

DISASTERS AND POVERTY: NATURAL DISASTERS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT THE WORLD'S LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES

Over 90 percent of deaths due to natural disasters occur in low-income countries. Even in developed countries, low-income citizens are most affected by disasters. The disparity in disaster outcomes between high-income and low-income can be understood as a function of both pre-event vulnerability and post-event response. Factors such as geography, personal resources, community infrastructure, and political stability all impact the occurrence and consequences of natural disasters. Social instability may also accompany poverty particularly when there are large disparities in the distribution of wealth and income.

- **Geography:** Lower-income individuals are more likely to live in less expensive and environmentally vulnerable areas, such as flood plains, volcano bases, seismically active areas, or tornado alleys. Environmental exploitation, often made for economic reasons (e.g., deforested hillsides), increases vulnerability to landslides.
- **Personal resources:** Poverty is a well-known determinant of poor physical health, and lower-income individuals may therefore be more vulnerable to adverse physical health outcomes in the wake of a disaster. Malnourished, non-immunized, and chronically ill persons may be less able to withstand the physical stress of a disaster. Furthermore, persons with less income, who have been focused on daily survival, are less likely to have resources — extra food, fuel, or money — to use in the event of a disaster. When provided sufficient food, the body's response of moving from famine to adequate nutrition can bring its own physical changes and potential negative symptoms.
- **Infrastructure:** Lower-income individuals often live in sub-standard housing that is more vulnerable to collapse and destruction during an earthquake or other disaster. Building codes are often not adopted or

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enforced. Low-income communities often lack transportation and communication infrastructure to facilitate an adequate disaster response. Health systems in low-income countries are often under-

- resourced even prior to a disaster, and are quickly stretched beyond capacity in the face of increased injuries and illness.
- **Political instability:** Political instability in many low-income countries can hamper the ability to organize a coordinated disaster response. Limited resources can also expose intra-community schisms — sometimes along racial, ethnic, or religious lines — that further complicate necessary community coordination. Disasters open these fault lines of a society composed of differences in economic privilege, race, and religion. Immigration out of disaster areas by those able to do so can be dramatic after a disaster. At times this further exacerbates the economic disparities as the wealthy are able to leave and those of lower-income are not. These individuals may also use illegal and risky means of immigration in order to find safety, nutrition, health, and work for themselves and their families.
 - **Vulnerable populations:** In the face of scarce resources, women, children, the elderly, and the ill, may be particularly vulnerable to neglect and exploitation. Children and women living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to exploitation as they try to obtain food and safety in a disaster community with few resources.
 - **Recovery from disaster:** When other countries bring disaster recovery resources to economically impoverished nations, they can also create expectations that cannot be sustained after the responders leave. Working with the disaster region's populations and recognizing the need for sustainable recovery is a critical ingredient after a major disaster.