



Vietnamese Americans' Experiences With Hurricane Harvey: Diversities and Unequal Challenges With Recovery

Mai Do, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Tulane University, USA*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2965-4812>

Jannette Diep, BPSOS-Houston, USA

NhuNgoc K. Pham, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Tulane University, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3584-2147>

ABSTRACT

Immigrant populations in the United States continue to receive inadequate attention in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery despite the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters and catastrophic events. This analysis documents the experiences and challenges of Vietnamese Americans in the Houston metropolitan area after 2017 Hurricane Harvey. Findings highlight diverse experiences and unequal successes and challenges among this population. It is critical for planners and emergency managers to take into account such recovery asymmetries to better prepare for and plan their responses to natural disasters and the current or future pandemics.

KEYWORDS

Challenges, Disaster Recovery, Diversities, Hurricane Harvey, Vietnamese Americans

INTRODUCTION

There is an assumption among the public that when a disaster occurs, government agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are responsible for assistances and compensation for damages and losses caused by the disaster (Greer, 2015; Schneider, 2008). In areas where natural disasters tend to occur frequently, it is therefore critical to understand the extent to which residents feel that they can trust and rely on agencies and organizations that provide assistance in disaster recovery processes. It is also important for local agencies to have the capacity to not only assess but also communicate residents' needs and priorities for assistance, and challenges in accessing resources, should a catastrophic event occur. In the absence of such capacity, the federal government and other agencies are likely unable to effectively respond and assist in the recovery. Our analysis aims to document perceptions of government and non-governmental agencies' disaster responses from the perspective of a major immigrant population.

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*Corresponding Author

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Little attention has been paid to the post-disaster recovery of immigrant populations; they have been called the “silent victim” of disasters (Johnson, 2008). Immigrants are likely at an increased vulnerability to disasters since they have limited capacity to prepare for, respond to, or recover from them (Lindell & Perry, 2003). Such vulnerabilities have been attributed to immigrants’ limited language skills, geographical isolation, and lack of social acculturation (Kaplan & Huynh, 2008; Mathew & Kelly, 2008; Nguyen & Salvesen, 2014; Seidenberg, 2005; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2007). Immigrants, like Vietnamese Americans (VA), who experienced previous, repeated traumas related to the Vietnam War and the hardship of migrating to the United States may also be more adversely impacted by disasters than other immigrant groups (Nygaard et al., 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2012; Steel et al., 2002). Yet, disaster response strategies continue to be built around culturally neutral frameworks (Nguyen & Salvesen, 2014; Vitiello, 2009); even if state officials recognize the needs for culturally sensitive responses, it often is not a priority. Unless equities are consciously and intentionally built into planning strategies, challenges will remain in disaster preparedness and responses that are sensitive to the diversity and vulnerability of immigrant populations.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall near Rockport on the Texas coast as a category 4 hurricane on August 25, 2017. Flash flooding spread widely across most of Harris County as the rainfall continued through August 30th; a third of the Houston area was under water. The storm affected 13 million people within Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, destroyed about 12,000 homes, and damaged another 200,000 (Brasier & Thompson, 2018; FEMA, 2017; Moravec, 2017). Responses to the disaster were expansive: two months after the hurricane, it was estimated that at least 400,000 hurricane survivors applied for individual assistance from FEMA (McLaughlin, 2017).

The Houston metropolitan area has been one of the most rapidly growing and diverse populations in the nation (Capps & Soto, 2018). Immigrants are concentrated in Harris County and had quickly grown in the population size between 2010 and 2017. Asian immigrants had grown 29% during this period, second only to those from Central America. Vietnamese immigrants were the fourth largest immigrant group in the Houston area in 2017 with more than 90,000 people (Capps & Soto, 2018) and is estimated to continue growing in size. Nevertheless, little is known about how immigrants fared after Hurricane Harvey struck the region. The impact of the hurricane on the Vietnamese community has remained undocumented, despite Houston being home to the second largest Vietnamese population in the country. This analysis sheds light on how this population were affected by the hurricane.

The focus on the Vietnamese population in the current study was due primarily by two drivers: 1) the lack of evidence on the scope of adverse impacts and the extent of support received among immigrants in general, and VA in particular, after a natural disaster, and 2) meanwhile, the limited number of studies that included a very small sample of VA, indicated significant disparities in post-disaster support and recovery between ethnic groups. A recent review of the literature indicated that there were very few studies that documented the impacts of Hurricane Harvey on Asian populations (Flores, Collins, Grineski et al., 2020); when they did, the sample of Asian population was very small and often aggregated to one group of Asian and Pacific Islanders, which masked the diversity of experiences of this group (see, for example, Bozick, 2021; Bevilacqua et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). Yet, this small number of studies already pointed to significant disparities between ethnicities in their experiences in coping with the aftermath of disasters. For example, Flores et al. (2021) summarized that racial/ethnic minority groups had more constrained access to resources for disaster impact mitigation prior to Harvey, compared to other groups, and were also bore disproportional impacts of the hurricane on their physical and mental health. While studies that included Vietnamese or Asian populations did not include similar conclusions due to the small samples, they all highlighted strong, positive associations between personal and property exposures to the hurricane with worse health outcomes (Bozick, 2021; Bevilacqua et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018). This study will fill the gap by documenting immediate challenges faced by Vietnamese Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

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