

UF Survey Finds Many Floridians Still Recovering From 2004 Hurricanes

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As homeowners clean up debris from Hurricane Dennis and keep a wary eye on newly formed Emily in the Atlantic, several hundred thousand Florida residents have not even started home repairs caused by last year's destructive hurricanes, says a University of Florida researcher.

Based on the results of telephone surveys this spring, an estimated 1.3 million Sunshine State residents have completed repairs, but repairs are still under way for 696,000 Floridians and had not yet begun for another 348,000, said Stan Smith, director of UF's Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"Certainly in terms of the number of people affected, last year's hurricanes had a far greater impact than any previous natural or man-made disaster in Florida, wreaking havoc from one end of the state to the other," Smith said. Overall, the storms were blamed for at least 80 deaths and caused more than \$20 billion damage, he said.

More than 2,000 respondents, of whom 1,881 were permanent state residents when the first of last year's four hurricanes struck in August, participated in the surveys, which were conducted between February and May. The survey has an error rate of 3 percent.

Twenty-six percent of the respondents said they evacuated their homes before at least one of last year's hurricanes, with 3 percent saying they left home for all four, he said.

"This would imply that nearly 4.5 million Floridians evacuated their homes at one time or another, which is a huge number," Smith said. Slightly more than half of evacuations were for one or two nights, followed by 28 percent for three or four nights, 17 percent for five to 10 nights and 4 percent for more than 10 nights.

In all, 32 percent of the respondents reported some hurricane damage to their homes, with 8 percent characterizing it as major and 24 percent as minor, Smith said.

"Assuming the distribution of damages for all housing units is proportional to that of households, we estimate that 2.6 million of Florida's 8.1 million housing units were damaged by the storms with 35,000 destroyed, 649,000 sustaining major damage and 1,917,000 sustaining minor damage," he said.

Hurricane Jeanne, which made landfall on the southeast coast, caused the most widespread destruction, damaging 14 percent of homes among the survey respondents, compared to 12 percent for Frances, 10 percent for Charley and 8 percent for Ivan, Smith said.

The average damage estimate was \$10,300 among the nearly 80 percent of respondents who reported knowing the dollar value of damage to their housing unit, he said.

Nearly one in 10 respondents said they were forced to actually move out of their homes after at least one hurricane, with most away for less than one week, Smith said. But 12 percent had still not returned by the time the surveys were conducted in spring 2005, he said.

More people were uprooted by the loss of utilities -- 72 percent -- than by structural damage, 14 percent. But the length of time residents were away from home was much greater for those who left because of structural damage, he said.

Seventy-three percent of those forced to leave their homes moved in with family and friends; 14 percent went to a hotel or motel; 3 percent rented a house or apartment; 3 percent stayed on their own property in a tent, RV or some other type of temporary housing; 3 percent went to a public

shelter; and 5 percent made other types of lodging arrangements.

They survey showed residents taking precautions to minimize any effect of future hurricanes, with nearly 10 percent making a structural change to their housing unit, 8 percent cutting down or trimming trees and 4 percent buying a generator, Smith said. “That implies almost 300,000 generators were purchased in Florida in the six months or so following the hurricanes,” he said.

Eleven percent of respondents said they plan to buy the devices in the future – implying 700,000 more generators – and 2 percent said they intend to move out of Florida, he said.

The 2004 hurricane effects on Florida’s population growth will likely be small and short-term – with possible lingering effects in some local areas – but are not likely to influence long-term population trends, unless there are several consecutive years of high hurricane activity, Smith said. Despite summertime heat, humidity and hurricanes, Florida has many positive attributes that include warm winters, sandy beaches, low taxes and rapid job growth, he said.

“People have long been aware that Florida has hurricanes, just as California has earthquakes, Kansas has tornadoes and Colorado has wildfires,” he said.

Source: UF

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