

This year, hurricane season will coincide with health, economic, and racial crises of a historical nature. In the midst of the pandemic, economic shock, murder of George Floyd and unrest over police violence against Black individuals, communities across the South are facing what's slated to be an above-normal hurricane season. NOAA predicts 6 to 10 Atlantic hurricanes with 3 to 6 of those being major hurricanes (NOAA 2020). Preparations must go beyond debris removal contracts and FEMA reimbursement protocols. It is time to set a vision for disaster preparation, response, and recovery that commits to improving outcomes for Black, Brown, and poor households.

## South suffers higher losses from natural disasters

Weather-related natural disasters vary across regions, with mortality, economic loss, and frequency higher in the South than in most regions (Borden and Cutter 2008; NOAA NCEI 2020). According to the NOAA National Center for Environmental Information, over the past decade, the South has had the “highest cumulative damage costs, reflecting the diversity, frequency, and severity of weather and climate events impacting the region” (Smith 2020). With climate change, weather-related disasters will increase and strengthen in magnitude, bringing even greater devastation (NASA n.d.). Scientists project regional effects of climate change with the Southeast experiencing sea level rises, extreme heat, and water shortages, all of which will threaten the health, environment, and economy of the region (NASA n.d.).

## Disasters grow inequities across race and income

These more frequent and severe disasters will exacerbate long-standing racial and economic inequities. Natural disasters have increased racial wealth gaps locally (Howell and Elliott 2019). In Hurricane Katrina, Black residents and those with less than a high school education were “most likely to have been unable to evacuate because of lack of money, transportation, a place to go, or job requirements” (SAMHSA 2017, pg 6). People with low incomes face greater vulnerabilities at every stage of disaster: less ability to evacuate; greater damages to homes due to age of homes, quality of construction, and likelihood of being in high risk areas; higher death and injury rates; and greater difficulty receiving aid (Literature reviewed in SAMHSA 2017).

## Small communities struggle to prepare

Small, resource-poor local governments are less likely to have key disaster preparations in place—leaving residents in those communities at even greater risk (Dzigbede, Gehl, and Willoughby 2020). This is not confined to the South, as demonstrated in survey comments from a recent disaster preparedness survey of local governments (ICMA 2019):

“We are a small community so we have a lot of challenges before any disaster strikes, with limited resources and funding sometimes that will slow recovery efforts.”

– City manager, Georgia

“While we were able to apply for some federal disaster funding, I am certain there was more we could have done, but we do not have the resources to identify those other funding sources and submit the required documentation.”

– City administrator, Texas

“Small staff without knowledge of where to start to make a plan for disaster.”

–Town manager, North Carolina

“Living in a small, deprived community we barely get by as it is, financially. Just trying to keep the City going is a challenge. We don't have extra funds to be put aside for disasters. After answering these questions I see we are not prepared for a disaster.”

–City manager, Michigan

“Small towns have limited resources that have to cover all town services. In this era of increased issues caused by climate change mitigation there is not enough funding to properly cover what needs to be done.”

–Local emergency manager, Massachusetts

## Southern communities are prepared for many aspects of disaster response, but not social services

Social services will be more essential than ever as communities battle COVID-19 and weather-related disasters simultaneously. However, preparations around social service disaster response and recovery are generally lacking among Southern local governments. To better understand the preparedness of communities, we worked with the International City/County Managers Association to survey local governments nationwide in the fall of 2019 about their disaster preparedness. Here are some key findings of the 328 Southern local governments that responded:

**Resources.** Almost all (95%) responding local officials indicate familiarity with the process for securing state and federal disaster relief resources. Most have access to some own-source resources (e.g. reserves, insurance, departmental funds) to support relief and recovery efforts. About half (48%) have estimated the financial impacts of a major disaster and over half (52%) have completed a risk analysis of which facilities or community assets are most vulnerable.

**Plans and Trainings.** Most (84%) have hazard mitigation plans in place or in progress, and a majority have standalone disaster recovery plans and continuity of operations plans in place or in progress. However, only 38% have a sustainability and resiliency plan in place or in progress. A little over one-third (37%) of respondents have engaged in disaster training exercises that included economic and community recovery and restoration scenarios. Half (50%) of

respondents have identified a recovery leader/manager, and half have an inter-departmental task force to coordinate recovery.

**Partnerships.** Less than a third (29%) have a public engagement strategy in place that is inclusive of the whole community. Most respondents (90%) have mutual aid agreements with other jurisdictions for public safety in the case of disaster, yet only 24% have such agreements for social services. About two-thirds of respondents (65%) have contracts in place for emergency management and debris management. However, only 20% have contracts in place to support temporary housing in the event of a disaster. Less than half (46%) have established formal partnerships with nonprofits, community organizations, and/or religious organizations to assist in recovery.

Only a handful of local governments answered YES to all of the social service and community engagement options: inclusive public engagement strategy, temporary housing pre-disaster contracts in place, social and human services mutual aid agreements, and formal partnerships with local nonprofit, community, and/or ecumenical/religious organizations. We interviewed a Florida local government administrator that was able to answer YES to each of those questions, and he provided these insights:

“The most important thing that a community can do is map out the social services capabilities and how to find them. Develop a tool or pamphlet to get that information out. A lot of my job is communicating where stuff is. A lot of counties and some states have extensive social services programs but they are hard to find. We’ve put together a road map that shows which services are available dependent on our need. Working with social services, we’ve identified towns within 50 miles that have hotels and have contracts in place for special needs populations.

Disaster identifies the problem but most of the rest, we are doing outside of disaster. With Hurricane Irma, we found that one gentleman experiencing homelessness was responsible for 40% of our EMS calls. We embarked on a program to get him off the street and were able to do so through relationship-building between him, a social worker, a police officer, and a firefighter.”

--City administrator, Florida

## Policy Implications

**Map out social services for weather-related disasters and COVID-19.** Local governments and nonprofit partners need to map out social service capabilities and re-examine existing plans based on potential COVID-19 impacts. For example, if the local school typically acts as a temporary shelter in the event of flooding, how are the facilities and cleaning operations going to need to be altered to prevent the spread of COVID-19? How will quarantines alter typical evacuation practices? Evacuation preparations need to consider regional capabilities for providing COVID-19 testing and treatment.

### **Commit to better outcomes for Black and Brown households and people with low-incomes.**

Policymakers should consider [SAMHSA's recommendations](#) for protecting vulnerable populations in the event of a weather-related disaster. They include making a commitment to improving outcomes for people with low-incomes, targeting aid to Black households and low socioeconomic status households, focusing on living wages and poverty reduction, increasing access to disaster aid, improving housing, and planning for transportation challenges.

**Help small communities fill their gaps.** State and federal policymakers must ensure small, resource-poor communities are capable of response and recovery. Inequities across regions will grow worse if we fail to construct systems that are responsive to local fiscal, economic, and staffing challenges.

**Set a vision for climate action.** Dr. Mark Paul and Dr. Leah Stokes lay out a [menu of state and local actions](#) for Southern leaders in their new report, with a focus on equity throughout. Although the South lags other regions in climate action, there are examples of progress that can be replicated throughout the region.

## References

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**SEAP** is your partner and resource. We amplify the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work towards broadening economic power and building a more equitable future. Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to directly address these connections. SEAP focuses on 12 Southern states and marginalized/vulnerable populations within the region and is a fiscally sponsored project of the Roosevelt Institute.