

## Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice • Sam Houston State University

Director: Mary M. Breaux, Ph.D.



### Disasters within Disasters:

#### Understanding the Link between Extreme Weather Events and Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S.

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Although coverage of natural disasters often focuses on the impact on the environment or public safety, their impacts also profoundly alter the social and interpersonal lives of individuals affected. In the U.S., natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, droughts, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, blizzards, and other extreme weather events, have consistently disrupted residents' daily lives, devastated communities, and heightened individual vulnerabilities (Cannon & Kovach, 2025; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008). It is also important to note that these events do not occur in a social vacuum; instead, they interact with existing structural inequalities and personal dynamics. One troubling consequence that has drawn increasing scholarly and policy attention is the link between natural disasters and increased risk of exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV).

IPV is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological harm perpetrated by a current or former partner or spouse (Cheng et al., 2025). While IPV exists across all demographic categories, evidence shows that women and economically marginalized groups are disproportionately affected (Curry & Bell, 2024; First et al., 2017). In disaster contexts, these vulnerabilities can intensify as resources diminish, systems weaken, and stress accumulates. Research from the past two decades highlights that IPV rates often rise following natural disasters in the U.S. (Bell & Folkerth, 2016; Frasier et al., 2004; Harville et al., 2010; Medzhitova et al., 2022; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008). Factors such as housing displacement, loss of income, scarcity of essential supplies, the breakdown of social services, and reduced law enforcement

capacity converge to create conditions where abuse is more likely.

This report examines the link between natural disasters and IPV in the U.S., including an overview of the existing empirical literature on disaster-IPV correlations. Furthermore, this report presents case-specific analyses of six major disasters to further illustrate the links, and also explores policy and legislative reforms designed to mitigate IPV risks and protect survivors in disaster-prone contexts.

### The Empirical Literature on Natural Disasters and Intimate Partner Violence

A substantial body of scholarship documents the associations between natural disasters and heightened IPV risk and/or exposure in many contexts within the United States. Several systematic reviews confirm that disasters create conditions in which the risk of IPV is exacerbated (Boddy et al., 2024; Cannon & Kovach, 2025). Factors such as housing displacement, loss of income, scarcity of essential supplies, the breakdown of social services, and reduced law enforcement capacity converge to create conditions where abuse is more likely (Bell & Folkerth, 2016; Boddy et al., 2024). Empirical studies have used a range of outcomes, including police reports, hotline calls, shelter intakes, hospital/ER records, victim self-reports, and qualitative narratives. Using such data, for instance, has indicated that there are increased calls to domestic violence hotlines, higher demand for shelter services, and more frequent police reports following disasters (Gearhart et al., 2018; Perez,

2024; Weisberg, 2025). Across datasets and designs, the underlying picture is clear: natural disasters function as multipliers of preexisting risk and can precipitate new incidents of IPV (First et al., 2017; Medzhitova et al., 2022; Sety et al., 2014).

Several quantitative studies identify statistically significant increases in IPV-related indicators following extreme weather events. Large-scale time-series and administrative data studies document increases in simple assaults, domestic violence calls, and service demands in the weeks to months following disasters (Gearhart et al., 2018; Schumacher et al., 2010; Weisberg, 2025). However, increases are not uniform within the uniform. For instance, the literature notes heterogeneity across disaster types, with some studies showing transient spikes (e.g., days to weeks) while others indicate prolonged elevated IPV risk (e.g., months to years); this largely depends on local recovery trajectories and systemic responses (Boddy et al., 2024; Lauve-Moon & Ferreira, 2017; Rezaeian, 2013). Timing is important in other ways as well. Research has also found that IPV indicators can decrease during the acute phase, as victims are unable to safely report or access services, and then rebound sharply as communications and mobility are restored (Harville et al., 2010; Woelfl et al., 2024). Accordingly, scholars note that administrative proxies (e.g., police calls) may therefore undercount true prevalence during the disaster and capture only secondary surges in reporting (Bell & Folkerth, 2016; Medzhitova et al., 2022).

Qualitative and mixed-method studies provide complementary insights into how natural disasters shape IPV risk and exposure. Participatory action research and interviews reveal pathways that quantitative data alone cannot capture (First et al., 2017; Frasier et al., 2004; Parkinson, 2022; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019). Common themes in such studies include the following:

- **Confinement and isolation:** Survivors describe being physically trapped with abusers (due to barriers such as power outages, impassable roads, etc.), having reduced privacy in shelters and crowded housing, and experiencing a loss of

protective social contacts, such as friends, family, and co-workers.

- **Dependency and control:** Economic losses and displacement increase survivors' dependency on abusive partners for shelter, transportation, and other resources, which abusers may exploit to exert further domination.
- **Service gaps:** Survivors have noted various obstacles to getting help during and after extreme weather events. When disasters strike, healthcare and social service systems are often disrupted, and law enforcement resources are redirected toward disaster response. These service gaps also include closed courts, inaccessible shelters, and overwhelmed hotlines, and service providers have described being incapacitated and inaccessible due to the same disaster conditions.



Figure 1: Mechanisms that elevate IPV risk during and after natural disasters  
(Adapted from Rezaeian, 2013)

The existing empirical literature identifies a set of proximate mechanisms by which natural disasters increase the risk of IPV. These mechanisms are interrelated and often co-occur (see Figure 1). As mentioned above, disasters frequently disrupt the

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operations of shelters, legal services, courts, healthcare facilities, and advocacy organizations, which reduces victims' options for escape, protection orders, and health care (Buttell & Carney, 2009; Curry & Bell, 2024; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019). Moreover, evacuation, communal shelters, and temporary housing can drastically alter social networks and significantly limit privacy. Displacement can even result in exposure to new abusers (e.g., household members in emergency housing), lack of safe private space to report abuse, and obstacles to continuity of care (Frasier et al., 2004; Harville et al., 2010).

Other scholarship discusses the ways in which immense property loss and job disruption increase household stress and economic dependency. These studies link post-disaster unemployment and housing loss to higher IPV risk (First et al., 2022; Lauve-Moon & Ferreira, 2017), and note that resource scarcity (e.g., diminished access to food and water) increases conflict in relationships and can be weaponized by perpetrators (Epstein et al., 2025). Moreover, disaster exposure can produce anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and heightened irritability. Perpetrators' responses to such stressors may encompass maladaptive coping strategies that escalate violence (e.g., substance abuse), while victims' trauma may curtail help-seeking (Bell & Folkerth, 2016).

Finally, the existing research highlights the ways in which natural disasters are mediated by gendered power relations, discrimination, and poverty. Marginalized and/or disenfranchised groups, such as rural residents, non-English speakers, and low-income households, face compounded barriers to safety and recovery (Parkinson, 2022; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019). Within the scholarly literature, such dynamics are examined in the context of statistical moderation, where several moderators influence the magnitude and duration of IPV risk following natural disasters. For example, low-income households show larger increases in IPV-related service needs, likely due to fewer "buffers" in preexisting resources, and rural areas often have fewer services and longer recovery times, which increases vulnerability (Frasier et al., 2004).

Furthermore, communities with a higher baseline incidence of IPV may experience steeper absolute increases post-disaster because disasters amplify existing dynamics (Curry & Bell, 2024; Medzhitova et al., 2022).

Although the existing literature is quite informative, scholars note that research gaps in this area still remain. Scholars have discussed several important future research directions, including the need for longitudinal, multi-wave studies that measure pre-disaster IPV and follow survivors for years post-event to more fully understand delayed effects (Rezaeian, 2013; Boddy et al., 2024). Additionally, conducting quasi-experimental designs (e.g., using synthetic controls) may provide a more accurate estimate of the causal effects of natural disasters on IPV. Researchers also note there should be rigorous evaluations of interventions, as few disaster-preparedness programs have been formally evaluated for IPV outcomes, and that more studies are needed on how intersectional factors (e.g., ethnicity, disability) interact with disaster-related IPV risk and exposure (Curry & Bell, 2024; Parkinson, 2022; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019).

### **IPV in Six Major U.S. Natural Disasters**

Survivors' experiences during Hurricanes Katrina (2005), Harvey (2017), and Beryl (2024), Superstorm Sandy (2012), the 2025 California wildfires, and Winter Storm Uri (2021) illustrate how major natural disasters can escalate IPV and strain already limited networks (Cheng, 2024; Harville et al., 2010; Lauve-Moon & Ferreira, 2017; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019; Taylor, 2024).

#### **Hurricane Katrina (2005, Louisiana)**

Hurricane Katrina caused catastrophic damage in New Orleans, Louisiana, displacing hundreds of thousands of residents. After Katrina, documented IPV rates rose substantially: married or cohabitating women reported more severe physical abuse in the six months after compared to before the hurricane, with researchers linking this increase to displacement, unemployment, shortage in shelter space, diminished mental health, and lack of access to other services (Harville et al., 2010; Schumacher

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et al., 2010). Also, police responses to IPV calls were inconsistent, as law enforcement was overwhelmed with disaster duties (Buttell & Carney, 2009; Schumacher et al., 2010).

### **Superstorm Sandy (2012, New York/New Jersey)**

Superstorm Sandy exposed vulnerabilities in densely populated areas. Rice-Missouri (2017) reported that IPV services were unfortunately overlooked in disaster recovery planning. Survivors faced barriers accessing shelters and legal services, highlighting how disasters in large urban areas can exacerbate IPV risks when infrastructure collapses.

### **2025 Wildfires (California)**

The recent wildfires in Los Angeles, California, displaced thousands of local residents. Mathews (2025) noted a surge in IPV cases linked to housing insecurity and heightened stress in temporary shelters. Advocates highlighted that disaster preparation often neglects IPV services, leaving survivors without critical support.

## **Natural Disasters in Texas**

### ***Hurricane Harvey (2017)***

Hurricane Harvey caused massive flooding in the city of Houston and the surrounding areas; 41 counties were declared federal disaster zones. It is estimated that the storm dropped trillions of gallons of rain over multiple days, causing damage to tens of thousands of homes (Dickinson, 2017; Shultz & Galea, 2018). In a Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) report, Serrata and Hurtado Alvarado (2019) extensively document the associated vulnerabilities during and after the hurricane, including significant increases in family violence reports and challenges advocates faced in reaching survivors. Some shelters were cut off by floodwaters, and several family violence organizations had severe infrastructure damage that prevented normal functioning. Courthouses and justice system facilities were damaged, which hampered protective order processes, investigations, prosecutions, and other legal remedies, and left victims exposed to continued violence. Furthermore, service organization staff faced their own crises: some lost their homes, had family members in danger, were physically impacted

by the flood, illness, or rescue operations, while continuing to serve survivors.

Serrata and Hurtado Alvarado (2019) note that the month after Harvey saw the largest need for services ever recorded by some organizations, as new client intakes increased by more than 60%, the need for housing assistance more than doubled, and vulnerable populations were disproportionately affected. Flooding, displacement, and loss of personal property created extreme stress and dependency, as survivors described chaotic, traumatic, survival-mode experiences. Survivors also reported lingering impacts, including continued economic instability, long-term mental health issues, and housing insecurity long after the immediate emergency. Service organizations reported burnout, grief, and trauma exposure among staff, as workers also bore unexpected expenses when they used personal funds to purchase supplies and transport clients in need.

### ***Winter Storm Uri (2021)***

During the 2021 winter storm, millions were trapped in homes without power, water, or heat for multiple days. Washington (2021) and Woelfl et al. (2024) documented that IPV cases rose significantly as survivors were confined in homes with abusers, and many reported being physically and emotionally abused during that period. IPV was “condensed,” as patterns or levels of violence that might have taken weeks otherwise were compressed into the storm period. Assaults, threats, and psychological abuse intensified. Service providers described Uri as a “disaster within a disaster” for IPV survivors, as the cold weather, isolation, and lack of shelter compounded emotional stress and increased powerlessness and risk.

Woelfl and colleagues (2024) also discuss the impact of inaccessible court and social services. In Harris County, filings for protective orders dropped to zero on some storm days because courts were physically closed or unreachable. Shelters were also inaccessible due to blocked/icy roads, power outages, and other safety concerns, and hotlines could not be reached. After the storm, when power was restored, hotlines “rang off the hook” and calls

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for help remained elevated for weeks (Woelfl et al., 2024). Moreover, according to TCFV data, intimate partner homicides doubled in the four weeks after Uri compared to the first six weeks of the year in the impacted areas.

### ***Hurricane Beryl (2024)***

Perez (2024) and Taylor (2024) discussed spikes in domestic violence hotline calls following Hurricane Beryl. The Houston Area Women's Center reported increased IPV cases after Beryl, particularly with more severity in emotional/psychological abuse, and also some escalation in physical violence (Taylor, 2024). Prolonged power outages, home damage, difficulties obtaining food, and loss of road access (e.g., making escape or seeking help difficult) were cited as major immediate stressors, as these conditions exacerbated conflict and reduced prosocial coping capacities. Isolation from friends, family, and support networks also heightened IPV risk, as it reduced victims' ability to reach out for help. While formal support resources, such as hotlines and shelters, were operational during this time, service providers noted that many survivors consistently faced obstacles in accessing these resources (e.g., lack of transportation, safe housing).

### **Suggested Policy and Legislative Reforms**

Research on the disaster-IPV link underscores the urgent need for policy interventions and legislative reforms to mitigate risks during future extreme weather events. Scholars and practitioners have discussed the following important recommendations:

- **Integration of IPV Services into Disaster Planning:** Disaster management frameworks should explicitly include IPV response protocols, ensuring that shelters, hotlines, and advocates are part of emergency preparedness (Curry & Bell, 2024; Sety et al., 2014).
- **Funding for Resilient Service Networks:** State and local governments should allocate disaster relief funds specifically for IPV services. This ensures shelters and hotlines remain operational despite service interruptions (Curry & Bell, 2024; Serrata & Hurtado Alvarado, 2019).

- **Training for First Responders and Law Enforcement:** Law enforcement and emergency personnel should receive IPV-focused disaster training, allowing them to recognize warning signs and provide appropriate referrals (Buttell & Carney, 2009; First et al., 2017).
- **Expansion of Housing Protections:** Policies should prioritize safe, IPV-sensitive housing solutions for displaced individuals. Emergency shelters should include IPV safeguards, such as confidential intake procedures (Frasier et al., 2004; Harville et al., 2010).
- **Strengthening Legal Protections During Natural Disasters:** Temporary protective orders, expedited court processes, access to emergency court resources even during closures, and crisis response legal aid can help survivors maintain protection amid disasters (First et al., 2017; Perez, 2024; Washington, 2021).
- **Public Awareness and Education Campaigns:** Disaster preparedness campaigns should integrate messaging on IPV risks, including hotline numbers and available resources (Mathews, 2025; McLaren et al., 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Natural disasters exacerbate IPV by intensifying vulnerabilities, straining services, and creating conditions where violence thrives. Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Harvey, and Winter Storm Uri distressingly illustrate how different types of extreme weather events can produce similar IPV risks. Yet, legal and policy responses have not integrated such considerations into disaster management frameworks. To better protect survivors, U.S. disaster planning must explicitly include IPV prevention and response, backed by dedicated funding, legal safeguards, and cross-sector collaboration. With the frequency and intensity of disasters consistently increasing year after year, addressing the intersection of disasters and IPV is essential for community well-being, resilience, and protecting the vulnerable.



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