

Hurricane Harvey three months on: Tens of thousands still homeless from worst natural disaster in US history

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Hurricane Harvey made landfall in the United States in late August of this year, killing at least 90 people and devastating much of the region around Houston, Texas. Three months later, tens of thousands of people are homeless, home construction has hardly begun and the long-term health consequences of the disaster have yet to be tallied.

By some measures, Harvey is the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States, with estimated costs of nearly \$200 billion, including flood damage to more than 300,000 homes. It was followed in September by Hurricane Irma, which struck the Caribbean and Florida, and Hurricane Maria, which destroyed much of the infrastructure and housing stock on the US island territory of Puerto Rico.

Each of these storms, fueled by higher temperatures caused by global warming, has exposed the criminal negligence of the American ruling class. Inadequate or nonexistent evacuation procedures and emergency shelters led to the deaths of some 250 people, according to official figures (the number of deaths in Puerto Rico is far higher than reported). Many more have had their lives upended, forcing them to fend for themselves after their homes were destroyed.

The American media and its talking heads have quickly moved on from any examination of the impact of Harvey, in keeping with the media's response to every disaster that hits the United States. In one of the few recent articles documenting the ongoing catastrophe, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that three months after landfall, "more than 47,000 flood victims are living in hotels and motels across Southeast Texas and beyond, a testament to the glacial pace of housing recovery."

These, the *Chronicle* states, "are the lucky ones."

The newspaper continues: "Tens of thousands more have cobbled together their own temporary arrangements, living with relatives, in tents or on mattresses in barely habitable homes."

The meager government assistance made available to the tens of thousands without flood insurance in Texas is largely in the form of temporary subsidies for accommodation in motels through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Those impacted must undergo a tortuous application process for aid. According to the *Chronicle*, only about 9,500 families have qualified for additional housing assistance through FEMA beyond the temporary subsidies. Of these, "just one had been able to move back into a home repaired through FEMA's program, and 223 were living in a trailer or mobile home." The article adds that "no one has moved into a trailer, secured an apartment or seen repair work begin through the state's interim housing programs."

An investigation carried out by local TV station KHOU found that 22,208 students in the Houston area are considered homeless, with some districts reporting a homeless rate as high as 10 percent. It quoted child advocate Dr. Bob Sanborn: "This is something that could indeed affect this whole generation," the "Harvey generation."

Other consequences are harder to calculate. One report by National Public Radio noted that there are 25,000 people in the Houston area living with HIV and AIDS, and many had to go weeks without medication. "The hurricane closed pharmacies and clinics for a week—or longer. Floodwaters ruined drugs. People who fled to other states couldn't get their prescriptions filled for HIV medicine."

Then there is the environmental impact. The flooded

waters were filled with E. coli, lead, arsenic and other toxins, impacting those living and working in the region.

Much of the construction in the Houston area is being performed by day laborers, mainly undocumented immigrants who live in constant fear of deportation, intensified by the policies of the Trump administration. They work without any legal protection, often in hazardous conditions.

The Associated Press reports that the National Day Laborer Organizing Network recently interviewed day workers in Houston and found that “most are routinely exposed to mold and contamination... About a quarter of the more than 350 workers surveyed said they had been denied wages promised for cleanup work after Harvey, sometimes by employers who abandoned them at work sites after they had completed a job.”

Similar conditions prevail in the other regions devastated by hurricanes this season. More than 40,000 people have applied for emergency food stamps in Florida, many waiting in long lines for the most meager assistance. The entire housing stock on the Caribbean island of Barbuda was wiped out, with investors and speculators swooping in to seize land.

Half of Puerto Rico remains without power more than two months after Hurricane Maria. Hundreds of thousands are still without clean water. The island has experienced what can only be described as a mass refugee crisis, with tens of thousands fleeing to the United States for housing and employment. The government is using the disaster as an opportunity to shut down or privatize schools and lay off teachers, as happened after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

Natural disasters expose the reality of social life. The United States is characterized by levels of social inequality that are without precedent. Three billionaires own as much wealth as the bottom half of the population. Last week, Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, increased his wealth to over \$100 billion—three times the amount of aid approved by the US Congress for hurricane relief last month.

For the past four decades, the ruling elite, under Democrats and Republicans alike, has engaged in a single-minded policy of wealth redistribution, channeling resources from social programs and infrastructure to the balance sheets of corporations and

the bank accounts of the rich. The consequences are innumerable, from the opioid crisis ravaging much of the country, to declining life expectancy, poverty-level wages and soaring debt for the majority of the population.

The main domestic priority of the ruling class is to pass a massive tax cut for the corporations and the wealthy, currently being fast-tracked through Congress. While the Republicans are spearheading this looting operation, they do so with the complicity of the entire political establishment.

The conditions in Houston exemplify the social reality that the Democrats and the media are attempting to bury by polluting public consciousness with the campaign over allegations of sexual harassment and the neo-McCarthyite hysteria over claims that Russia is “sowing divisions” within the United States. They hope to suppress opposition through a regime of Internet censorship.

Facts, however, are stubborn things. The devastation wrought by Harvey will have its impact in other ways, feeding into a growing mood of anger and opposition that has revolutionary implications.

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