



# The Iowa Policy Project

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## **Flooding and Inequity: Policy responses on the front line**

*Disparate impacts and recoveries for communities as flooding rises in Iowa*

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Dec. 12, 2019) — Communities on the front line of natural disasters vary in their ability to protect themselves and to recover, putting a priority on making equity a greater focus of policies to prevent, mitigate and respond to floods or other disasters.

“We have seen right in Iowa the disparity in effects of flooding, and there are things the state could do better to protect populations least-positioned to weather a disaster and the transitions that follow for their home, neighborhood and jobs,” said Joseph Wilensky, a University of Iowa graduate student and author of a new report for the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project.

Wilensky’s report notes recent Midwest flooding, which included severe damage in western Iowa, killed dozens of people and caused billions of dollars in economic losses. Trends have accelerated for flooding, and have come as development has expanded in flood-threatened areas and stream and river flows have been modified.

“As public policy has contributed to these destructive trends, policy makers in an era of climate change and greater problems must examine how to better focus on equity in policy responses,” he said. “We must keep our attention on the impacts for what are ‘frontline’ communities — those whose members are the first and hardest hit by flooding.”

Challenges for those communities may intensify as climate models predict accelerated trends in increased rainfall, particularly in the Midwest. The report notes precipitation in the Upper Mississippi River Basin has risen on average about one inch per decade since the 1970s. The number of five-year record rainfall occurrences in two-day storms is expected to rise by 30 percent by the mid-century period of 2041-50.

“Frontline communities are more vulnerable before, during and after a disaster,” he said. “Their members are more likely to live below the poverty level, to experience unemployment, to have lower levels of education, to have a disability, and to speak English as a second language. They are more likely to lack access to a vehicle to go to work, and they are more likely to be parents, be elderly, to identify as African American or Latino, or to be the female head of a household.”

The report cited research that shows residing in a frontline community is “an important indicator of everything from evacuation compliance during an event to successful long-term recovery after one.” It also noted members of frontline communities are “more likely to die in a disaster event and less likely to recover after one.”

### ***Policy Implications***

To help frontline communities and their members who may lack the ability to recover or move from hazardous areas, the report notes several policy options:

- “Rebalance” mitigation efforts with an emphasis on community impact and vulnerability rather than up-front economic loss, the latter putting higher-value properties ahead of those less able to cope on their own.
- Put more flexibility in FEMA guidelines to ease community burdens and allow for a creative use of funds.
- Better direct Community Block Development Grant funds to the best place for mitigation efforts — not necessarily within the damage area, but outside if needed. Flood mitigation is best placed upstream.
- Keep state funds flowing pending the arrival federal aid, which might be delayed after a federal disaster is declared and Iowa stops processing and paying disaster claims.
- Support a watershed coordinator with state funds to guide applications for assistance, as these applications must be well-supported and well-documented, and more difficult for small communities to deliver.

“Iowa — like the rest of the Midwest — is going to have to adapt to severe weather driven by climate change,” said David Osterberg, IPP founder and lead environmental researcher.

“If we are to prepare public policy in a way that carries the greatest public benefit, equity needs to be at the front of the process, not an afterthought,” he said. “Individuals in communities most in jeopardy and least able to rebound from a flood are on the front line when disaster hits, and they must be at the front of the line for public support.”

Wilensky noted Iowa does offer assistance for individuals impacted by natural disasters, but participation comes with many qualifications.

“Amounts are small — and must be repaid if an applicant receives federal assistance, which can be delayed.”

In addition, he noted, federal approaches consider a benefit cost analysis, which favors expensive mitigation projects to protect high-value property above projects that benefit others — even though higher-income or wealthier property owners are better able to recover on their own.

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy analysis organization in Iowa City. Reports are available at [www.iowapolicyproject.org](http://www.iowapolicyproject.org).

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