

Understanding safety nets as protective factors in disaster recovery



Family and friends

Social networks and social capital are a key part of getting through hard times, however, research has demonstrated that not all social capital holds equal value in a disaster context. One study found that a Lower Ninth Ward resident (an almost exclusively Black community) would have needed to know 80 more neighbors than the average Lakeview resident (an almost exclusively white neighborhood) to achieve the same level of assistance from their social network³⁷. This is likely due to the fact that Black individuals' networks were in similarly vulnerable situations³⁸, or because Blacks were more likely to be impacted and widely dispersed increasing the likelihood that their social networks were more of a point of concern rather than a crucial source of support³⁹.



Flexible employment

Being able to remain employed, or quickly go back to work after a disaster can allow you to remain in limbo waiting on program delivery at post storm rentals, functionally affording you a second buffer (i.e., family and friends) to fall back on should you need, affording such individuals more "resource time"21. Lower-income individuals, or those who lose their iobs as a result of the disaster, have less "resource time"21 because they can't pay for temporary housing and so rely more heavily on family^{39,40}. Furthermore. Black workers are four times more likely to lose their job than Whites after a disaster³⁹.



Where do US households stand when it comes to having financial savings as a safety net?

6 months after disaster

61% of U.S. households have less than 6 months of savings³⁴

3 months after disaster

46-51% of US households have less than 3 months' worth of savings^{34,35}

60% of Whites, **43%** of Hispanics, and **40%** of Blacks have 3+ months' worth of savings³⁵

73% of those with a Bachelor's degree, 48% with a college/technical/associate degree, and only 24% with less than a high school education have 3+ months' worth of savings³⁶

0 months after disaster

32% of US citizens cannot cover a \$500 emergency expense with their savings, while **14**% cannot even cover a \$100 emergency expense³³

Differences in savings patterns are drawn along racial and educational lines, and this pattern has been stable over time³³⁻³⁶. Research suggests this is **due to the ability to save rather than the will to save**, with those who make more being able to save more³⁴.





Insurance

Insurance can be a protective factor but only if it is carried in the right amount and type^{28,42}. **Socially vulnerable groups frequently don't carry insurance because of the prohibitive costs⁴³. Those who are unable to have insurance are often further penalized through reduced allocations from programs⁴⁴.**

Program delivery delays push people off the precipice of precarity

The **precipice of precarity** is the point at which individuals, typically the poor, are forced to make decisions that appease immediate needs but ultimately undermine their long-term recovery^{21,39,45,46}. In the language of others, this is the point at which an individual runs out of "resource time" and is "temporally dominated"²¹.

Research exploring a buyout program case study demonstrated that this precipice of precarity occurred at around six months for individuals while program delivery on average took over a year⁴⁵. In this case, this mismatch in timelines between program delivery and people's "resource time"²¹ (i.e, amount of time they could float on family, friends, and personal funds) resulted in 75% of the individuals having to put insurance funds towards repairs on a home that would be demolished. The individuals could not recoperate these funds to put them towards a new home when the buyout program funds finally came through due to "double dipping policies" in the Stafford Act⁴⁵.

This same pattern seems to span programs. It also stands to reason given the previously noted differing patterns of safety nets or protective factors individuals have, that **resource time or the point at which they are forced off the precipice of precarity is much less than six months**²¹. **This varies drastically by race**³⁵ **and socio-economic status**^{21,36,39} with BIPOC individuals and those lower SES being much more likely to have limited resource time and fall off the precipice of precarity much sooner.

The pattern explained here is the primary mechanism by which delays act as a social stratification sieve, propelling those with resources into recovery and pushing those without off the precipice of precarity into downward spirals of resource loss.





Recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners

Jerolleman (2019)²⁰ suggests four principles of a just recovery that should be adopted, which largely summarize ths brief's recommendations for policy-makers and practicioners:

- All members of a community need to be fully informed and be able to exercise their agency freely:
- Injustices must be defended by the discriminator, not the other way around (i.e., the victim should not have to demonstrate they are "deserving" of equal treatment):
- There must be a utilization of a community's full "transformative and adaptive capacity" while acknowledging historic trends and context^(p. 21); and
- There must be equal access to programs and resources and the decision-making processes that are associated with these.



Understand and integrate equity into disaster recovery outcomes

- Programs need to understand equity and "become equitable in every approach," and in all outcomes^{30(p. 11)}. Each of these can be conceptualized as unique steps to achieving equity, and careful attention needs to be paid to where we are now and how we can get to equity in all outcomes, which the literature suggests, to date, remains elusive.
- "The term 'equity' refers to fairness and justice and is distinguished from equality: Whereas equality means providing the same to all, equity means recognizing that we do not all start from the same place and must acknowledge and make adjustments to imbalances. The process is ongoing, requiring us to identify and overcome intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures." ⁵³



Include historically marginalized populations throughout the disaster recovery process

- Our literature review shows that disaster recovery that is meant to support communities continues to play a major role in exacerbating pre-existing social inequalities through systemic biases^{8,27,28}.
- These findings point to a need for greater inclusion of historically marginalized populations in every step of the disaster recovery and planning processes^{3,12,17,18}. This will help "expand the pool of potential solutions"²⁹ by providing unique and "locally appropriate" perspectives and insights¹⁵.



School education curriculum and employer requirements should be explored

- Improved education will ensure an adequate pre-disaster understanding of recovery programs and processes.
- No individual is immune from disaster³² and, subsequently, all ought to understand the recovery process and the resources available





Governments, relief organizations, and other stakeholders should carefully consider and strategically address each of the identified barriers in order to better meet the needs of diverse populations

- Communication must be "clear, simple, meaningful, and jargon-free" as the Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires⁵ and must overcome language and literacy barriers^{5,29}.
- The existence of multiple processes with differing rules and timelines essentially creates an unnavigable process. The burden of weaving together disparate resources should not sit on the community. Both GAO⁵ and Finucane et al. (2020)²⁹ recommend the importance of "clearly documenting the responsibilities of all agencies" to "ensure accountability" and also to enhance transparency, which "mediates public perception"²⁹.
- Agency representatives, whether government employees or contractors, must be empowered to serve applicants first and foremost, not solely to seek compliance. This may require better training for entry-level staff in key competencies including empathy, so as to ensure that survivors have a sense of control, trust, and feel valued^{5,22}. This may also require better compensation for that work so as to reduce turnover^{5,22}.
- Local governments must protect the rights of all residents, including renters, in the recovery process.
- Take a more **needs-based**, **data-driven approach** when directing resource flows^{5,17,31}.

A transformative approach to disaster recovery

To achieve transformation, disaster relief programs should be redesigned to guarantee basic minimum human rights for all affected individuals, regardless of their housing status, citizenship status, or any other factors.

Local governments must protect the rights of all residents, including renters, in the recovery process. This may mean ensuring that mitigation requirements do not displace families and taking steps to prevent predatory land grabs.

At a minimum, there are many civil rights protections built into the Stafford Act that the ecosystem of aid must abide by. There should be greater enforcement of these provisions, including requiring states and municipalities to be in compliance. This will require a concerted effort by agency attorneys and advisors to fully determine the bounds of FEMA's authority and how best to ensure accountability.

In order to move away from the idea of deservedness, we must collectively show the shared experience of disaster recovery and identify areas of solidarity and community. Stories and case studies can serve to show the experiences that disaster survivors have and the barriers that they must struggle to overcome.



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For further information

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