

Racial Inequities in FEMA Disaster Aid

AP Seminar

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Introduction

As climate change drives more intense and devastating natural disasters, federal aid programs have become increasingly vital for affected communities. However it has become clear that in many cases, this aid is distributed unevenly. Statistics indicate that from 2012 to 2022, natural disasters in the United States caused an average of \$125.9 billion in annual damage (Statista), but victim accounts as well as professionally conducted studies show that federal relief funds have not been allocated fairly. To provide a quick example, after Hurricane Laura in 2020, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) paid a White family \$10,000 more than a Black family who suffered virtually identical property damages, reflective of potential racial disparities in disaster aid (Flavelle). Statistics also show that FEMA's flood buyout program, which purchases flood-prone properties for open space, has disproportionately targeted whiter counties and neighborhoods for buyouts (Elliott et al.). Yet within participating neighborhoods, residents of color have been more likely to accept buyouts, suggesting they may have fewer relocation options (Elliott et al.). Additionally, Black residents interviewed on disaster aid have stated they feel that the more White-heavy neighborhoods around them have received disproportionately higher aid. This unequal distribution inhibits recovery in communities of color, exacerbating prior disadvantages. As climate change leads to more frequent and intense disasters, addressing such biases in federal assistance has become an urgent matter, thus begging the question, how can we decrease bias in natural disaster aid and provide fair aid to all?

I. Aid Allocation Following Natural Disasters

Since the passing of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief act in 1988, FEMA has been providing disaster aid to communities all across America. The Stafford act authorizes the federal government to provide assistance to state and local governments during a declared natural

disaster or emergency. To do this, the Stafford act establishes a method for state governors to request that the President declare an emergency, based mainly off of damage assessments. Under the Stafford Act, several types of federal assistance are provided, such as debris removal, repair or replacement of infrastructure, and personal assistance such as temporary housing and unemployment assistance (Stafford Act §403, §406, §408). FEMA also has a system where disaster victims can request financial aid for repairs and other related costs by applying online or calling a telephone hotline. While it would make a lot of sense for this system to provide aid based almost solely on damage amount with other factors carrying a limited weight, this seems to not be the case for many areas. One group of researchers from the University of Florida affirm that “[A] disaster recovery's pace and trajectory are primarily determined by when and how requisite support is provided,” and go on to also state that other factors like socio-economic status, demographic factors and quality of governance can also affect recovery speed and distribution of aid (Emrich et. al.). This research alone suggests that racial biases are present with FEMA’s aid programs, a pitfall that needs to be eliminated in order to provide equitable aid.

II. Assessment of FEMA aid programs

FEMA runs a buyout program which purchases homes in flood-prone areas and converts them into usually either open space or flood control infrastructure. This program has funded buyouts in over 500 cities and towns across America, purchasing tens of thousands of homes (Elliott et al.). Researchers at Rice University conducted a study in 2020 on the racial distribution of buyouts under this program. Their analysis used publicly available datasets from a project called openFEMA, which aims to provide transparency and public access to FEMA data (FEMA). After analyzing this data, it was noted that counties and neighborhoods with higher

concentrations of White residents generally received more assistance and offers with buyouts, especially in urban areas. However, they also saw that predominantly Black communities have been more likely to accept these buyouts, despite being given fewer offers in general (Elliott et al.). These findings hint at bias within FEMA towards White neighborhoods, even though they tend to accept fewer offers. Conversely, the tendency of Black neighborhoods to accept more offers on average means that there must be an incentive in these communities to accept the more limited offerings, but the lower volume commonly seen in these areas do not match. In addition to the flood buyout program, FEMA also offers financial disaster aid as mentioned earlier. This program has proven to be extremely helpful to disaster victims in the past, but if we look closer at racial distribution of this aid money it paints FEMA in a different light. A team of Florida researchers looked at FEMA's disaster aid data, finding that while the program is functioning as intended on the surface by targeting damage levels as a primary factor, the overall actual distribution of funds between affected areas varies in correlation with race (Emrich et al.). In theory, this disaster aid program should be providing generally equitable aid, with damages and property value being top priority factors in deciding how much money to grant. However, many feel they have experienced unfair funding from FEMA, such as is the case of the Biagas family. In the 2020 Hurricane Laura, the Vaussine and Biagas families in Louisiana experienced similar damage circumstances, yet there was a staggering \$10,000 difference in how much they were paid by FEMA. According to the New York Times reporter who interviewed the families, they have the same type of home (single-story), the damage to each house was a tree falling through the roof, and neither family had insurance (Flavelle). The families were also relatively close together, only around 12 miles apart. The Vaussine family, who are White, were paid \$17,000 in disaster aid by FEMA while the Biagas family, who are Black, were paid only \$7000. When

interviewed by the New York Times Mr. Biagas noted no signs of overt racism by boots-on-the-ground FEMA staff, which can be compared thematically to Nelson Mandela's quote from *Long Walk to Freedom* where he writes "The racism and repression were the same; I would simply have to fight on different terms (Mandela)." Biagas' experienced a definite form of racism, whether intentional or not, which has similarities to the theme of Mandela's quote that alludes to racism on "different terms". In Biagas' case, these different terms were simply that the racial bias experienced was not upfront but rather in the shadows, hidden behind proprietary formulas and methods. This prompts us to consider that maybe something in FEMA aid granting policy has affected this large disparity in aid. Further proof that this may be the case is that the Government Accountability Office is looking into FEMA to ensure they provide more equitable outcomes (Flavelle). Additionally, FEMA's advisory board reports to the FEMA Administrator, and in this meeting during November of 2020, members of the council voiced concern that FEMA isn't meeting its duty to provide equitable aid well enough. This report from FEMA's own advisory council further strengthens the point that this issue is likely from inside of FEMA, at a higher level than the staff at the disaster site.

III. Systematic Issues

Several systematic issues can also vary access to aid. The process between applying for aid and either receiving it or being denied can take a while depending on the disaster severity and number of applicants, and in order for FEMA to have jurisdiction, the President has to officially declare an emergency. Prerequisites for federal aid can cause delays that disproportionately impact low-income communities. For example, to submit an application, disaster victims must have internet access to submit a request online or telephone access to be able to call FEMA's

phone hotline. This can cause aid requests to be fulfilled more slowly in poorer communities, as telecommunications infrastructure tends to be damaged often in natural disasters. Take for example, Hurricane Katrina which affected the Gulf of Mexico and many southern states in 2005. According to Dr. Robert Miller of the National Defense University, “[Katrina] caused catastrophic damage over an area roughly the size of Great Britain,” and that it caused “Virtually all of the critical infrastructure sectors in the region [to be] put out of commission at the same time. (Miller)” Due to the mass damage caused by Katrina and other storms for that matter, hundreds if not thousands of people in the affected states, especially in poorer areas, would have lost access to the Internet, telephones, or both which would have affected their access to aid. Additionally, there appears to be a correlation between low income areas and Black populations, as affirmed by comparing maps showing rough association of lower average household incomes and higher Black populations in the southern United States (BestNeighborhood). Because of this, anything affecting generally poorer areas would also statistically have a higher effect on Black people. Furthermore, the Stafford Act also dictates that the President declare an emergency before FEMA is given jurisdiction, which can add delay to aid response time (Stafford Act §401, §501, FEMA). This, coupled with inevitable delays in the application process can severely impact disaster survivors, especially those in low income areas who already may not have had a lot even before the disaster.

IV. Proposed Solution

In order to ensure that the aid provided by FEMA is equitable for all, there are a few issues we need to address. Firstly, FEMA should create standardized, publicly available formulas for disaster aid calculation. Additionally, more options for the aid request process should be

made available, such as mail or physical locations set up in heavily affected areas which then forward requests to FEMA. Finally, FEMA should increase collaboration with local aid organizations who would have more experience in the area. Currently, the actual formulas and full information that FEMA uses to calculate how much aid money to grant are not publicly accessible. While simply making these available would not solve the issue of bias on its own, it would increase transparency within FEMA, and help people understand why they receive what they receive. It seems that there isn't much of that kind of transparency currently; on FEMA's website they simply state that they will send applicants a letter stating if they are granted aid or not. If so, the letter will say how much and what the applicant is allowed to do with it (FEMA). The request process for receiving aid is currently available through two channels: the FEMA website, and a telephone number. However, many severe disasters leave residents without access to the Internet or telephone services. Thus, offline solutions are a necessity. The US Mail system could be one option for this, however depending on the severity of the disaster this may also be negatively affected as well. The USPS states that "During and after a storm the Postal Service employees will make every reasonable, safe attempt to deliver mail to the addressee. (USPS)" This seems promising, however after major hurricanes and other storms, the area would not always be safe to traverse, making US Mail services not guaranteeable. This leaves one more plausible solution: physical locations set up at disaster sites. After a major disaster, FEMA employees are already at the site to provide food and shelter, so why not set up a few stations for aid requests as well? This solution seems the most plausible because such stations could be created from a rugged vehicle like a van or a truck, which would generally have little to no trouble getting around a disaster site. With a vehicle based system like this, disaster victims could submit their requests physically, and FEMA staff operating the vehicle could either judge

the applications on site or send them off to a remote location for judgment. This solution of physical aid request stations goes hand in hand with one more solution that is already being implemented on a small scale: partnerships with the community in the area and other organizations to distribute aid more evenly. FEMA has stated that it is already partnering with several other organizations to provide aid (FEMA). Adding more organizations to this list of partners would only help victims more, and provide a more diverse range of aid groups which could also smooth out the racial distribution of aid funding. In Haiti, this sort of community based disaster recovery has already been demonstrated, as shown in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. According to a journalist whose reports were included in a research paper, people from “[E]ven the most disadvantaged areas [...] returned to places where they expected to find survivors [...] to help recover survivors or remains of the deceased, (Rahill et. al)” which shows that any community member(s) who are motivated enough to help can and will. This type of community service, which is surely already occurring in the US, could be much more effective if backed by FEMA with grants and assistance. To conclude, a combination of transparent formulas, offline request solutions, and more small community aid partners would all work together to solve the issue of disparities in natural disaster aid.

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