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New Report on Disasters and Climate Change Shows How Government Can Help Communities Move from Surviving to Thriving

By any definition, Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria of 2017 were historic disasters, but they were not disasters beyond human imagining. We've seen huge, intense storms before and will surely again, particularly with the effects of climate change. In [a new collection of essays](#) from more than a dozen of the nation's leading legal scholars, the Center for Progressive Reform (CPR) presents a set of recommendations, policy proposals, and reforms that can help governments and people work together to move from merely surviving to thriving, even in the face of climate change.

"Because massive storms and other climate change-induced disasters are foreseeable, it's vital to anticipate them when we plan and build our communities, transportation networks, power grids, and more," said Alyson Flournoy, Board Member at CPR and a co-editor of [*From Surviving to Thriving: Equity in Disaster Planning and Recovery*](#). "That way, when disasters strike, we can prevent or mitigate the worst effects, saving lives, protecting property, and preventing the type of setbacks that can impoverish families and entire communities for decades."

In 2017, we witnessed how we have failed to plan for resilience and build communities that can thrive before and after the storm. Power outages in Florida claimed lives after Irma. Massive flooding did the same in Houston in Harvey's wake, and large-scale emissions of toxic chemicals from a plant built in a floodplain turned floodwaters into a toxic brew. And the collapse of Puerto Rico's power grid caused the lion's share of Maria-related deaths.

Unsurprisingly, those hit hardest by the storms and their aftermath were among our society's most vulnerable. As co-author and CPR Board President Rob Verchick noted, "Catastrophe is bad for everyone. But it is especially bad for the weak and disenfranchised."

"There are significant inequalities in the way that we plan for and respond to disasters, and they lead to disproportionate impacts on low-income communities," added co-editor and CPR Member Scholar Victor Flatt. "Industrial plants rarely abut million-dollar homes, but they are commonly built adjacent to low-income neighborhoods. The wealthy have better access to evacuation resources and routes, and to health care in the wake of the storm, if they need it." In these and many other ways, the social inequities that imperil the health and safety of low-income Americans are magnified and exacerbated in an emergency.

In the new report, CPR's Member Scholars and staff address different aspects of the nation's disaster planning and its environmental, health, and safety standards, with a particular view to mitigating the social inequities laid bare by last year's storms.

"The policy solutions included in our report will not stop hurricanes or other disasters from occurring," said CPR Member Scholar and co-editor Karen Sokol. "But they could make impacts less severe in the long run by taking toxic chemicals and other dangerous hazards out of the path of storms, making the power grid more agile and adaptable, reducing incentives to build in flood zones, better protecting the health and safety of recovery workers, improving disaster response so that it serves all Americans, not just those in wealthier neighborhoods, future-proofing vital infrastructure – roads, bridges, pipes, wires – against the creeping effects of climate change, and more."

The full report is available at <http://bit.ly/fromsurvivingtothrivingrptfull>. The preface and executive summary are available today on *CPRBlog* at <http://bit.ly/fromsurvivingtothrivingrpt>, where CPR will release a chapter a day throughout September. See the table of contents below for the list of topics covered in the report.

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The Center for Progressive Reform is a nonprofit research and educational organization with a network of Member Scholars working to protect health, safety, and the environment through analysis and commentary. Read [CPRBlog](#), follow us on [Twitter](#), and like us on [Facebook](#).