A Social Science Perspective of Disaster Impacts on Latino and Indigenous Migrant Communities

Dr. Michael Méndez
University of California, Irvine
Department of Urban Planning & Public Policy
“[This book] should be required reading for the most committed Green New Dealers and their opponents alike.”

-- Liam Denning, Bloomberg Opinion
The (in)visible victims of disaster: Understanding the vulnerability of undocumented Latino/a and indigenous immigrants

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Gang violence

ABSTRACT

As climate change advances, communities across the United States are adapting to the increased threat of wildfires, drought, heatwaves, and infectious diseases. Such disasters are expected to become more frequent and severe. Now more than ever, it is crucial to understand how these events amplify existing inequalities, and how to lessen the resulting harms. Differences in human vulnerability to disaster stem from a range of social, economic, historical, and political factors. We argue that given their social status, undocumented Latino/a and Indigenous immigrants are particularly vulnerable to disasters and require special consideration in disaster planning. They are disproportionately affected by racial discrimination, exploitation, economic hardships, limited English and Spanish proficiency, and fear of deportation in their everyday lives—their pre-disaster marginalized status. In the case of the Thomas Fire in California’s Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, we show that emergency response and recovery efforts ignored their needs. Resources were directed toward privileged individuals, leaving local immigrant rights and environmental justice groups to provide essential services such as language access to emergency information in Spanish and Indigenous tongues; labor protections for farmworkers endangered in the fields; and a private disaster relief fund for undocumented immigrants ineligible for federal aid. The article concludes with preliminary participant observations from the COVID-19 pandemic response in the region, indicating how lessons from the fire may inform official actions. As governments grapple with the increasing severity of disasters, understanding the differential impacts on undocumented immigrants can help improve disaster planning to protect the most vulnerable and stigmatized populations.
FIRE DISASTER RECOVERY RESOURCES
FOR VICTIMS OF THE SADDLERIDGE FIRE

For more information visit asmde.org/dn/SRfire or call (818)-504-3911

SOURCE: California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES)
www.caloes.ca.gov

FEMA: REGISTERING FOR DISASTER ASSISTANCE
Have the information below ready when you apply:
- Social Security number (one per household)
- Address of the damaged home or apartment
- Description of the damage
- Information about insurance coverage
- Telephone number
- Mailing address
- Bank account and routing numbers for direct deposit of funds

1-800-621-FEMA (3362) TTY: 1-800-462-7585
www.DisasterAssistance.gov

FEMA: REGISTRACIÓN PARA ASISTENCIA EN CASO DE UN DESASTRE
Información que debe tener a mano cuando esté listo para solicitar:
- Número de Seguro Social (uno por hogar)
- Dirección del apartamento o casa afectada
- Descripción del daño
- Información sobre el seguro de cobertura
- Número de teléfono
- Dirección de correo
- Número de cuenta bancaria y código de identificación bancaria (routing) para el depósito directo de los fondos

1-800-621-FEMA (3362) TTY: 1-800-462-7585
www.DisasterAssistance.gov

LUZ RIVAS
ASSEMBLYWOMAN, 39th DISTRICT
9300 Laurel Canyon Blvd. First Floor
Arleta, CA 91331

5 555-5555AUTO**5-
The Mendez Family
Sylmar CA 91342-1871
Kincade Fire: Farmworkers flee without gas or cash and are stranded at makeshift shelter

As the Kincade fire raged on, a Cesar Chavez-inspired public affairs radio station kept farmworkers informed.

Ana Martinez walks through a neighborhood that was evacuated in the Getty fire on Monday. (Brittny Mejia)
Roadmap:

• Understanding Wildfire and Inequality
• Overview of Thomas Wildfire and Undocumented Immigrants
• Disaster Impacts
• Broader Policy Implications
• Recommendations
• Update: Summer 2020 California Wildfires
ADAPTING TO WILDFIRE

Wildfire costs and risks in the West are ever increasing with climate change: How do we cope?

Climate change has led to more wildfires in the U.S. West.

Build-up of fuels makes fire severity higher in dry forests.

The wildland-urban interface (WUI) is more at risk.

Costs and risks of a new era of western wildfires continue to rise.
15 of 20 Largest Wildfires recorded in California (since 1932) have been in the last 20 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIRE NAME (CAUSE)</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>ACRES</th>
<th>STRUCTURES</th>
<th>DEATHS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENDOCINO COMPLEX (Under Investigation)</td>
<td>July 2018</td>
<td>Colusa County, Lake County</td>
<td>459,123</td>
<td>280</td>
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<td>THOMAS (Under Investigation)</td>
<td>December 2017</td>
<td>Ventura &amp; Santa Barbara</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDAR (Human Related)</td>
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<td>San Diego</td>
<td>273,216</td>
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<tr>
<td>KUSH (Lightning)</td>
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<td>Lassen</td>
<td>271,911 CA / 43,666 NV</td>
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<td>BIM (Human Related)</td>
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<td>Tuolumne</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZACA (Human Related)</td>
<td>July 2007</td>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>210,207</td>
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<tr>
<td>CARR (Human Related)</td>
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<td>Shasta County, Trinity County</td>
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<td>175,125</td>
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<tr>
<td>BASIN COMPLEX (Lightning)</td>
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<td>Monterey</td>
<td>162,818</td>
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<td>DAY FIRE (Human Related)</td>
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<td>STATION (Human Related)</td>
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<td>November 2018</td>
<td>Butte</td>
<td>153,326</td>
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<td>ROUGH (Lightning)</td>
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<td>McNALLY (Human Related)</td>
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<td>Trinity</td>
<td>140,948</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*There is no doubt that there were fires with significant acreage burned in years prior to 1932, but those records are less reliable, and this list is meant to give an overview of the large fires in more recent times.*
17 of 20 Largest Wildfires recorded in California (since 1932) have been in the last 20 years

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<th>COUNTY</th>
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<th>STRUCTURES</th>
<th>DEATHS</th>
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<tr>
<td>AUGUST COMPLEX (Under Investigation)*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>396,624</td>
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<td>363,220</td>
<td>1,491</td>
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<tr>
<td>NORTH COMPLEX (Under Investigation)*</td>
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<td>291,200</td>
<td>1,561</td>
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<td>THOMAS (Powerlines)</td>
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<td>Ventura &amp; Santa Barbara</td>
<td>281,893</td>
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<td>CREEK FIRE (Under Investigation)*</td>
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<td>278,368</td>
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<td>Ventura</td>
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There is no doubt that there were fires with significant acreage burned in years prior to 1932, but these records are less reliable, and this list is meant to give an overview of the large fires in more recent times. This list does not include fire jurisdiction. These are the Top 20 regardless of whether they were state, federal, or local responsibility. *Numbers not final.

(Sept. 2020)
Human vulnerability to wildfire stem from a range of social, economic, historical and political factors:

- Unequal access to disaster preparedness knowledge and resources
- Contrasting legacies of forest management practices
- Expansion of residential development into the wildland.
Wildfire Hazard Potential

- Low
- High
- Non-burnable

Map A
California’s 4th Climate Change Assessment projects 77% increase in Wildfire acreage Burned by 2100

This image shows the modeled area burned by wildfires from current time (modeled as 1961-1990), for mid-century (2035-2064), and for late century (2070-2099). By the end of the century, California could experience wildfires that burn up to a maximum of 178% more acres per year than current averages.

Credit: State of California 2018
Undocumented Immigrant Communities undercounted in U.S. Census

Map B

Credit: Davies 2018
Wildfires and Environmental Justice

✓ Socioeconomic status and disproportionate share of environmental impacts

✓ Suffer related public health and quality of life burdens.
Context of Thomas Wildfire (2017-2018)
The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Largest Wildfire recorded in California History

![Map of California with burn area in Orange]

- Santa Barbara
- Ojai
- Ventura
- Oxnard
- Fillmore
- Los Angeles County
- Santa Clarita
- Ventura County
- Santa Barbara County

Burn Area in Orange
Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties

✓ Heavily fire-prone and drought-impacted area
✓ Landscape between mountains and ocean creates vulnerabilities in housing, transportation, infrastructure
✓ Major agriculture and tourism industries with low-wage immigrant workforce
✓ High level of racial and economic inequality and lack of political and economic inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Non-English</th>
<th>Immigrant</th>
<th>Noncitizen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara County</td>
<td>442,996</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ventura County</td>
<td>847,834</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oxnard</td>
<td>206,732</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventura (city)</td>
<td>110,153</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara (city)</td>
<td>91,443</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Indigenous Oaxacan People from Southern Mexico

Ventura County 25,000  Santa Barbara 29,000

Concentrated in labor-intensive sectors

Mixtecs:

✓ Culturally and linguistically isolated
✓ Many are illiterate
✓ Most speak neither Spanish nor English, but only their native language, Mixteco (oral).
Our research adapts the work in the field of public health that examines issues of intersectionality. That is — how social categories of identity and culture intersect to reveal new patterns of environmental risk and injustice.

For this wildfire case study we analyze the intersection of:

- Race and Indigeneity
- Gender
- Immigration Status and class
Social Vulnerability to Extreme Wildfires

- comprised of the risk of exposure (the likelihood that people will be affected);

- sensitivity (the degree to which people will be affected), and;

- **adaptive capacity** (the ability of people to prepare for and/or recover from a wildfire based on available resources).
What does Adaptive Capacity to Wildfire mean for Migrant Communities?

- Language Access
- Workers Health and Safety/Rights
- Immigration Status and Disaster Aid
- Housing/Transportation

Protecting vulnerable communities is costly and dangerous.

Following wildfires, communities often rebuild in ways that don’t significantly reduce future vulnerability.

Some forested areas will not persist with changing wildfire and climate.

New Approach: Promote fire-adapted planning and land-use.

New Approach: Foster post-fire transitions to ecosystems more adapted to new climate.

Infographic by PNAS/Schoennagel (2017)
The Impacts
Language Access to Emergency Information
Language Access to Emergency Information
Air Quality during Wildfire
Safe Drinking Water Access

Advisory Boil Order
Community Steps Up:
No Official Government Response
Worker Health and Safety Impacts: Farmworkers
“During the fire, I worked 3 days without a mask. It caused me headaches and watery eyes, as well as a cough. We were scared because we were very near where the fire was occurring. The masks were not handed out until the City came to regulate.”

-D.P., Farmworker, Oxnard

“We all got sick. Our throats closed in from breathing too much smoke and our kids couldn't go to school. We had to buy masks and medicine for our throats and some goggles because my eyes were irritated when I worked.”

-F.C.P., Farmworker Oxnard
Economic and Health Impacts on Workers
Worker Impacts: Domestic and Service Workers
“I could not get to the homes where I worked because the streets were closed. Two of the homes I worked at were destroyed. One of my good friends was lost during the mud flow [following the fires heavy rains caused mudslides from the fire debris]. He had only been living in Montecito for 3 weeks before he died. I myself am a cancer survivor and am the only one who provides for the family.”

-SZ, Landscaper, Santa Barbara

“The day the fire started, the sky was covered with smoke and we were sent home. The next day we didn’t work because it was dangerous due to the fire. We lost power because it was cut off by the fire and we lost food and milk for the kids. During the mudslides, we couldn’t get to work and were told to stay home for 2 days.”

-R.M. Mixteca Farmworker, Oxnard
Immigration Status and Disaster Aid
“My husband was deported just before the fire. I was really struggling to find work in the fields. I finally got hired the first week in December 2017, but was let go once the fire and smoke grew too big and the fruit spoiled. As the only breadwinner, I had to borrow money from friends and family to feed my kids. Our food went bad due to the power outage, adding to our expenses. I am grateful for the UndocuFund assistance. I am still in need of help and continue coming to MICOP for other services.”

-Lorena, Domestic Worker, Santa Barbara

*Public Charge Rule*
Total Relief Effort

- **1685** Families Provided Financial Assistance, helping:
  - **3349** Undocumented People
  - **7041** Total Mixed Status Family Members

- **39** Clinics
- **425** Volunteers
- **671** Mixteco Speakers Assisted

**Total Amount Distributed**

- **$2,198,550**
Loss of Regional Housing Stock
Loss of Transportation Infrastructure
Policy Implication: Limits of Vulnerability Mapping
Policy Implication: Thinking Beyond Property Values
Undocumented Immigrant Communities undercounted in U.S. Census
Policy Implication: Existing Inequities Are Exacerbated During Disaster

*No Social Safety Net*
Broader Policy Implications

Photo Source: Anderson (2017)
Ensure Inclusive Disaster Planning

✓ Draw on Immigrant Community Knowledge

✓ Embrace Immigrant Communities in Disaster Planning, Response, and Recovery

✓ Bolster Latinx/Indigenous Civil Society Organization’s capacity in Disaster Relief and Planning Efforts.
Equitable Disaster Laws and Policies (adopted):

• AB 1877 (Limon): Language access for emergency information
• SB 160 (Jackson): Cultural Competency in disaster planning and climate resilience planning

Recommendations

• State Disaster Relief Fund for all regardless of immigration status
• Emergency Funding for CBOs on the ground
• Develop new methods to map socially vulnerable communities
• Codify into law CalOSHA Regulation § 5141.1 “Protection from Wildfire Smoke” (July 2019) – and Extend protections to Domestic Workers.
NEDTalks

Update: Sonoma and Central Coast Wildfires (August and September 2020)

Preliminary Findings:

• Uneven N95 Mask implementation throughout the state
• Improper monitoring of air quality index
• No statewide guidance for implementation of worker health and safety
• Access Verification Permits – allows farmworkers in mandatory evacuation zones
  • Farmers have no emergency plans
  • No health tests for workers
• Cal/OSHA has limited staff and only 26 Spanish speaking field investigators
NEDTalks

Source: Mendez (2018)