



Understanding Post-Disaster Social Services for Children and Families

Review Report
June 28, 2020

EVALUATE

HOPE

STRENGTH

CONNECT

EQUITY

Preface

This report summarizes findings from a commissioned review that Community Science conducted for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine on behalf of the Administration for Children and Families, focused on the delivery and coordination of post-disaster social services for children and families.

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1. Review Overview

Social services are key in mitigating disaster impacts for vulnerable populations, such as children. Until recently, the social services sector has been excluded from preparedness and recovery planning and coordination. There has been a stronger emphasis on preparedness and recovery planning and coordination in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Coordinating post-disaster social services is especially critical because disasters can create a surge in social service needs, further straining limited resources.

This report summarizes findings from a commissioned review that Community Science conducted for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine on behalf of the Administration for Children and Families, focused on the delivery and coordination of post-disaster social services for children and families. We begin with an overview of the impacts of disasters on children and families and how these impacts shape service delivery and coordination needs. We then discuss the infrastructure and funding for providing social services for families in the aftermath of federally declared disasters, highlighting key funding challenges. Next, we provide a comprehensive review of how social service efforts have been affected by past federally declared major disasters, with an emphasis on post-disaster social services for children and families that are under the purview of Administration for Children and Families (ACF) — including child welfare, child care, domestic violence, runaway and homeless youth, and human trafficking services. Lastly, we close by highlighting areas where further research and assessment is needed to better understand post-disaster service delivery and coordination for children and families and strengthen efforts to provide these services.

2. Impacts of Disasters on Children and Families

In understanding the complexity of post-disaster social service needs for children and families, it is first key to understand how disasters impact them.

Children, defined as those up to age 18, are vulnerable because of how their age interacts with many other factors to make them particularly at risk — especially how demographic characteristics, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, intersect with environmental considerations, such as the likelihood of living in a community with substandard schools, child care centers, and housing structures. Disasters are likely to affect children’s psychological and psychosocial development, particularly given potential loss of loved ones, disruptions in school, and vulnerability to toxins and environmental pollution and impact.^{1,2,3} Children may not be able to articulate their needs with the same success as during normal circumstances, because of intensified stressors. Disasters have also led to major mental health impacts for children and families.^{4,5} Studies already show how the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded children’s emotional trauma due to many other recent disasters.^{6,7}

Furthermore, children depend on caregivers to help identify and address their physical safety needs and access social and behavioral services. Unless they are specifically targeted, they are more likely to be overlooked by social service providers post-disaster. Adults that children usually rely on may be unable to provide support because they are also addressing their own stressors, which can prevent children from reestablishing a sense of safety and security.⁸

The child population spans a broad and diverse range of identities and developmental stages and therefore has a diverse set of needs that must be addressed after a disaster. While children are often referenced as a cohesive group in service planning and delivery, in reality, the diversity of their age range, racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic status, and other social and environmental factors impacts the range of supports they need and how they can be involved in disaster recovery efforts.⁹ Just as children experience the pre-disaster world differently based on life stage and circumstances, they have different needs and capacities post-disaster. Service planning and coordination needs to consider the whole life cycle of children and how disasters may impact children differently.¹⁰

Family composition also shapes the unique service needs of children and family post-disaster. In particular, research has focused on three types of relevant family compositions: families with same-sex couples, families with members who have disabilities, and those affected by language barriers.^{11,12} Research about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) families and households has been limited. Studies have shown that LGBT families are more likely to experience issues with policies — such as those around visiting hospitalized loved ones — and stigma that can make it difficult to access services.¹³ Households with members with disabilities can face challenges with access to medications, assistive technologies, and medical equipment, which can be lost or left behind in a disaster.^{14,15} Lastly, language and immigration status can leave a household at risk, causing challenges with awareness around social services available, obstacles to access due to language barriers, and fear of accessing services.

2.1 Post-Disaster Social Service Needs of Children and Families

These ways in which children and families experience disasters have major implications for how to comprehensively provide social services post-disaster.

Given that children spend the majority of their time either at home or in school or child care centers, it is essential to coordinate disaster recovery efforts with systems that regularly provide services to them and their families. Many systems and sectors provide services to children, including education and child care, pediatrics, child-welfare authorities, social services, family violence prevention and services, and community- and faith-based groups.¹⁶ A key challenge in post-disaster recovery services for children is ensuring the continuity and coordination of all of these different services and players. Furthermore, the return of school programs and child care is vital to community recovery infrastructure.

Just as children have diverse needs, they also have unique capacities. When given appropriate support, children — particularly older youth — can often articulate their own needs and be involved in disaster recovery planning and efforts. While children are a vulnerable population and therefore at special risk in disasters, they are not passive victims.¹⁷ Educating and empowering children and their families is the first step toward vulnerability reduction — and ultimately providing services that are timely, culturally appropriate, and coordinated across the systems that children and families interact with. Service coordinators can build formal structures of opportunity to engage children and youth in designing their own pathways to risk reduction and disaster recovery. Children have the capacity to not only be involved but also play a vital role in the community as a bridge between their schools and families and often can influence their peers' actions.¹⁸

3. Examining Post-Disaster Social Services for Children and Families: Infrastructure and Funding for Service Delivery

Service delivery and coordination for children and families are driven by federal government structures for response and recovery.¹⁹ Under the National Response Framework, ACF supports Emergency Support Function 6 (ESF-6), the Mass Care, Temporary Housing, Emergency Assistance, and Human Services function.²⁰ The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) leads ESF-6, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is a support agency. Within HHS, ACF provides leadership in disaster human services for ESF-6. Under the National Disaster Recovery Framework, ACF also supports the Health and Social Services Recovery Support Function, which focuses on restoring and improving social service networks to meet disaster-caused needs.²¹

The Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response (OHSEPR) created an infrastructure for providing and coordinating post-disaster human services. Limited information is available about how most of the entities within OHSEPR coordinate and administer services. A complex web of 13 ACF program offices drives ACF post-disaster service delivery and coordination. OHSEPR is the core of these services, responsible for promoting the resilience of vulnerable individuals, children, families, and communities. OHSEPR was established after Hurricane Katrina, in response to a White House directive to develop a more robust, comprehensive, and integrated system to deliver human services during and after disasters. It ensures the effectiveness of human services in preparedness, response, and recovery from disasters and public health emergencies.²²

Funding Supports

Within ACF, the Office of Community Services, Office of Child Care, and Family and Youth Services Bureau provide the bulk of funding for human services that serve children and families after disasters (see Exhibit 1). There is limited evidence about how these funding vehicles have been implemented and coordinated. Collectively, these offices administer five grant programs: 1) Social Services Block Grant, 2) Community Services Block Grant, 3) Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, 4) Child Care and Development Fund, and 5) Family Violence Prevention and Services Act Program. These grant programs exist during non-disaster times to strengthen communities, and funding is used to maintain continuity of services or provide new services after federally declared disasters.

Exhibit 1: ACF Funding Sources to Respond to Disasters

ACF Funding Source	Funding Administrator	Uses of Funds During Non-Disaster Times	Uses of Funds During Disaster Times
Social Services Block Grant (SSBG)	Office of Community Services (OCS)	Provides social services to reduce dependency and promote self-sufficiency and supports to reduce neglect, abuse, and exploitation of children and adults	Meets post-disaster social service needs and rebuilds social service facilities; can be used for food cards, medication and medical equipment, child care vouchers, and reimbursement to community agencies for costs incurred providing services to affected people; provides education and training to meet the social service needs of affected people
Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)		Improves self-sufficiency and living conditions among low-income people by addressing issues such as housing, employment, education, health, and nutrition	Provides emergency support, such as utility assistance, supplies for basic needs, and crisis intervention hotlines
Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)		Assists families with heating and cooling energy costs	Funds available post-disaster for shelters, temporary housing, home repairs (e.g., weatherizing), and supplies (e.g., generators)
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)	Office of Child Care (OCC)	Provides low-income, working families with child care subsidies and improves the quality of child care	Flexibility in spending to meet post-disaster child care needs (e.g., supporting providers in rebuilding; broadening eligibility requirements for child care assistance)
Family Violence Prevention and Services Act Program (FVPSA)	Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB)	Provides funds for emergency shelter and related assistance for victims of domestic violence and their children	Ensures continuity of domestic violence services, with the flexibility to adapt to fluctuating needs, including direct crisis intervention services and outreach efforts and training for providers

In addition to these grants, ACF allows states, tribes, territories, and grantees to use funding during emergencies and disasters to support children and families. ACF grantees can draw on flexibility policies and waivers to expand their service purview to prepare for and respond to disasters. For instance, following Hurricane Katrina, ACF Children’s Bureau used funds to identify and license new foster family homes for displaced children.²³ Waivers provide flexibility by suspending existing rules or penalties, such as allowing for disaster-related rebuilding and transportation costs that might not usually be covered.

There are many challenges with administering funding for post-disaster services, which can affect how quickly children and families receive services and how comprehensive the services are, particularly during funding shortages that do not fully meet local needs. Despite various funding sources that can be activated to serve children and families, a disproportionately small amount of the total federally appropriated recovery funds are specifically allocated to support children's needs.²⁴

Specific challenges around post-disaster human services funding include the following:

- **Restrictive Requirements:** There are narrowly defined criteria about how funds are used, who can be served, and what expenses are allowable, even with flexible policies and waivers. For example, after the 2005 hurricanes, applicants for FEMA funding reported needing additional flexibility when rebuilding to address significant population changes.²⁵ Additionally, with SSBG Hurricane Sandy funds, sub-awardees serving at-risk populations, such as senior citizens, individuals experiencing homelessness, or those facing mental health or substance abuse disorders, faced challenges documenting recipient eligibility and being audit-ready.²⁶
- **Unclear Requirements.** Requirements to receive funding are not always clear and may even conflict across agencies.^{27,28,29.}

For example, federal agencies, such as FEMA, have not comprehensively defined requirements for post-disaster contracts, making it hard for human services organizations to access funds, which hinders response and recovery efforts. Lacking clearly defined boundaries for the geographic area that was eligible for funding made it more difficult for local vendors to apply after the 2017 hurricanes and wildfires.³⁰

- **Coordination Challenges Related to Roles and Responsibilities.** The roles and responsibilities of federal and state government and nongovernmental agencies can become muddled, and unclear roles and inefficient communication delay action post-disaster. For instance, after Hurricane Katrina, multiple agencies and funding streams had to work together. However, lack of clarity in roles and lines of authority created coordination and communication issues that cost precious time and left many without resources.

Nevertheless, organizations have sometimes been able to collectively use funding to develop innovative supports for children and families post-disaster. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Texas Workforce Commission led the development of the Frontline Child Care Availability Portal, allowing essential workers who were parents to search for child care facilities near them, open hours, and number of seats available. The portal was launched in partnership with the Frontline Child Care Task Force, which includes the Office of Governor Greg Abbott, the

The Child Care and Development Block Grant funded the development of an innovative solution that required multiple entities to collaborate during an unprecedented crisis — in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Texas Workforce Commission led the development of the Frontline Child Care Availability Portal, allowing essential workers who were parents to search for child care facilities near them, open hours, and number of seats available.

Texas' Child Care Licensing Agency provided data on whether centers are open, their hours, and ages served; the Workforce Commission provided information on the Rising Star (Texas' quality rating and improvement system) program and subsidy program. Child care providers entered data on vacancies, seat availability, and contact information. Coming together to provide comprehensive data allowed essential worker parents to easily find a child care provider in real time within their parameters.

Texas Health and Human Services Commission, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Education Agency.³¹ The Child Care and Development Block Grant funded it completely.³²

- **Coordination Challenges Related to the Timing and Flow of Funding.** Uncertainty exists about when different funding sources will come into a jurisdiction and inability to determine when federal assistance will be available because the timing depends on the speed of congressional action after federally declared disasters. This can cause challenges figuring out which children and families can be served, how, and when. For example, at the end of the initial project period, SSBG Hurricane Sandy funds were largely unspent; as states continued to experience high needs, ACF provided a two-year extension to allocate and spend these funds. However, some states had already begun to close out activities, which led to state and local agency staff turnover and service interruptions.³³
- **Staff Capacity to Administer and Receive Funds.** The way that some federal funding sources are set up requires a lot from federal, state, and local staff. Overwhelming administrative burden surrounding funding can slow down the process.³⁴ For example, block grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for disaster recovery do not have adequate guidance for staff reviewing grantees' capacity and financial quality, and HUD must customize requirements for each disaster due to a lack of statutory authority for its funds. This can lead to confused and overwhelmed staff and a lag in disaster aid. Moreover, when delayed funds are received all at once at the local level, it can create staff overload on the ground.

4. A Closer Look at Social Service Delivery and Coordination for Post-Disaster Services under the Purview of ACF

Post-disaster social services for children and families involve a complex web of government and nongovernmental partners. In the following section we provide a comprehensive review of how social service efforts have been affected by past federally declared disasters, with an emphasis on post-disaster social services for children and families that are under the purview of ACF — including child welfare, child care, domestic violence, runaway and homeless youth and families, and human trafficking.

Crosscutting complexities around post-disaster human service delivery and coordination include fragmentation of services, lack of coordination across agencies, chronic workforce shortages and overburdened service providers, and fluctuating and insufficient levels of funding.³⁵ One of the greatest challenges in post-disaster social service delivery for children and families has been the fragmentation of services. Overwhelmingly, comprehensive collaborative disaster planning is lacking, so coordination tends to happen once a disaster has already occurred. For example, federal law requires state child-welfare agencies to develop disaster plans but does not require them to share or coordinate these plans with other entities (e.g., juvenile dependency courts). This is a missed opportunity to be intentional about coordinating services for children and families.³⁶

Additionally, many community- and faith-based organizations play a critical role in service provision in the aftermath of disasters, despite inadequate coordination between government and nongovernmental organizations and a need for more clarity on how to formalize the roles and responsibilities of nongovernmental organizations.³⁷ The administrative costs of working with the federal government may also be too high for some organizations, given that the need to have personnel, such as grant writers and administrative personnel, on staff to get and keep government support may outweigh the financial benefit of receiving government funds.³⁸

4.1 Child Welfare

Child-welfare agencies are public departments run by each state that are responsible for preventing and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect and assessing child and family needs. Their services also include arranging foster care and adoptions, and family reunification — all critical components of protecting and supporting children and families following disasters.³⁹

Examining Post-Disaster Child-Welfare Services Provisions

Research specifically on disaster response and child-welfare programs is limited. The majority of existing reports are guides and resources that pull from research on disasters and research on child welfare to make recommendations on best practices.^{40,41,42,43} In 2006, shortly after Katrina, GAO conducted a study⁴⁴ and published a series⁴⁵ of recommendations on the necessity of federal action to ensure that child-welfare agencies have disaster plans in place. While the recommendations were formal, very little investigation has occurred on whether the recommendations are achieving their intended results. Save the Children published a report in 2015 that highlighted improvements and gaps in disaster service coordination in the ten years following Katrina, which included a brief section on child-welfare coordination. It took the position that while requiring the disaster plans is an important step, many of the plans lacked specificity.⁴⁶

Coordination of Post-Disaster Child-Welfare Services

Child-welfare agencies are often understaffed and underresourced even between disasters, which makes it challenging to both plan for and effectively respond to service needs post-disaster. For instance, in a 2006 GAO report, state officials expressed concern about whether they would receive additional funding in the aftermath of the storm for recovery efforts, in part because some funding is tied to performance indicators that they felt they would be unable to meet due to the circumstances.⁴⁷

Evacuations cause strain and challenges for both foster families and child-welfare officials. For example, foster parents are required to contact social workers before leaving the state, but post-Katrina, phone lines were not working and social workers were displaced. The state did create a toll-free hotline for foster parents to report children's locations and needs, but officials had difficulty contacting them because of limited emergency contact information and inaccessible or destroyed records.⁴⁸

Child-welfare agencies receive an influx of service needs during disasters as they are struggling to maintain continuity and capacity. Domestic violence has been shown to increase during and after disasters. Families may be separated, or responsible adults may feel unable to provide the same level of support to children, due to their own emotional distress and changed circumstances.⁴⁹

Based on research, it appears that child-welfare agencies have not been well integrated into other disaster recovery efforts. After an uptick in research following Hurricane Katrina, no additional studies have been conducted to investigate if this has changed in recent years. GAO made a series of recommendations on how federal action was needed to safeguard such children displaced by disasters.⁵⁰ Later that year, Congress enacted the Child Family Services Improvement Act, which requires state child-welfare agencies to develop disaster plans. However, "[a] 2008 review of state plans by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges found the resulting plans lacking in specificity."⁵¹ Additionally, state child-welfare agencies are not required to share their plans or coordinate with other vital stakeholders.⁵² Louisiana officials also had difficulty coordinating with American Red Cross and

FEMA efforts to get information from the American Red Cross and FEMA on families they were unable to locate.⁵³

4.2 Child Care and Head Start

In the aftermath of disasters, child care centers and Head Start programs play a critical role in providing stability and serving as a link for resources and agencies that assist families. Child care following disasters can prevent children from being left alone or in unsafe environments while parents are going to work, accessing public benefits, or engaged in rebuilding efforts.

Examining Post-Disaster Child Care Services Provisions

Research is scarce on best practices for child care and Head Start programs in post-disaster response and recovery. Some research exists on child care provider disaster preparedness and recovery and response needs. For instance, a few studies exist on the needs of child care providers following disasters and crises. In one survey of center-based child care in 14 Florida counties, responses indicated a need and desire for greater support around disaster preparedness and increased availability for training regarding the emotional needs of children post-disaster.⁵⁴ The ACF, FEMA, and nonprofits have also published guidance on how child care agencies should respond before, during and after disasters and emergencies — though, overall, the emphasis has been more on how-to manuals and guides rather than the research base that shapes these practices.

Coordination of Post-Disaster Child Care Services

Collaborating and coordinating with other social service agencies and nonprofits can help child care centers better meet the social, emotional, and physical needs of children and families, but collaboration has been limited. Collaboration and coordination among child care centers and with external agencies need to be strengthened. The same study of child care centers in Florida found that although almost all of the 67 centers in the sample experienced a hurricane, only 40% had an agreement with another center to provide care if the facility could not be used after disaster.⁵⁵

A survey of Early Head Start and Head Start grantees examined emergency preparedness drills and coordination and communication with external agencies. Of the 1,524 respondents, almost half reported having no drills that simulate or involve actual communication with federal, state, local and/or nongovernmental emergency management agencies. Even more (67.1%) reported they do not include relief agencies and other response and recovery resources in their drills. A majority (76.9%), however, reported having policies and procedures for communication and coordination with some external agencies during an emergency, usually with local emergency management agencies.⁵⁶

4.3 Domestic Violence

The literature establishes that domestic violence and child abuse increase following disasters.⁵⁷ Therefore, domestic violence supports are integral for children and families as a component of holistic, family-focused recovery. For instance, one study found that respondents directly impacted by the disaster (the Deepwater Horizon oil spill) were twice as likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV). Respondents who experienced emotional and physical IPV were five times more likely to feel they rarely or never received social and emotional support they needed following the disaster.⁵⁸

Examining Post-Disaster Domestic Violence Services Provisions

Some research exists on lessons learned to support family violence survivors and guidance for social service providers in working with domestic violence survivors post-disaster. For instance, a Family and Youth Services Bureau grantee, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women developed a training on the intersection between domestic violence advocacy and disaster response and recovery for social service providers (e.g., in residential shelters, case management). The guide drew from research by organizations, such as Women's Health Goulburn North East and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, and scholars and activists, such as Elaine Enarson and Luran Van Dernoot Lipsky.⁵⁹

ACF's Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) also provides federal funding to support emergency shelter and assistance for victims of domestic violence and their children. Although it does not address emergency preparedness, it includes eligible housing types relevant in disasters, such as emergency and immediate shelter, housing and rental subsidies, and temporary lodging.⁶⁰ The FVPSA has been used to support additional shelter and counseling in transitional housing.⁶¹

Coordination of Post-Disaster Domestic Violence Services

Coordination among systems that serve domestic violence survivors exist and can be strengthened before disasters and leveraged during and after disasters. For instance, one study described a framework for IPV professionals to provide resources and build capacities that promote women's safety and well-being in each disaster phase. That includes disaster preparedness planning, meeting basic needs, providing comfort and support, and connecting to long-term services. A suggested communitywide strategy was to develop collaborations with local, state, and federal disaster agencies, healthcare facilities, law enforcement agencies, and domestic violence organizations to build community capacity to respond to IPV. Partnerships among multiple entities can foster better information dissemination and facilitate a better, coordinated response with a focus on IPV. By working together, agencies may be able to identify gaps in services that they can address in disaster settings.⁶²

Additionally, it is crucial to have trusted systems in place that are dedicated to preventing and addressing domestic violence and can quickly mobilize to address the relief and recovery needs of domestic violence survivors and their families post-disaster. For instance, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Mayor's Domestic Violence Advisory Council (DVAC) resumed meeting (it existed before the storm and met for 14 years). During recovery, DVAC, Crescent House, local advocates, and the National Office on Violence Against Women came together to open the Family Justice Center, a one-stop community program for referral and protection of victims and survivors.⁶³

4.4 Runaway and Homeless Youth

Runaway and homeless youth face unique challenges — they are more at risk of becoming victims of violence, developing mental health and addiction problems, and being forced into human trafficking.⁶⁴

Examining Post-Disaster Runaway and Homeless Youth Service Provisions

A substantial literature stream exists on addressing youth homelessness and the understanding that multiple systems need to collaborate to provide services for runaway and homeless youth, though research is lacking on social services for runaway and homeless youth specifically post-disaster.

Disaster risks and vulnerabilities have been studied for the general population of people experiencing homelessness, albeit not focused on youth. People who experience homelessness are more vulnerable

to disasters because of issues regarding shelter, transportation, mental and physical health, violence, substance abuse, and lack of financial and material resources. Moreover, they may not have access to information on disaster warnings and recovery resources. It is essential to engage social service providers already serving this population, in partnership with disaster experts, to convey critical information appropriately.⁶⁵

Specifically related to disaster response and recovery, similar to other key services areas discussed here, a number of resource manuals exist — though it is unclear the extent to which these manuals are grounded in research. The National Center for Homeless Education released guidance on meeting the education needs of students displaced by disasters. Youth may be separated from family or become homeless because of the disaster or may have already been homeless before it. Since unaccompanied displaced youth may not know how to access emergency services, such as food, housing, and medical support, it is essential for local education agencies, schools and school districts, and relief agencies, such as American Red Cross or Salvation Army, to identify them, link to services, and enroll them in schools.⁶⁶

ACF has also released a disaster-planning manual for runaway and homeless youth programs to help youth-serving organizations create emergency preparedness plans, including prevention and preparedness, response, and recovery.⁶⁷ The research base for this manual is unclear. Additionally, the effectiveness of these emergency preparedness plans in disaster relief and recovery for youth experiencing homelessness has not been examined.

Coordination of Runaway and Homeless Youth Services

Homeless and runaway youth experience needs that have to be addressed by multiple systems — housing, education, employment, child welfare, and health. In 2011, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness collaborated with multiple federal agencies, such as HUD, HHS, and the U.S. Department of Education, to develop a framework to end youth homelessness and agreed upon four core outcomes — stable housing, permanent connections, education or employment, and social-emotional well-being.⁶⁸ ACF's Family and Youth Services Bureau and the Office of Head Start also promoted a collaboration between Runaway and Homeless Youth and Early Head Start grantees to best serve pregnant youth or young parents and their young children to promote healthy development, family self-sufficiency, and parental engagement.⁶⁹ It is unclear whether these collaborative efforts have been assessed.

4.5 Human Trafficking

Disasters increase vulnerability, which human traffickers may take advantage of. Factors that contribute to this vulnerability are displacement, loss of resources, emotional strain, and unstable or inefficient government regulation and support, among others.⁷⁰ These “push factors” may drive individuals to be more susceptible to traffickers’ “pull tactics” and fraudulent promises and manipulations.⁷¹

Examining Post-Disaster Human Trafficking Services

While it is widely accepted that disasters cause increased vulnerability among both children and adults that can lead to higher rates of human trafficking, no studies have looked into this quantitatively in the United States. Most existing research on human trafficking generally focuses on humanitarian aid in other countries. For instance, of the 98 reports on human trafficking that the U.S. government funded, only one includes “disaster” in the description. It was conducted in Nepal in 2017 after an earthquake.⁷²

Some technical assistance resources are available, such as the Trafficking Prevention and Disaster response guide developed by ACF and the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center that provide general guidelines for post-disaster human trafficking supports. States and cities have also made action plans and toolkits to address trafficking during disasters. For example, after Hurricane Harvey, the city of Houston developed an emergency disaster response toolkit with direct outreach materials, policies, and phone numbers to prevent trafficking.⁷³

Coordination of Human Trafficking Services

There is very little information on coordination of post-disaster human trafficking services for children and families. As noted, this is likely due to the lack of evidence in this area in general.

5. Areas for Future Research and Assessment

Despite an uptick in research and assessment on social service delivery and coordination, particularly in the aftermath of Katrina, many gaps still remain around evidence-driven best practices. In particular, future studies need to focus on more comprehensively understanding the following:

- ***Longitudinal evidence on post-disaster social service delivery and coordination for children and families.*** Research and evaluations on coordination and human services have been limited to particular disaster events, especially major ones, such as Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Sandy (2012), Hurricane Maria (2017), and COVID-19 (2020). This has been a barrier to building longitudinal evidence about 1) common and unique coordination and service delivery challenges (e.g., disaster type, size, impact, and local cultural context) and 2) specific ways that coordination and service delivery systems have improved and simultaneously weakened.
- ***Specific social service needs of children and families regarding key services, such as those discussed here that are under the purview of ACF*** — child welfare, child care, domestic violence, and runaway and homeless youth, and human trafficking. For each area, despite a wealth of evidence in general research and evaluation, knowledge is limited on service delivery and implementation for children and families post-disaster. Evidence is especially lacking around runaway and homeless youth and human trafficking.

Future research should also further examine systems and approaches for linking data from multiple social services to address questions about pressing recovery needs and support resource allocation.

- ***Complex funding structures that must be woven together to comprehensively serve children and families — in particular, past successes around funding infrastructure that can be drawn on for future disasters.*** Sources focused on funding for post-disaster social services tend to focus on challenges and recommendations rather than highlighting successes. A spirit of continuous improvement in the literature is good, though it also makes it difficult to replicate successes. Better understanding funding vehicles for social delivery also requires commissioning studies that assess the workings of specific federal grant programs post-disaster, and coordination across grant programs.

Furthermore, metrics are needed for what success looks like in operationalizing funding mechanisms and coordinating various types of funding across agencies.

- ***Best practices for the roles that children and families can play in articulating their own needs and be involved in disaster recovery planning and efforts.*** As noted, educating and empowering children and their families is critical in providing services that are 1) timely, 2) culturally appropriate, and 3) coordinated across the relevant systems. More research is needed to identify how service coordinators can engage children (particularly older youth, in the 12–17 range) and families in designing their own pathways to risk reduction and disaster recovery.

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Appendix A: Research Methods

The purpose of the commissioned review was to inform the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine workshop series [From Hurricane Katrina to Paradise Wildfires, Exploring Themes in Disaster Human Services](#). The research team conducted a comprehensive review of literature related to disaster recovery and human services by identifying relevant sources and search words, searching for relevant literature, creating a tracking system to review sources and store relevant information to inform the reporting, and synthesizing findings.

Literature Search

Our review included literature on coordinated delivery of post-disaster human services and research on service delivery for children and families, focused on federally declared disasters between 2005 and 2020. We primarily reviewed the impacts of disasters on children and families, how those impacts shape service delivery and coordination needs, how social service efforts have been affected by past disasters, and post-disaster coordination of funding for social services for children and families. We also identified gaps in the literature and opportunities for future research.

The research effort was as broad as possible and included information in a variety of different formats, including academic research, evaluations, government and non-government reports, fact sheets, guides, manuals, and webinars. While the initial sweep was broad, we prioritized government reports and academic studies that included qualitative and quantitative data. We identified and reviewed 137 articles based on these criteria; however, additional studies and publications were identified based on their title and abstract and excluded upon further review.

Search terms included phrases such as the following:

- Human services disaster recovery
- Social services disaster recovery
- Disaster services for children and families
- Federal coordination delivery of services
- Disaster recovery
- Children and disasters
- Children, families, and disasters
- Specific disasters names + search terms above (e.g., Assessments of Post-Katrina)
- Disasters + specific issue areas of interest (child welfare, child care and Head Start, runaway and homeless youth, domestic violence, and human trafficking)

To ensure a thorough review, the research team also identified particularly relevant studies and searched for both who was cited in that work and who cited it.

Analysis and Synthesis

The research team identified literature based on their titles and abstracts using the methods described above. Once all literature was identified, the team reviewed articles to confirm their relevance and summarized them, using an Excel spreadsheet. Reviewers also tracked which articles discussed specific issue areas and research questions, in addition to the author and year of publication. Reviewers combined summary notes and synthesized to find common themes and findings among all sources.