Affordable Housing and Equitable Disaster Recovery: A Study of the 2013 Colorado Flash Floods

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks how characteristics of social vulnerability shape the disaster recovery process, particularly for households living in affordable housing. Our paper is based on data collected following the 2013 floods in Colorado, one of the costliest disasters in state history. The floods had significant impact on affordable housing stocks in numerous cities, towns, and unincorporated communities. We interviewed 95 households in the three counties most affected: Boulder, Larimer and Weld. In addition we interviewed 19 local, county and state officials about housing recovery, and observed dozens of recovery-related meetings and events. We describe how households living in affordable housing struggle with the uncertainty of recovery, with concrete impacts on their daily lives and work. We also discuss how the fate of low-income households is in question, given the rapidly escalating price of homes and rentals in the 3-county region.

Introduction

Equity is a fundamental part of sustainable disaster recovery [1, 2, 3, 4]. For a recovery to be equitable, it must attend to both the fair distribution of resources and a framework that allows full, effective participation in decision-making [5]. In practical terms, measuring equitable recovery requires an evaluation of both recovery process and recovery outcomes. An equitable recovery thus means that all affected households have fair and sufficient access to recovery information, resources and processes given their needs. Evaluating equitable recovery also requires us to examine housing outcomes: do some households or groups recover better than others, and if so, is it due to unfair access to resources or unequal treatment under recovery plans or policies? This paper presents initial findings from a study of household recovery following the 2013 Colorado floods. We ask how characteristics of social vulnerability impact the recovery process, with a particular emphasis on housing.

The September 2013 floods were one of the costliest disasters in Colorado state history. Over a several day period the Front Range region received more than 17 inches of rainfall, triggering widespread flash flooding across the north and central parts of the state. The flooding destroyed 1,852 homes, caused widespread damage to roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, and displaced more than 18,000 people. Eighteen counties were included in the major disaster declaration (FEMA-4145-DR), with the bulk of the damage concentrated in Boulder, Larimer, and Weld counties [12].

Although housing, and particularly affordable housing, is just one element of recovery, it is a fundamental and often controversial issue around which concerns over equity often arise [6, 7, 8]. Disasters can impact affordable housing stock directly through damaged or destroyed homes or indirectly when prices rise due to the sudden drop in supply. For disaster-affected communities, processes and decisions about whether, where and how affordable housing gets built can fundamentally shape the

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character of long-term recovery. Typical of many states in the western U.S., Colorado is experiencing rapid population growth and an accompanying rise in housing prices and decline in the availability of affordable housing. In Boulder County, rental vacancies are at a 12-year low and the median sale price of a single-family home is now over $375,000 [9, 10]. In Weld County, where Evans and Milliken are located, rental vacancies are some of the lowest in the state due to the strengthening regional economy and growth of the oil and gas industry [11]. Given region-wide housing shortages and significant development pressures on these and other small towns, a key question is whether the recovery process will adequately address the housing needs of socially vulnerable groups. In other words, will households seeking affordable housing options be able to return to rent or rebuild, or will the disaster accelerate gentrification trends in the region?

The September floods damaged or destroyed thousands of homes in Boulder, Larimer, and Weld counties, and were particularly destructive to affordable housing stocks. In Lyons, the floods destroyed both of the town’s mobile home parks and dozens of houses in the Confluence neighborhood, where many of the town’s low and moderate-income families lived. In Evans, the flood washed away 208 trailers, home to over 1,000 residents, as well as dozens of homes in an affordable neighborhood abutting Riverside Park. In Milliken, a small town of just over 6,000, 35 mobile homes were destroyed and another 8 significantly damaged.

Housing recovery is a long-term process and the fate of affordable housing impacted by the floods will not be known for several more years. In this paper we focus on the experience of recovery for households who relied on affordable housing prior to the flood. What has their experience been in locating temporary shelter, how has the loss of housing affected their livelihood and the daily lives of their families, and what are their long-term prospects for living and working in the region? Additionally, we compare their experiences against households with higher incomes and who have access to market rate housing.

Methodology

Our findings are based on survey data collected over a four-month period, May-August 2014. We interviewed 95 households from Boulder, Larimer and Weld counties who suffered significant damage to their homes and/or property during the 2013 floods. Because the flood disproportionately impacted affordable housing, our sample was comprised primarily, but note entirely, of socially vulnerable households. We recruited participants with fliers, direct mail, emails, tabling at flood recovery events, and snowball sampling. Surveys were administered in-person in either English or Spanish and lasted between 45 and 180 minutes (with an average of 75 minutes). We entered the survey data into a custom Microsoft Access database and exported it to Excel for analysis. In addition to our household survey, we interviewed 19 local, county, state, and federal officials directly involved with recovery. We also attended dozens of public meetings related to housing recovery, primarily in Boulder and Weld counties, and monitored communications from recovery officials to disaster affected households and the public.

Findings & Conclusion

Although anecdotal evidence from our interviews suggests that households living in affordable housing affected by the floods are struggling to recover, we are finalizing our data entry and analysis and will report concrete findings at the time of the conference in late September. We will also update our abstract to include these findings.

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References