



# Lessons from the Storm

## Climate Displacement Three Years After Hurricane Sandy

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# Introduction and summary

Just weeks ago, the New York City metropolitan region faced the threat of a severe hurricane nearly three years to the date after Hurricane Sandy devastated areas of New York and New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> As government agencies began preparing for expected flooding, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) told a radio show, “I have learned the hard way it’s better to prepare for the worst. I’ve learned not to say we’re prepared for whatever comes our way because you can never be prepared for whatever comes our way.”<sup>2</sup>

Hurricane Joaquin subsequently moved eastward, sparing New York and New Jersey from significant flooding. Still, the storm was a stark reminder of the region’s vulnerability to extreme weather. On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy swept up the Atlantic Seaboard, wreaking unprecedented damage in coastal areas of New York and New Jersey. U.S. damage estimates rose to \$67 billion, and 159 deaths were directly linked to the storm.<sup>3</sup> When the water receded, New York and New Jersey faced a housing and employment crisis. More than 650,000 residences were damaged or destroyed,<sup>4</sup> and unemployment claims increased from 35,000 to more than 100,000 for up to three weeks after the storm.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of lost or damaged housing and decreased economic security resulted in major climate displacement—a growing issue for climate resilience planners—with as many as 776,000 people displaced from their communities in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.<sup>6</sup> The scale of the housing crisis, coupled with the not-so-distant memory of the 1.5 million people displaced by Hurricane Katrina, prompted government and community organizations to focus on programs that would not only rebuild communities, but also curb climate displacement in the region. Policymakers and community organizers quickly developed plans that sought to reduce the housing, economic, and health impacts on the climate displaced. Despite some successes, as many as 39,000 people still remain displaced today from Hurricane Sandy.<sup>7</sup> Although official displacement numbers do not exist for other extreme weather events, it is clear that thousands of people are forced to relocate from their homes, either permanently or temporarily, every year.<sup>8</sup>

Hurricane Sandy affected the entire Northeast region, but low-income communities bore the worst outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Low-income communities are disproportionately affected by extreme weather due to several factors, including living in less resilient housing stock, the precarious nature of wage-based earnings during and after disasters, environmental markers such as susceptibility to heat waves or nearby industrial sites, and restricted mobility or communication options.<sup>10</sup>

As New York and New Jersey continue to help the displaced return home, other cities and states should analyze their resilience and rebuilding programs to proactively protect against mass climate displacement. The projected increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather due to climate change<sup>11</sup> will make events such as Hurricane Sandy less of an exception and more of an expectation. This, in turn, will make climate displacement a growing problem. And while it is impossible to predict where and when a disaster will occur, states and cities that proactively prepare for the damage and displacement wrought by extreme weather can create more resilient, equitable, and economically healthy communities.

Climate resilience is often defined as programs and plans that allow a community to bounce back to its pre-event state; however, that definition should be expanded to account for the need for low-income communities to bounce forward, or avoid the factors that make them more vulnerable to the effects of extreme weather in the first place.<sup>12</sup> This resilience is also made possible by the work of nongovernmental, community-based organizations, whose unique contributions to low-income climate resilience should be an integral part of any climate resilience plan.

In order to avoid displacement and equitably strengthen communities against the effects of increasing extreme weather, cities and states should adopt proactive climate resilience plans that include the following:

- Efforts to fortify hard and soft infrastructure
- Programs that prioritize keeping or returning people to their homes to prevent climate displacement
- Analysis, support, and integrated planning with community organizations that can assist communities before and after an extreme weather event
- Initiatives to incorporate affordable housing needs with climate resilience and anti-displacement measures

Broadening climate resilience planning to promote community strengths and cohesiveness can retain residents and help communities thrive before and after extreme weather events. The efforts of New York City, New York state, and New Jersey to broaden resilience in this manner after Hurricane Sandy provide an important blueprint for other cities and for climate resilience generally.

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