

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because It Helps Build Resilience in the Face of Disasters

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We are dedicated to using social science to improve disaster recovery for those on the margins of society—in particular on the unique needs of children and older adults in times of crisis. Our past work has shed light on how age influences issues of both vulnerability and agency. Uplifting lessons learned is especially important as we continue to face more extreme weather events and a changing climate.

Recovery needs vary based on age

Children have unique disaster needs because of their age, cognitive abilities, and dependence on adult guardians and caretakers, with older children commonly more affected. Additionally, children tend to experience magnified effects, because they must cope with disaster-related stress during a developmental phase in which their personalities and identities are forming.

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Similarly, older persons tend to have different health concerns, financial considerations, and worldviews relative to their younger counterparts. While they often demonstrate significant resilience to disaster impacts due to greater life experience and resultant coping skills, many older adults also tend to face substantial barriers to recovery because of social marginalization and declining social support.



These factors help to explain seniors' overwhelming representation among fatalities in disasters, such as Hurricane Maria, Hurricane Katrina, the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, and many others.

The capacities of both elders and children to recover from a disaster can vary substantially based upon a range of individual and environmental circumstances. Social science sheds light on these kinds of variation, allowing us to better anticipate what forms of support are needed and respond appropriately in the aftermath of an extreme event.

Youth and older adults can be untapped resources

Youth engagement in disaster recovery strengthens social ties, fosters a sense of community, includes diverse perspectives in community building, and ultimately promotes lifelong civic engagement. [Recent research](#) has shifted from focusing on children's vulnerability to promoting their agency.

Studies have bolstered evidence on the [meaningful and rich role that youth can play](#) in the disaster resilience space, emphasizing their capacity for engaging in tasks like providing peer counseling, distributing aid, participating in planning

and rebuilding efforts, and sharing educational disaster information with friends and family.

Although stereotypes associated with advanced age often lead to the treatment of seniors as passive victims or liabilities in the context of disaster, scholars have increasingly come to recognize that older adults are commonly an underutilized resource for community resilience. [Research](#) reveals that elders often possess skills and resources that are critical to disaster response and recovery, based on their life and professional experience.

Key roles that older adults have played in past disaster recovery efforts included fundraising, providing management support, distributing food and goods, and coordinating services. Moreover, [studies have found](#) that this kind of volunteerism can yield benefits for elders themselves in addition to providing essential support to communities, thereby creating a positive feedback loop.

Organizations that support youth and seniors play a critical role in disaster recovery

As is the case with many other sectors, child-serving and senior-serving organizations are important components of the social fabric in any community. These organizations are wellsprings of expertise and can help ensure recovery processes accommodate the unique needs of children and older adults. Therefore, it is vital to meaningfully include these entities in disaster recovery efforts—and to foster pre-disaster collaboration and preparedness.

Social science is critical to improve and innovate

By highlighting realities that run contrary to commonly held assumptions, the systematic study of disaster outcomes at both ends of the age spectrum points to the value of social science research for evidence-based decision-making. The insights that scientists provide are only as good as the questions that they ask.

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adults are more vulnerable to disasters, and to question what we might be able to learn from their efforts to cope with those vulnerabilities.

However, by requiring attention to the broader contexts in which complex societal processes unfold, social science inquiry encourages the development of better questions.

The imperative of scientific rigor has led social scientists to challenge their assumptions about why children and older



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