



# INDIANA UNIVERSITY PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

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## CLIMATE RESILIENCE BUILDING IN THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE NETWORK

### BACKGROUND

Extreme weather impacts caused by climate change affect every region of the United States.<sup>1</sup> For Indiana, weather models based on the past 60 years show a 45% increase in the risk of heavy flooding.<sup>2</sup>



Residents boat down a main street in Munster, Indiana, 2008.  
Source: Leo Skinner, [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#).

Increased weather disasters have made it clear that government agencies cannot respond to them alone. They need the nonprofit and business sectors as disaster planning and response partners. U.S. public policy assumes that nonprofit charities that care for the day-to-day needs of economically vulnerable people, through food banks, shelters, community health clinics, and other organizations that provide each community's social safety net will also meet these needs post disaster. Federal government policymakers characterize this as the "whole community" approach to disaster relief.<sup>3</sup>

Adding considerations regarding climate change to emergency planning reveals that "traditional response-oriented emergency management models no longer meet the level or nature of demands."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the escalating

### KEY FINDINGS

*For philanthropic organizations:*

- Most social safety net nonprofits have emergency plans, but few have taken additional steps to reduce risk (e.g., risk audits, infrastructure improvements).
- Disaster-response nonprofits make organizational decisions related to climate change with the influence of board leaders and significant stakeholders.
- Focusing on each community's lived experiences with disasters and networking to share information and good practices can depoliticize discussions about climate change.

*For community networks:*

- Professional service networks can significantly improve adaptation to climate change by creating learning networks for exchanging information and experiences.
- Local emergency planners should involve a broader group of charitable organizations in local disasterresponse networks.
- United Ways and community foundations have valuable networks that should be used to share risk information and connect partners to effective practices.

*For policymakers:*

- Disaster response policy relies heavily on nonprofits' readiness to provide services, but it does not consider that these organizations may themselves be unprepared for emergencies.
- It is important to make concerted efforts to communicate climate science to nonprofit leaders.

effects of weather disasters on communities increase the need for local philanthropic leaders to plan for weather disasters and reduce risk.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is a growing need for charities with disaster response missions to be examining their own level of preparedness to assure service continuity.

A statewide Indiana survey of leaders of social safety network organizations, carried out by Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs professor Beth Gazley and doctoral student Rachel Cash, provides rich descriptive data about the realities of organizational disaster planning relating to climate change.<sup>6</sup> The results are relevant to similar inland states with similar risk profiles (e.g., flooding, extreme wind).

This brief examines what kinds of organizations respond to local disasters in Indiana and to what extent they engage in risk reduction actions to adapt to climate change. It also looks at attitudes and behaviors to understand how thinking about climate change may predict an organization's success in disaster planning. The brief underscores the need to consider nonprofits in the formulation of policy not only in the response and recovery following a disaster but also in reducing risk and increasing preparedness in advance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers identified 1,257 organizations reflecting each Indiana community's social safety net across all 92 counties. This group included first responders like the American Red Cross; the network of United Way organizations and their grantees/community partners; all community foundations in the state; organizational members of local disaster-planning networks (including VOADs/COADs<sup>A</sup>); and organizations that provide human, health, youth, and social services. The list comprised 21 categories from the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers analyzed the impact of one kind of natural disaster event—flooding—on Indiana's social, health, and human service charities because it is the leading cause of death and economic loss in Indiana and the United States.<sup>8</sup> Indiana offers a good location for analysis of flooding

impact because the state is more typical of the overall U.S. experience with extreme weather events than those located in coastal areas and captures an understudied region. Indiana charities and the people they serve are at risk of both urban (pluvial) and riverine (fluvial) flooding and flash flooding. Indiana is also subject to other natural disasters such as severe weather and high winds, whose effects were captured indirectly in this study by asking respondents to recall all their natural disaster experiences.

Between March and August 2022, respondents received three invitations to participate. A total of 467 nonprofit leaders responded. Questions addressed charities' vulnerable populations, the types of disaster services they have provided in the past, and their partnerships and networks. The survey collected information about the agencies' past experiences with disasters, plans and preparedness for future disasters, and how climate change might fit into their emergency planning.

## **FINDINGS**

### **WHO RESPONDS? THE CHARACTER OF ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING DISASTER RELIEF**

Findings indicated a wide range of nonprofits that have provided past disaster relief and recovery. Nearly 90 percent of all respondents reported case management, food assistance, spiritual help, healthcare, housing, transportation, childcare, cash assistance, mental health services, or a related resource.

Organizations that identified disaster response as a primary mission represent about 15% of the population of social safety net organizations in Indiana, including 1 in 8 community foundations and 1 in 3 United Way agencies. Nearly all the remaining organizations identify as likely secondary responders and hold a wide range of social and human service missions serving low-income individuals, youth, seniors, and individuals with disabilities (See Table 1).

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<sup>A</sup> VOAD stands for Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. COAD stands for Community Organizations Active in Disaster.

## ARE THESE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS PLANNING FOR DISASTER?

Survey results reveal a moderately strong level of emergency planning across all organizations. More than two-thirds reported severe weather, evacuation, or communication plans. Although primary responders are slightly more likely to have emergency plans, they are not necessarily more likely to have taken actions to reduce risk. In several instances, primary responders have less often put certain kinds of planning in place and appear to lag secondary providers in such areas as data backup. Despite a relatively high level of emergency planning in place overall, only around 14% of survey respondents had taken programming or advocacy efforts related explicitly to climate change (See Table 2).

Primary responders are substantially more likely than secondary providers to belong, now or in the past, to community disaster-planning networks. To support service continuity, primary responders more frequently have formal mutual aid agreements or government contracts in place.

Despite their past role in community disaster response and recovery and their potentially important future role in climate change risk mitigation, community foundations and United Ways are actively planning for emergencies at lower-than-ideal rates. One in 9 have no emergency plans; 80% have taken no climate-mitigation actions; and an equal number think discussions with board members about climate change would be unwelcome.

These findings are particularly problematic because these organizations provide community infrastructure and can help define issues and bring together cross-sector partners to find solutions.

## HOW DO ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS REGARDING CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECT EMERGENCY PLANNING?

Among nonprofit leaders who participated in the survey, about 39% viewed human activity as the primary cause of climate change. These individuals were substantially more likely to express concern about the impact climate change could have on the state and the people they serve. (See Table 2) These results are consistent with public opinion surveys of all Indiana adults.<sup>9</sup>

When asked whether stakeholders would welcome a conversation about the possible impacts of climate change on their organizations, most respondents did not know how stakeholders would respond.

Nearly half of all respondents have not engaged their board members in a discussion about climate change and indicated that they were not likely to do so in the future. Among the other half, boards that have discussed climate change are much more likely to have created emergency plans and taken some risk-reduction actions.

**TABLE 1. Nonprofit respondent descriptives**

SAMPLE SUBGROUP/ MISSION	NUMBER IN SAMPLE	SAMPLE SIZE (RESPONSE RATE) (N=467)	IDENTIFY AS "PRIMARY RESPONDERS" (N=70)	IDENTIFY AS "SECONDARY RESPONDERS" (N=366)	DO NOT IDENTIFY AS A DISASTER RESPONDER (N=33)
Community foundations	78	40 (51%)	12.5%	87.5%	0
United Way agencies	51	25 (49%)	32%	64%	4
United Way grantees	581	227(39%)	7.1%	83.2%	9.7
Respondents identified through NTEE codes in IRS records	547	178 (33%)	24.2%	67.4%	8.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,257</b>	<b>470 (37%)</b>	<b>14.9%</b>	<b>77.9%</b>	<b>7%</b>

**TABLE 2. Organizational climate change action (N=64)**

CONCERNS RELATED TO CLIMATE CHANGE	TOTAL PERCENT	PERCENT OF "PRIMARY RESPONDERS"	PERCENT OF "SECONDARY RESPONDERS"
Which of the following concerns related to climate change have been part of your organization's planning during the past ten years?	13.8	21.4	13.4
Infrastructure	11.5	15.7	11.2
Programming/staffing	3.2	7.1	2.2
Advocacy	2.8	5.7	2.5

Gazley, B. & Cash R. (2023, October). Nonprofit Disaster Response and Climate Change: Who Responds? Who Plans? Nonprofit Policy Forum.

**TABLE 3. Respondent attitudes about climate change compared against disaster response mission**

	TOTAL PERCENT	PERCENT OF "PRIMARY RESPONDERS"	PERCENT OF "SECONDARY RESPONDERS"
<b>Do you personally think climate change is caused ...?</b>			
Entirely or mostly by human activity	37.2%	23.9%	39.3%
Equally by natural and human activities	31.9	35.2	31.7
Entirely or mostly by natural causes	5.3	12.7	3.8
I am uncertain what is causing the climate to change	20.6	21.1	20.5
Did not answer	4.9	7	4.6
<b>Total (excluding "did not answer")</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>How much do you think climate change will harm people in Indiana in the next few years?</b>			
Not at all	7.1 %	13.8%	6.5%
Only a little	15.3	13.8	15.5
A moderate amount	36.9	35.4	37
A great deal	17.5	9.2	18.6
Don't know	23.2	27.7	22.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

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## IMPLICATIONS

This study confirms that the public and policymakers may underestimate how prepared community charities are for local disaster relief and recovery. While policymakers recognize that local safety net agencies are necessary participants in stabilizing communities after weather disasters, they have focused little attention on the preparedness of these nonprofits, especially relating to service continuity during and after a disaster. These providers represent disaster response and recovery actors

who are equally essential to local and national emergency preparedness planning. If nonprofits are unprepared for weather disasters, policies like FEMA's National Response framework, which assumes private sector capacity and availability, could fail.

Planning has received greater consideration than actual risk reduction, and both need more attention. At least one quarter of disaster-response charities in Indiana have not systematically determined how they would adapt and provide services during such an emergency. They also lack

mutual aid agreements and emergency communication plans that might protect them against a service collapse.



Red Cross emergency shelter  
Source: George Armstrong, FEMA Photo Library, via [Wikimedia Commons](#), 2008

Findings also support the value of networking among organizations, including belonging to each community's emergency planning network. Evidence suggests that resilient communities rely on high levels of connections between organizations. As trusted actors, United Ways and community foundations may neutralize the politics of climate change and legitimize constructive conversations and responses by working together to share information and convene community members. They are also part of national networks that link organizations to national information and effective practices.

Since local community planning networks are the main vehicles for organizing better local preparedness, policymakers should take an expanded view of who should be invited to these opportunities. Planning for local preparedness, however, needs to go beyond what occurs within community emergency planning networks. Policymakers and charities within local community leadership such as United Ways and community foundations should also encourage disaster planning and climate adaptation within their professional service networks.

In addition to being a shared responsibility, building disaster resilience will require sustained behavioral change.<sup>10</sup> Climate change is a contentious issue, and this study confirms a need to consider the attitudes of board members and other significant stakeholders regarding climate change and their influence on organizational

decisionmaking. Depoliticizing the climate change issue by creating spaces to share real experiences with disasters may encourage risk-reduction actions. Communicating regularly about climate science and focusing on lived community experiences could also lead to greater risk-reduction actions.

Policymakers should go beyond considering nonprofits only in response and recovery to improve their role in organizational risk reduction and preparedness. Research indicates that social safety net nonprofits must be involved in planning and adaptation before disaster strikes to ensure business continuity. Public policy additionally identifies United Ways and community foundations as key private sector partners—particularly within the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Disaster Recovery Framework<sup>11</sup>—to provide infrastructure for meeting emergency community needs in response to natural disasters.<sup>12</sup> As weather disasters intensify, all organizations most likely to provide disaster relief and recovery must be planning and be ready for climate change.<sup>13</sup> Only when the capacity of these nonprofits keeps pace with the more severe threats posed by extreme weather will the whole community approach to disaster relief have a chance to succeed.

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## FURTHER READING

To read more about disaster response and climate change, see links to Beth Gazley's publications in her faculty profile at the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs, [go.iu.edu/gazley](https://go.iu.edu/gazley).



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