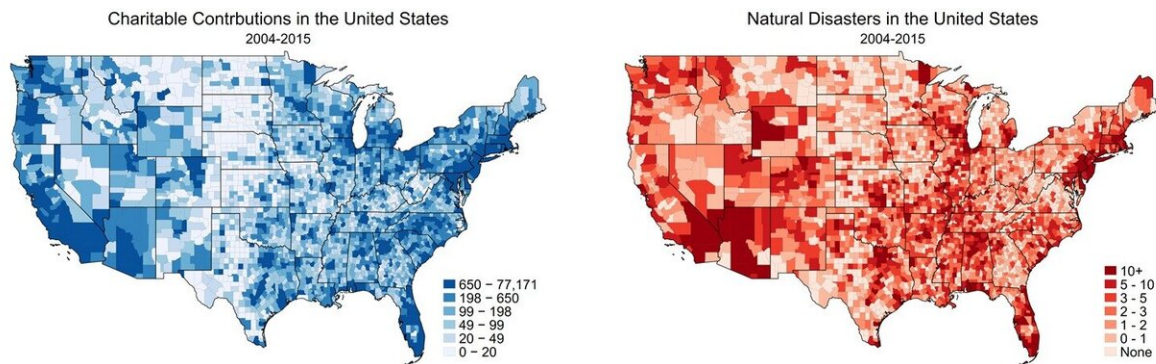


# The effect of natural disasters on charitable and criminal activity

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Credit: Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The human condition is riddled with extreme events, which bring chaos into our lives. Natural disasters leave a trail of destruction, causing direct and horrible pain and suffering—costing lives, creating injuries, destroying houses, livelihoods, crops and broken infrastructures. While extensive research has been conducted on the economic and public healthcare costs of these types of disasters around the world, their effect does not end there. A team of researchers from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem sought to better understand the behavioral and social implications of these types of events around the world which resulted in a paper with the potential to change how policy makers and local governments respond in the wake of disasters.

In their study, published in the journal *Natural Hazards*, Professor Claude Berrebi, Ariel Karlinsky and Dr. Hanan Yonah specifically wanted to understand how people reacted in the wake of [disasters](#) with regard to social behavior and whether it impacted their levels of philanthropy and [criminal activity](#). While media has popularized a notion of widespread looting and chaos in the wake of major disasters, the researchers found that communities impacted by disasters actually experience a decrease in crime. Their article also found a marked increase in philanthropic activity amongst people that live nearby disaster areas but weren't directly affected by the disaster.

The team analyzed data of the disasters that took place in the US between 2004 and 2015, a period which saw over 10,000 individual disasters of differing scope and killed over 8,300 people, causing damage in excess of 100 billion dollars. The researchers carefully compared data between communities that were directly affected versus those who had been spared direct impact from disasters.

The study revealed that disasters generally don't contribute to marked increase in criminal activity and in fact there were definite reductions in crime levels—although surrounding unaffected areas often reported an uptick in crime.

While directly affected areas understandably saw a decrease in charitable giving, neighboring regions and even those communities more distanced from the disaster zone would see marked increase in philanthropy.

The paper proposed that the philanthropic trends they found are generally related to a model known as conservation of resources (COR). the model suggests that when a person feels fearful for his or her own resources, they are likely to be overly protective and reduce spending on anything that is not essential so as to best preserve for their own

wellbeing and survival. At the same time, increased giving in neighboring areas is driven by a sense of empathy and solidarity with people who live near them and were so impacted by the disaster.

Professor Berrebi said, "These findings have important implications for [policy makers](#) and others who are in charge of disaster response and crisis management. The study demonstrates how people respond when their resources are threatened, or even are believed to be threatened and this leads people to withdraw from social involvement while at the same can inspire others to come out in solidarity and financial support. This is particularly important as we recognize that often official channels and governments can be slower in their responses and therefore policies that encourage volunteerism and increased civilian support for those directly affected can be of vital assistance in the immediate wake of such events."

**More information:** Claude Berrebi et al. Individual and community behavioral responses to natural disasters, *Natural Hazards* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s11069-020-04365-2](#)

Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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