

## ***Hurricane Harvey***

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## INTRODUCTION

Harvey has been a nightmare for every Houstonian, but some have faced more challenges than others. During the period before the hurricane struck, Harris County and Houston officials refused to order an evacuation, arguing that residents should stay put, even as CNN meteorologists forecasted more than 20 inches of rain for the first weekend, and the National Weather Service placed Houston under a Flash Flood Watch on the Thursday before the storm struck [1]. Despite knowing that the poorest residents of Houston live in unelevated, flood-prone areas that could not handle the rain, city officials steadfastly refused to evacuate these neighborhoods, forcing residents to pray for search-and-rescue operations. From the beginning, low-income Houstonians of color have struggled to receive the same treatment provided to their wealthy counterparts. As Houston continues its reconstruction efforts, the city must reduce the disparity between aid to privileged and marginalized communities.

## ANALYSIS

This inequality predates Hurricane Harvey, especially in the Texas Medical Center. During Tropical Storm Allison in 2001, the entire Medical Center was flooded. Decades of medical research at Baylor College of Medicine was wiped away as water entered the basement [2]. In the years since Allison, almost every hospital that could afford renovations chose to improve their facilities. However, Ben Taub, which is run by a governmental entity named Harris Health System, was unable to obtain the funding needed to fix its flooding problem. In part because Ben Taub specializes in patients who cannot afford most treatments, Harris Health System has faced increasingly wide funding gaps, as the Houston Chronicle reported as far back as June 2015 [3]. The shortfall hurt their primary care clinics, health centers, and homeless outreach programs, ensuring that no building upgrades could be completed. During Hurricane Harvey, while almost every hospital in the Texas Medical Center continued operations, largely unaffected by the rising waters, Ben Taub was forced to evacuate its patients [2,4]. The basements in all three of its buildings were flooded, displacing pharmacy and food services. Compared with other Houston health systems, Ben Taub's continued shortage of funds because of its focus on low-income patients likely contributed to its failure at the hands of Harvey. The working class Houstonians who relied on Ben Taub were thus unable to receive care they needed during the hurricane. This issue was not limited to the Texas Medical Center. According to a December 2017 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Episcopal Health Foundation, lower-income adults and people of color were statistically more likely to lack health insurance and to say that they are unsure about where to go for medical care [5]. Considering that 1 in 6 storm victims said that a family member's health condition was created or worsened by Harvey, it is likely that many Houstonians need to see a physician, but the wealthier ones will be more likely to actually have their medical condition treated [5].

Over the same time period, vulnerable minority communities found their concerns ignored by the local government, resulting in considerable damage during Hurricane Harvey. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the City of Houston is in violation of the Civil Rights Act [6]. One of the biggest problems with maps showing the relationship between ethnicity and location in Houston is the east-west segregation of White, non-Hispanic households from minority communities. But these divisions are not just racial; West Houston—which is overwhelmingly white—also dominates Houston Properties’ list of the most expensive Houston neighborhoods, comprising nineteen of the twenty areas listed [7]. This may seem coincidental, but the City Council has perpetuated this division. Over the past four years, 91 percent of buildings that they considered for tax credits were in majority-minority areas [6]. When the Houston Housing Authority decided, for the first time in its history, to affirmatively invest in a majority white, low-poverty 2eighbourhood, the project was blocked by the City [7].

Having different racial and ethnic groups neatly split by clear lines has allowed the City to provide better resources for predominantly White, non-Hispanic groups and distribute hazardous materials almost entirely in minority neighborhoods. Overwhelmingly non-white areas bear the vast majority of the city’s pollution: 84 percent of carcinogen emitters, 78 percent of closed landfills, and 88 percent of hazardous waste sites. This has had major effects on cancer rates in various Houston racial communities [8]. According to a 2014 case study of South and Southeast Houston by the Houston Department of Health and Human Services, compared to white women, African American women are more likely to develop more aggressive, more advanced-stage breast cancer earlier and die from breast cancer [9]. When Harvey arrived, the impact became more severe. According to Texas Southern University sociologist Robert Bullard, the “father of environmental justice,” the petrochemical plants in neighborhoods of color spread toxic waste whenever the city floods [10]. Data from Air Alliance Houston shows that petrochemical plants will send over 1 million pounds of harmful pollution into the air because of Harvey [11]. For low-income communities of color that already cannot afford the cleanup from the flooding, the long-term health issues that will arise as a result of Harvey will ruin their lives.

Communities of color have already faced major difficulties in their attempts to receive aid when compared to predominantly white areas. The same study conducted by Kaiser Family Foundation and Episcopal Health Foundation found that while half of all storm victims believed they were not getting the help they need, this was true for sixty-six percent of black residents [12]. This disparity is shown through FEMA assistance numbers, too. While black, Hispanic, and low-income respondents were more likely to have experienced property damage or income loss, they were less likely to receive aid [12]. Only 13 percent of black Houstonians had their FEMA applications approved, compared to 34 percent of white residents [12]. Without this aid, medical bills become near impossible for most low-income people, many of whom were already uninsured before Harvey. Sixty percent of respondents say they have skipped or postponed needed treatment or medication, problems that will exacerbate treatable illnesses and chronic conditions like diabetes [12].

## CONCLUSION

Although the colossal volume of rainfall drenched every part of Houston, the most impacted people were the most marginalized. Harvey may not have specifically targeted the poor, but the poor have struggled the most to recover from it. Because of racially and economically discriminatory policies by the City of Houston, low-income communities of color were the least prepared for and most impacted by Hurricane Harvey. Even as the cleanup effort continues, poor minorities face more hurdles than their wealthy, White counterparts. The local, state, and federal governments should ensure that their aid distribution policies are fair and non-discriminatory to ensure that all communities can effectively recover.

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