



## Disparate Impacts of Wildfires on Undocumented Immigrants: Lessons on Inclusive Disaster and Climate Adaptation Planning

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*In California, communities across the region have been adapting to the increased threat of wildfires as global warming surges and droughts persist. While climate scientists expect wildfires to become more frequent and severe --- it is important to explore how some people and communities are more affected by these events than others. Differences in human vulnerability to wildfires stem from a range of social, economic, historical, and political factors (Thomas et al. 2018). These factors include unequal access to disaster preparedness knowledge and resources, and legacies of past forest management practices, combined with expansion of residential development into the wildland (Davies et al. 2018).*

In December 2017, the Thomas Fire located in California’s Ventura and Santa Barbara counties burned approximately 281,893 acres, over a 40-day period --- making it one of the largest wildfires in the State’s history. This research examines how the emergency response and recovery efforts for the Thomas Fire overlooked the needs of low-income farmworkers, Indigenous Mixteco speakers and Latino immigrant families. In response, local immigrant rights and environmental justice groups collaborated on disaster response interventions to ensure: language access to emergency information; labor protections for farmworkers exposed to heavy smoke; and the development of a disaster relief fund for undocumented immigrant residents ineligible for federal aid.

This study argues that while interventions can reduce the overall harm and mortality in communities, they are most effective when they

consider how and why some social groups experience greater impacts to health and livelihoods than others.

As governments attempt to address the increasing severity of wildfires, understanding these differential impacts can help inform better disaster and climate adaptation planning to protect the most vulnerable populations.

	Population	Latino	White	Non-English	Immigrant	Noncitizen
Santa Barbara County	442,996	45%	45%	40%	23%	15%
Ventura County	847,834	42%	46%	39%	23%	12%
Oxnard	206,732	74%	14%	68%	36%	22%
Ventura (City)	110,153	35%	56%	27%	15%	8%
Santa Barbara (City)	91,443	37%	56%	35%	23%	15%

**Table 1:** Key Demographics of Immigrant Communities in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey.



## Key Findings:

- **Limits of Wildfire Vulnerability Mapping**  
Social vulnerability to wildfire models based solely on US Census data can have serious limitations. Immigrants often avoid interaction with government representatives for fear of deportation, causing undocumented immigrants to be undercounted. This renders some migrant communities invisible in social vulnerability mapping models.
- **Disaster Relief Aid**  
A statewide fund is needed to assist undocumented individuals who have lost their homes, wages, and/or employment due to natural disasters. Currently, the federal government prohibits disaster assistance to undocumented residents, and private relief funds such as the 805 UndocuFund are underresourced.
- **Ensure Migrant Worker Safety and Health**  
Due to advocacy from environmental and social justice organizations, the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board adopted an emergency regulation to protect migrant workers from smoke during wildfire events. To further strengthen migrant worker safety and health, these regulations should be codified into law.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Competency**  
State and local governments should be required to integrate the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of their residents for emergency communications, and disaster planning and implementation.

## Implications for Policy

Our analysis illustrates how a contextual vulnerability framework can more effectively evaluate the social determinants (ethnicity, income, gender, indigeneity, and immigration status etc.) of a community's adaptive capacity. It allows for a holistic exploration of the disproportionate impacts felt by certain populations at every stage of disaster.

Individuals from immigrant communities, likewise, often comprise more than one of these social determinants simultaneously and many of them intersect. These intersecting inequalities require planners to develop inclusive disaster and climate adaptation planning interventions to better safeguard immigrant communities, that include: **1)** drawing on immigrant community knowledge; **2)** embracing immigrant communities in disaster planning; and **3)** bolstering civil society organizations' capacity in disaster relief and planning efforts.

### Works Cited

Davies, I., Huago R., Robertson, J. & Levin, P. (n.d). The Unequal Vulnerability of Communities of Color to Wildfire. PLoS One, (11), 1-15.

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