

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IMMIGRANT RESILIENCE IS FOUNDATIONAL TO THE HOUSTON REGION'S RESILIENCE.

CASE STATEMENT

When Hurricane Harvey hit the Texas Gulf Coast in August 2017, many called it an equal opportunity disaster. But immigrants are disproportionately impacted and slower to recover from natural disasters than those born in the United States.¹ Immigrant resilience is essential to our region's resilience – our ability to withstand and mitigate the stress of disaster.

In 2017, 23% (1.6 million) of the Greater Houston region's residents were born in another country. While an estimated 506,000 (33%) of immigrants are undocumented (10% of the total region), many more families have "mixed" legal status, meaning citizens and non-citizens live in the same household.² In 2016, immigrant households contributed \$124.7 billion (26%) to the Houston metro area's gross domestic product (GDP), held \$38.2 billion in spending power, and contributed \$3.5 billion in state and local taxes.³ Immigrants are critical to Houston's workforce. In 2016, 32% of workers were immigrants, and 10% were unauthorized. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, construction workers – more than half of whom are immigrants – were in particularly high demand.⁴

Immigrants, particularly low-income immigrants, are disproportionately impacted by disasters. A December 2017 survey found that immigrants were more likely than U.S.-born respondents to report income or job loss due to Harvey (64% versus 39%). Research has long documented that less-privileged residents often suffer losses in economic, social, and cultural resources after disasters, while more-privileged residents tend to recover more quickly and may even benefit financially. In fact, the more aid an area receives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the more wealth inequality grows as a result of both physical damages and how recovery resources are designed and distributed.⁵

A November 2017 survey of 351 day laborers found that nearly two-thirds (64%) who identified as being undocumented indicated they do not feel safe asking for help from government officials for fear of risking their own or their family's security.⁶ Despite growing anti-immigrant policy on the federal and state level, the Houston region's sentiment toward immigrants grows more positive annually. Harris County residents who favor granting undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record grew from 75% in 2014 to 82% in 2018.⁷

1 Bryan Wu, Liz Hamel, Mollyann Brodie, Sim Shao-Chee, and Elena Marks, Hurricane Harvey: The Experience of Immigrants Living on the Texas Gulf Coast, Kaiser Family Foundation and Episcopal Health Foundation, March 2018, <https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/report/hurricane-harvey-experiences-immigrants-texas-gulf-coast/>.

2 Randy Capps and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, A Profile of Houston's Diverse Immigrant Population in a Rapidly Changing Policy Landscape, Migration Policy Institute, 2018. See also: <https://www.parkviewmc.com/app/files/public/1484/2016-Poverty-Level-Chart.pdf>.

3 "New Americans in Houston: A Snapshot of the Demographic and Economic Contributions of Immigrants in the Metro Area," New American Economy, accessed March 2019, <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/city/houston/>.

4 Randy Capps, A Profile of Houston's Diverse Immigrant Population in a Rapidly Changing Policy Landscape.

5 Junia Howell and James R Elliott, "Damages Done: The Longitudinal Impacts of Natural Hazards on Wealth Inequality in the United States," Social Problems, spy016, accessed March 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spy016>.

6 Nik Theodore, After the Storm: Houston's Day Labor Markets in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, University of Illinois at Chicago, November 2017.

7 Stephen L. Klineberg, The 2018 Kinder Houston Area Survey: Tracking Responses to Income Inequalities, Demographic Transformations, and Threatening Storms, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2018, <https://kinder.rice.edu/houstonurvey2018>.

PREREQUISITES

We must use our continued Harvey recovery efforts to build the systems needed for a more equitable recovery for immigrants, regardless of legal status, through future disasters for a more resilient region.

HILSC calls on Harris County and City of Houston government and non-profit agencies, including funders, to incorporate HAP recommendations into their strategic emergency planning. HILSC and our network of more than forty organizations have already begun. We thank Houston Mayor Turner for his Welcoming Houston commitment to coordinate with the Department of Homeland Security Emergency Preparedness in the development of a disaster preparedness plan focused on immigrants and refugees and stand ready to partner in this complex endeavor.⁸

Fundamentally, decision makers must:

1. Ensure the data informing policy and funding decisions includes vulnerable populations, including immigrants of all statuses, looking to experts like the Migration Policy Institute and Center for Migration Studies for best practices that can be applied locally.
2. Inform policy and funding decisions with existing studies that document immigrants' experience in Harvey response and recovery [Appendix A]. This includes HILSC's HAP and many of the studies cited within it. Additional data (prerequisite #1) is needed to understand where those stories apply in terms of geography and socio-economics to target planning successfully.
3. Consult with immigrant-serving organizations and their immigrant constituents in emergency management planning, who can inform an infrastructure that serves as a conduit between decision makers and immigrant-serving organizations and their clients throughout the region.

THE HUMANITARIAN ACTION PLAN

When Hurricane Harvey struck the gulf coast, HILSC stepped up for immigrants in response and recovery, and is now building systems for the next disaster. HILSC developed 34 Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) recommendations, including nine HILSC commitments to guide coordinated emergency management planning for immigrants. The HAP is based on interviews with over 80 people from more than 40 agencies – including undocumented immigrants, immigrant-serving and emergency management professionals, and decision makers on funding and policy. The expertise of immigrant-serving and emergency management organizations have seldom been brought together in one plan.

8 Accessible at www.welcominghouston.org.

Our research surfaced three primary opportunities to increase immigrant resilience:

1

Inclusive communication

Accurate, timely, and actionable information must be provided to immigrants in accessible language to increase the efficiency of response and recovery, reduce rumors, and help them connect with resources.

2

Accessible resources

Preparedness, response, and recovery assistance – particularly privately-funded aid – must be available, accessible, and understandable to all immigrants.

3

Culturally-competent approaches

All who play a role in emergency management must understand and address the core needs of immigrants and strategically design policies, services and materials to meet those needs.

Our recommendations can be accessed via HILSC's website, and filtered by Disaster phase (preparedness, response, recovery), implementation level (federal/state, county/city, nonprofit), implementation approach (policy, program/operations, funding) and opportunities (inclusive communications, accessible resources, culturally-competent approaches). We will also provide progress updates. Please share your successes as together we build a welcoming and resilient region: <http://hap.houstonimmigration.org>.