

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

## Because Hurricanes Aren't Going Away Any Time Soon and Schools Must Continue to Function

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Natural disasters (such as hurricanes) have a history of impacting some of the most socially vulnerable communities – low income communities and communities of color. [While the intensity and quantity of storms will likely increase in the coming years](#), we still have very little information on the best services and sources that can support schooling, educators, and students during and after natural disasters. My research is working to address this gap by collecting, analyzing, and presenting data on the best ways to assist recovery for some of the most vulnerable populations.

### What have we learned in the last decade?

Across the last decade, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) confirmed [67 Major Disaster Declarations in the United States from hurricanes alone](#). Each of these declarations impacted communities, schools, educators, and students throughout our nation. We've also learned that [6 of the 10 \(60%\) costliest hurricanes in our history occurred between 2010 and 2019](#), costing a total of \$393.7 billion.

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Let's also not ignore the magnitude of storms that hit in low-income communities, which had a smaller price tag but still left an enormous impact. Hurricane Matthew, for example, hit the Carolinas in 2016 and devastated one of the oldest Black communities in the nation, a historic Native American Lumbee reservation, and multiple rural White low-income communities. Although the cost of the storm estimated a comparatively small [\\$1.5 billion in property damages](#), the devastation of the storm's impact can still be felt more than three years after the storm ravaged the coast.

### Relevant research

Back in 2017, my team and I received [funding from the National Science Foundation](#) to assess how hurricanes impact and affect schooling in North Carolina and Texas following Hurricanes Matthew (2016) and Harvey

(2017). What we found was both shocking and understandable. As a whole, educators expressed feeling underprepared to deal with the aftermath of hurricanes. Generally, teachers are excellent at educating, though their roles often require them to also act as counselors, social workers, cooks, drivers, clothing collectors, you name it. However, even with the vast amount of skills expected of teachers, they are not prepared to deal with the aftermath of a natural disaster on their students, their peers, their families, and themselves.

Our findings also showed that schools were closed on average for 10 days during and after the hurricane. Although this may seem like a short period, it does not take into account the countless number of days educators took off from work to deal with personal matters – such as meeting with contractors, rebuilding their own homes, and supporting loved ones. In addition to educators missing school, students were absent as they dealt with similar disruptions in their own lives. These missing days are harmful to students in high-income and high-performing schools but are devastating for students in low-income and low-performing schools. Overall, we found that hurricanes continued to interrupt the schooling experiences of both educators and students long after the floodwaters receded.

### Where do we go from here?

Social science helps us answer thoughtful questions about how hurricanes have impacted schooling, educators, and students. By asking holistic questions like (1) “What are the major disruptions for schools after a hurricane?” and (2) “What practices can schools use to assist recovery?” we can assess the various forms of disturbances and ultimately better meet students’ schooling needs.

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As I mentioned earlier, hurricanes aren’t going away anytime soon. In fact, organizations like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) project hydrologic hazards, like hurricanes, to be worse in the near future. It is vital, now more than ever, that we sufficiently increase our efforts and investigate how schools can recover faster and be more prepared before the next storm makes landfall.



**CASSANDRA R. DAVIS** is a research assistant professor in the Department of Public Policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Davis continues to collaborate with schools on the best ways to recover from a natural disaster. Her current areas of interest include education policy, the impact of natural disaster on schools and communities, program evaluation, qualitative research methods, and social and historical context in education.