The Need for Equitable Disaster Response for LGBTQ+ Communities

LGBTQ+ communities comprise 16 million individuals in the United States, yet this population is often rendered invisible within disaster policies. Bias in federal disaster response programs, lack of recognition of LGBTQ+ families, and the prevalence of faith-based organizations in disaster relief services together heighten the risks that LGBTQ+ individuals face. This policy brief (Goldsmith, Raditz, Méndez, 2021) features key findings from a new study that explores how and why LGBTQ+ communities are impacted legally, physically, psychologically, and even religiously during disasters.

Introduction to the Issue

Addressing inequities in disaster preparedness is increasingly urgent. The 2018 National Climate Assessment suggests that extreme events, such as hurricanes, wildfires, flooding, and infectious disease are becoming more frequent and severe as the climate changes (Jay et al., 2018). Now more than ever, it is crucial to understand how these events amplify existing inequities, and how to lessen the resulting harms. LGBTQ+ individuals, however, have been largely invisible within disaster and response policies in the United States. Historical and ongoing stigma, violence, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities have created social disparities in their everyday lives that can be worsened during disasters (Lynn et al., 2011; Vinyeta et al., 2015; Hunter et al., 2018).

For instance, the higher rates of homelessness (Page, 2017), incarceration (Meyer et al., 2017: 267), and chronic illness and disability (Institute of Medicine, 2011) in LGBTQ+ communities place them among those at greatest risk of death or injury from hazardous conditions in disasters (O’Brien et al., 2007).

Research underscores that LGBTQ+ communities are impacted legally, physically, psychologically, and even religiously during disasters (Clayville, 2017; McKinnon et al., 2017a; Tierney, 2019; Greenhalgh, 2020). This especially includes those within the LGBTQ+ population who are most marginalized, such as transgender and undocumented people of color. Such drivers of discrimination during disasters include; bias in federal disaster response programs, lack of recognition of LGBTQ+ families, and the prevalence of faith-based organizations in disaster relief services (Marquez, 2017).

We offer the following policy recommendations to better safeguard LGBTQ+ communities, which include comprehensive training for private service providers and public emergency management staff; embracing LGBTQ+ communities in disaster planning; and bolstering civil society organizations’ capacity in disaster relief and planning efforts.

Key Findings

1. Federal Disaster Response Programs are often Inequitable

“Sexual orientation” and “gender identity” are not named in section 308 of the Robert T. Stafford Emergency Management and Disaster Assistance Act, which prohibits discrimination in disaster programs (42 U.S.C. 5151; FEMA, 2019). Federal legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals can be weakened during conservative anti-LGBTQ+ administrations. In 2019, for example, Ben Carson proposed to amend the Equal Access Rule, to explicitly exclude transgender people from anti-discrimination policies in homeless shelters receiving federal support (Stracqualursi, 2019; Cameron, 2020).

In addition, undocumented individuals, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+, and transgender individuals face barriers to obtaining proper identification which make it difficult for them to access federal emergency services (HRC, 2012; Méndez et al., 2020).

2. There is a Lack of Recognition of LGBTQ+ Families within Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Policies

Disaster planning, emergency response, and recovery policies often fail to recognize LGBTQ+ family structures (McCarthy-Brown and Waysdorf, 2009; Marquez, 2017). Same-gender relationships and families can be separated or denied benefits compared to heterosexual relationships and families (Rumbach & Knight, 2014). LGBTQ+ families also include “chosen family”, a group of important relationships, not restricted to genetic or legal ties. For many LGBTQ+ individuals, a chosen family is an integral part of their life and social support system (Chu, 2017; McCarthy-Brown and Waysdorf, 2009). Elderly LGBTQ+ individuals are particularly likely to have chosen family because they lived through a time when homophobia and transphobia were pervasive in society (HRC, 2012).

3. Faith-Based Organizations are Initial Access to Disaster Relief

Faith-based organizations are increasingly providing food, shelter, transportation, childcare, and medical services during and after disasters (Keller, 2017). Faith-based organizations are often seen as having both the network capacity and local trust needed to provide essential aid (Cain & Barthelemy, 2008). Many religious institutions, however, have historically condemned homosexuality, and a large number continue to teach homophobic theologies. The anti-LGBTQ+ positions of some churches can place LGBTQ+ people in a vulnerable position in the aftermath of disasters such as denying LGBTQ+ couples disaster relief services (Lewin and Leap, 2009). As a result, LGBTQ+ communities have a general distrust of faith-based organizations.
Recommendations

Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Policies and Training

• Any entity receiving disaster funding from state, local, and federal governments should be required to adopt anti-discrimination policies that include protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. Their disaster and emergency plans should also be developed in collaboration with LGBTQ+ communities.

Local disaster plans should address, at a minimum:

1. How all populations within a jurisdiction are served by emergency communications, evacuation and sheltering, mitigation and prevention, and preparedness. Including whether secular shelters and aid programs are provided in addition to faith-based.
2. Should consider the needs of groups dependent on institutional service providers, such as incarcerated and homeless shelters.
3. Should recognize the unique family structures and gender identities of the LGBTQ+ population.

• The cultural and structural competency of disaster relief organizations must be developed in collaboration with LGBTQ+ communities. Losses from disasters are significantly reduced in areas where communities are involved in disaster risk-reduction activities (Maskrey 2011; Van Niekerk et al. 2017; Allen 2006).

• Federal, state, local identification documentation methods should be made easier and comfortable for undocumented individuals and transgender individuals to obtain.

Resources for Community-Based Planning and Response

• Governments should provide appropriate resources, such as training and funding, for community-based organizations working directly with vulnerable LGBTQ+ populations to become qualified to provide forms of disaster response assistance, including evacuation shelters.

• Governments should establish permanent disaster relief funds that are culturally and structurally sensitive to LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized communities.

• Governments should facilitate relationships with foundations and disaster relief organizations to provide targeted funding to LGBTQ+ communities.

Disaster Aid and Health Care for the Uninsured

• Federal and state governments should provide dedicated funding for access to health care and mental health services for the uninsured and undocumented migrants. In addition, governments should establish permanent disaster relief funds that are culturally and structurally sensitive to undocumented LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized communities.

“There is a high representation of LGBTQ+ people among groups already identified as socially vulnerable to disasters.”

Policy Implications

Our research shows that current efforts to prepare for and recover from disasters often exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, whose vulnerability to such events is heightened by intersecting factors such as poverty, discrimination, homelessness, incarceration, immigration status, and more. Disaster preparedness and recovery are political in nature – choices are being made that disempower LGBTQ+ communities and withhold vital government protections and resources. As our society faces the challenges of climate change and associated disasters, it is necessary that governments, practitioners, and scholars take steps to increase socio-economic resources and political protections for LGBTQ+ communities.

Finally, it is critical to also recognize and support existing community resilience. Resilience is “those components of individual, group and social functioning that might reduce susceptibility to hazards, resist damage and change to an extent, absorb disruption, and/or foster recovery and rebuilding” (Zhou et al., 2010; Gorman-Murray et al., 2017). As disasters increase in frequency and severity due to climate change, investing in community resilience is essential for the most marginalized populations not only to “bounce back” from injustices but also to “bounce forward” to more equitable and just futures.

Authors:

Leo Goldsmith, Climate and Health Specialist, ICF
Michael Méndez, Assistant Professor, Urban Planning & Public Policy, UC Irvine
Vanessa Raditz, PhD Candidate, University of Georgia
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