

Organizations with broad social ties help recovering from natural disasters

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Communities recovering from natural disasters often see an increase in the number of businesses and non-profits that develop in the wake of the cleanup, but that apparent growth doesn't necessarily counterweigh the accompanying rise in poverty levels in areas transformed by events such as storms, earthquakes and wildfires.

These emerging businesses can improve the economic well-being of post-disaster [communities](#), but what's true for businesses is not always the case for other types of [community organizations](#), according to the results of a new study by a University at Buffalo-led research team.

"We found that community organizations, like churches, that are focused on their own needs during disasters do not block out the increase in poverty rates," says Kevin Smiley, an assistant professor of sociology at UB and the paper's lead author. "These organizations are an important part of the recovery and are effective on a small scale, but counties with increasing numbers of advocacy organizations, such as local environmental groups, political organizations and human-rights groups, tend to have a better recovery in terms of economic inequality."

The findings suggest that the most equitable recoveries are in those places where organizations that have a broad, crosscutting presence are located, and Smiley says that in order to encourage a wide economic recovery, communities should think about activating advocacy organizations that reach across diverse populations.

"In California, after the last of the fires has been put out, and the affected communities come together in their recovery, these broad-based organizations can help in a more equitable disaster [recovery](#)—it's not just the economic; it's the social," says Smiley. "Governments are uniquely positioned to help accomplish this. These organizations represent the democratic possibility; they are the institutions in which we imbue our collective spirit and they have the best opportunity to reach people.

"Communities come together following a disaster, but it's a lot to ask of a small isolated organization like a local church when a government already has that megaphone," says Smiley.

One of the curiosities of this research is that every community in the United States can learn from its findings—well, almost every community.

Natural hazards accompanied by property damage—not just headlines-grabbers like hurricanes and floods, but events such as hail, winter weather or severe thunderstorms—have occurred in all but one of the nation's 3,137 counties. Only rural Lyman County in South Dakota was untouched by a damaging event between 1998 and 2015, the timeframe Smiley and his colleagues examined for the study, which was published in the journal *Population and Environment*.

"These events are happening nearly everywhere in the country," says Smiley. "Given that prevalence, it's important to understand what's happening long-term and how to help communities recover."

The research team, including James Elliott, a professor of sociology at Rice University, and Junia Howell, an urban sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh, was motivated by how people come together after disasters to rebuild and how disasters have uneven impacts, like rising

social, income and neighborhood inequalities.

"In the time span we studied, the average U.S. county experienced a total of \$100 million in property damage from [natural hazards](#)," says Elliott. "This means the growing frequency and severity of natural hazards is an issue that every local community must consider."

The analysis relies on data from the Spatial Hazard Events and Losses Database, a county-level collection of information on damages in the U.S. from natural hazards.

"By looking at all counties in the United States across an 18-year period, this study is able to demonstrate how all places—not just those hit by mega [disasters](#)—are being affected by natural hazards and how organizations respond to them," says Smiley.

More information: Kevin T. Smiley et al, Disasters, local organizations, and poverty in the USA, 1998 to 2015, *Population and Environment* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s11111-018-0304-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-018-0304-8)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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