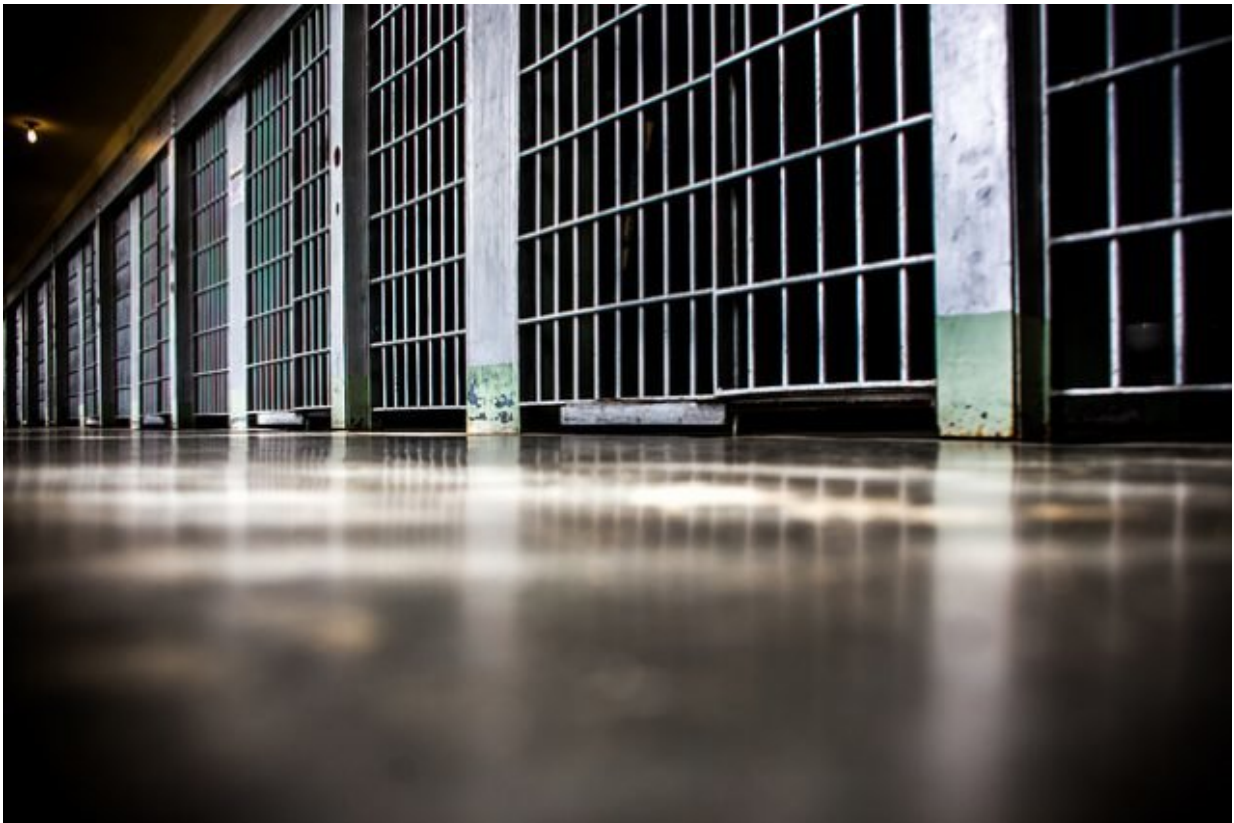


# We aren't doing enough to protect prisoners during natural disasters

May 17 2018, by William Omorogieva

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A new paper from the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law highlights legislative changes that can help protect prisoners' constitutional rights during natural disasters. Credit: Thomas Hawk via Flickr

The intensity of recent hurricanes and the damage they have caused in

America have garnered lots of national news coverage. After Hurricane Katrina, it became evident how a lack of planning for natural disasters can have dangerous and deadly consequences. However, often hidden from public view is the struggle that some of our most vulnerable citizens endure during times of hurricanes and other natural disasters. Inmates in prisons and jails cannot take care of themselves and must rely on prison officials to do so. During national disasters like hurricanes, prisoners have consistently suffered physical and mental injuries and often have no remedy for their suffering. In a country that has more correctional facilities than colleges, it is unfortunate how often prisoners' rights are left out of sight and out of our hearts.

A [new paper](#) from Columbia's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law explores the correctional sector in the United States and the culture of neglect regarding prisoner safety and well-being during natural disasters, with a focus on Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, Irma, and Maria. This paper covers rights that prisoners have under the Eighth Amendment of the United States Constitution and other federal statutes. The paper goes on to examine prison emergency preparedness in general and the lack of continuity regarding planning for [natural disasters](#).

Prisoner conditions during recent hurricanes are examined closely to highlight how a lack of adequate emergency planning led to inmates living in unsuitable [living conditions](#) that violated their constitutional rights. It is important to note that for over a decade after Hurricane Katrina, during which prisoners suffered dearly, this repeated cycle of unacceptable living conditions and deprivation of prisoner's rights has continued. The paper closes by recommending changes to some of the federal legislation that gives prisoners' rights. These changes, which range from legislative approaches to litigation, are meant to create comprehensive federal protections for prisoners who are confronted with horrible living conditions and inadequate health care when they are not evacuated during hurricanes.

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