SURVIVORS AS EXPERTS

A COMMUNITY EVALUATION OF DISASTER RECOVERY IN NORTHEAST HOUSTON

DECEMBER 2021
Working Paper #110

This Working Paper is a product of the work of West Street Recovery, The Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus, Northeast Action Collective, and all of our co-creators and co-conspirators, be they individuals or organizations.
Survivors as Experts: A Community Evaluation of Disaster Recovery in Northeast Houston

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"EACH DISASTER HAS ITS OWN RECOVERY, BUT FOR SOME REASON WE NEVER RECOVER AT THE SAME RATE AS EVERYONE ELSE. THERE IS NO EQUITY."

Over four years after Hurricane Harvey struck Houston in 2017, thousands of Houstonians remain displaced or are still living in damaged homes that endanger their health. While there is damage that remains across the region, BIPOC communities such as Northeast Houston (where the authors of this paper live or work) are home to the majority of the continued suffering; homes are abandoned, health impacts persist, quality of life in neighborhoods has declined, the mental health of survivors is strained, and lives remain disrupted. Cumulatively these stresses and deprivations are a deadly expression of inequality materialized along racial lines. This uneven recovery is both a result and an amplifier of previous health risks, environmental hazards, and systemic disinvestment found in the neighborhoods covered by this report.

Often sociological studies of disasters and recovery highlight large scale trends, and recovery policy prioritizes the perspectives of “experts” such as recovery administrators and government officials. This paper takes a different approach by centering the perspective of marginalized people who have had to recover from disaster and discussing this alongside larger bodies of research. Flood survivors themselves served as study designers, interviewers, analysts and co-authors.
KEY FINDINGS

- **Health Impacts**: People in NE Houston are experiencing sustained and severe physical and mental health impacts from Harvey.
  - Harvey created sustained negative health effects for all but one of the 21 interviewees.
  - Often, participants with pre-existing health conditions described a vicious cycle where the recovery process and displacement aggravated their conditions, which in turn made accessing aid more difficult.
  - 19 described depression, anxiety, or recurring trauma, but only five said they received professional care.

- **Financial Impacts**
  - For most families in our study, the only way to survive after a disaster was by draining savings, borrowing from family and friends, or taking on debt. Eighteen of 21 interviewees report depleting their savings or going into debt.

- **Evacuation and Preparedness**
  - Although evacuation lasted less than a week for the respondents in this study, the experience remains raw, and memories are triggered by every rain.
  - Local and state officials gave conflicting advice on evacuating, which caused distrust that the mayor “wasn’t telling [people] anything because they didn’t want to cause panic” and left people without enough information or time to make informed decisions.
  - Left on their own during Harvey, residents depended on help from informal networks of neighbors, family, friends, and civilian responders.

"YOU THINK THAT FOR SOME REASON THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT HELP US? GOD KNOWS WHY, MAYBE BECAUSE WE HAVE DARK SKIN."
KEY FINDINGS

- **Immediate Needs**
  - While mountains of free or donated supplies accumulated downtown, participants in our study had difficulty accessing critical needs like food, clothing, cleaning supplies, and beds.
  - A more urgent issue was a general shortage of goods in NE Houston due to road closures and broken supply chains after Harvey.

- **Application Experience**
  - After years of looking for help, many in our study still have not received the recovery assistance they need, either because they could never find an organization giving the aid they needed or because they were repeatedly deemed ineligible and denied.

- **Temporary Housing**
  - For people in NE Houston there was an overall lack of temporary housing options, partly due to widespread destruction from the storm.
  - Fourteen of 21 people we interviewed stayed with family or friends for some extended period between Harvey and our interview.

- **Home Repair**
  - Our study found that 15 of 21 residents considered their home not yet complete, and that some families are still living in badly damaged homes.
  - While there were organizations that assisted with mucking, the work was mostly taken on by households and their close networks.

"SOMETIMES I DO FEEL LIKE THEY PUSHED THE LOW INCOME CLIENTS, I MEAN, YOU KNOW, LOW CLASS, WORKING CLASS OR BLACK..THAT THEY PUSHED THEM TO THE BACK. THAT IS MY BELIEF AND I WILL ALWAYS FEEL THAT WAY."
Ultimately, the report concludes that a just recovery cannot play out in an unjust society. But the steps taken to help communities recover from specific storms can be the building blocks to a more just society that would make events like Harvey less dangerous and reduce the inequity of their impact.

One key idea advanced by this paper is that interventions should take place at the neighborhood level and that community members should be deployed and employed to help each other recover. This strategy would increase trust which is in short supply after years of racist policy and repeated trauma, reduce implicit bias in assessment and eligibility processes, and reduce poverty, which amplifies risk from disaster.

Furthermore, this paper asserts that FEMA and NGOs must radically expand disaster assistance eligibility and reimagine recovery as a space in which reperational policy could play out.

The report concludes with concrete and comprehensive recommendations covering each stage of disaster response and recovery: Evacuation, immediate needs, applications for assistance, eligibility, temporary housing, home repair, mitigation for future disaster and neighborhood-based solutions.

This paper is the product of years of dialogue, collaboration, and collective ideation: in both methodology and purpose, it is inseparable from the work of material recovery, relationship building, and organizing that has been growing in NE Houston in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Members of both the Northeast Action Collective and Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus pose outside during an open house of an unrepaired home damaged from Hurricane Harvey.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Evacuation and Preparedness
Emergency communications and evacuation plans should:
1. Eliminate the need for people to encounter grave health risks in order to evacuate.
2. Include the development of local disaster warning system, local shelters and neighborhood-based evacuation points and networks.
3. Be well-practiced, tailored to different types of events and have built in contingency.
4. Meet the needs of specific and vulnerable populations - elderly, disabled, medical needs, non-English speakers, limited access to tech, etc.
5. Adapt to the specific needs of each neighborhood and build on the base of existing community assets.
6. Support communities and individuals to protect themselves in disaster.
   a. Give clear and honest information - Honestly inform of the worst-case scenario so residents have the ability to prepare and give clear recommendations.
   b. Fund trainings in emergency skills.
   c. Equip communities and individuals with supplies like generators, boats, PPE, communications, high water vehicles, first aid, food, water, and clothing.

Immediate Needs
Immediately after a disaster, disaster response personnel and resources such as food, cleaning supplies, medical treatment, heating and cooling, and PPE should:
- Be deployed to the most vulnerable and most impacted neighborhoods.
- Be easy to access at predefined, walkable locations, and available door-to-door to those unable to travel.
- Require minimal or no application for access.

Application Experience
The application process should:
1. Automatically approve baseline aid for those living in a flooded area.
2. Be simplified, more accessible and oriented towards the goal of including as many people as possible.
3. Incorporate avenues such as door-to-door outreach that don’t depend on technological access or social network connection.
4. Require less information, fewer applications, and less duplication of work.
5. Use information the state already has on income, home ownership, and address rather than placing the burden of proof on applicants.
6. Give more aid at once rather than many smaller amounts.
7. Provide clear information, timelines, and updates.
8. Go beyond claiming universality to actively removing barriers including removing the presence of law enforcement parties.
9. Have intake staff and program managers understand the situations survivors are in by walking the streets and doing house visits.
10. Eliminate the main causes of denial by changing eligibility guidelines.
11. People with homes in heirship or with property debt should be made eligible for aid.
12. Aid must be given to people in the 100-year flood plain.
13. People should not be denied for deferred maintenance.
14. Aid must be accessible in any language and not require immigration status information.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Temporary Housing
Temporary housing should:
1. Be pre-planned, safe, dignified, accessible, and keep people close to their homes.
2. Not place the burden of locating housing on applicants; voucher systems must only exist if sufficient housing is available.
3. Be available until repairs are complete.
4. Avoid partial repairs unless they limit further structural damage. Partial repairs are an inadequate substitute for temporary housing.

Home Repair
The home repair process should:
1. Make mucking and mold remediation services available quickly and coordinate with case management services such as home repair intake.
2. Always be coordinated with temporary housing.
3. Strive for a one-stage rebuild process rather than partial rebuilds.
   a. Do partial repairs when they limit further damage or improve health.
4. Address issues predating the disaster.
5. Be part of ongoing governmental home repair and maintenance programs.
6. Allow homeowners agency in the decision-making process.
7. Hold builders and program managers accountable by including a system for intaking and accommodating homeowner feedback.
8. Support the local economy through hiring from the neighborhood and buying from small, local businesses.
9. Provide funding from HUD programs for self-repair and hiring outside contractors, prioritizing up-front payment over reimbursement models.

Structural Barriers to Recovery: Class, Race, and Geography
The recovery apparatus should adopt an affirmative anti-racism and anti-poverty framework to address historical and racial inequities using the financial capital made available in disaster recovery:
1. Deliver more aid to poor and low-income people & and do so more quickly.
2. Be part of improving quality of life, home, and environment in low-income neighborhoods and eliminating ‘sacrifice zones’
   a. Build trust in disaster systems through more regular and open communication and support between governments and residents in non-disaster times.
   b. Improve deteriorated housing stock and infrastructure degraded through disinvestment.
   c. Remove environmental hazards.
   d. Determine funding by accounting for historic inequity and concentration of risk in marginalized areas.
   e. Create funding by holding industries responsible for causing disasters accountable and spending a larger portion of government and tax money in (Low- to Moderate-Income) LMI areas.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Place-based Solutions
1. Investment and care at a neighborhood level must start immediately with “boots on the ground” work, regular services, and tangible results such as weekly, satisfactory trash pickup.
2. A just recovery requires flood prevention and risk reduction. Beginning at the scale of the neighborhood we should:
   a. Improve and maintain street drains and ditches
   b. Improve and maintain bayous and flood water retention systems
   c. Stop development that worsens flooding and contributes to climate change
   d. Remove sources of pollution and dangerous industry
   e. Clean the land, air, and water of past pollution
3. Recovery apparatus staff should live in or have a long running connection to the neighborhood in which they work in order to better understand applicant needs and experiences.
4. Locally hired staff must be empowered to reduce racial biases and lack of accountability in mass denials.
5. Buyouts should be used only after mitigation strategies have been fully explored. Buyout strategies need to be shaped by community members.
6. Determine funding by accounting for historic disinvestment, lack of services, and placement of risk. Create funding by holding industries responsible for causing disasters accountable and spending a larger portion of government and tax money in LMI areas.

NAC member Doris Brown and WSR intern Vatsala Mundra marking locations for a community mapping project on street flooding in Northeast Houston for the River Network research project.
Ms. Jackie Hester (Center, right) giving a tour of her unrepaired home to local media and other attendees. Her home suffered severe damage from Hurricane Harvey and the City of Houston rejected her application and gave her and her family no option for any alternative living space.

Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus posing for a group photo.