

Joplin, Missouri tornado death toll rises to 132

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The death toll rose to 132 in Joplin, Missouri, on Friday, as rescuers continued searching through miles of devastated neighborhoods. At least 156 residents remain unaccounted for five days after one of the deadliest tornadoes in US history struck the Midwestern town.

Elsewhere across the country, storms bearing tornadoes, heavy rains and hail claimed three more lives in Atlanta, Georgia. The death toll has risen to 16 from storms that struck Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas Tuesday night into Wednesday. Still early into the tornado season, the country has seen well over 1,000 tornadoes responsible for at least 512 deaths.

The number of missing in Joplin has declined since Thursday, when it stood at 232. Of those, Missouri Department of Public Safety spokesperson Andrea Spillars said 90 had been located alive. Twenty-two other names were added to the missing list in the past day, however. Spillars cautioned during a press conference Friday morning that many of those remaining on the list may be dead.

Six of the missing were identified among bodies held in six refrigerated semi-trailers at the city's sheriff's office. Many of the victims were rendered unidentifiable except by dental records or DNA testing, the city coroner's office said.

The tornado, classified as the strongest category EF5 storm, was the eighth deadliest in US history. More than 1,100 were injured, many of them seriously.

Joplin City Manager Mark Rohr said in a press conference earlier in the week that 8,000 structures across 1,800 acres were obliterated—as much as one-third of the city. Tens of thousands of residents have been affected, including thousands who have lost everything.

Recovery operations have been disjointed between federal, state, and local agencies, with most of the burden placed on the crippled city government and residents themselves. As a result, the pace of the recovery has been

slow and difficult.

Roadways remain impassable in some hard-hit neighborhoods, and thousands of people still have no electricity and phone service.

Only a few hundred residents are staying in shelters. A city spokesperson told the WSWS that as of Friday, only 156 people were housed in the primary shelter set up in the Missouri Southern State University athletics complex.

Residents have expressed rising frustration at not being allowed access the morgues to identify missing loved ones. The bodies of only 19 of the dead have been identified and released to families as of Friday.

After being stonewalled by officials, residents used local radio call-in shows, Facebook groups, posters and spray-painted messages to try to locate the missing.

In one case, family members searched for 16-month-old Skyular Logdson for days, appealing to Joplin authorities to verify whether the child's body had been found. Thousands of people spread word of his disappearance on online social media sites. On Wednesday the Joplin coroner's office finally confirmed that it had been storing Logdson's body in one of the makeshift morgues.

"I want to know when there's going to be that next press conference, because I want to ask, 'where are our loved ones?'" Debbie Cummins, the boy's great-grandmother, told MSNBC. "I want to know this and not just for myself and our family. We can't get any answers."

The city said Friday that it was continuing to search for survivors, fully three days after Missouri Governor Jay Nixon had declared an end to rescue and the beginning of recovery of the dead. Most of the crews were volunteers. "Search and rescue continues," the city said in a short advisory. "Working with search dog teams. Over 600 volunteers and over 50 dog teams working today."

In the aftermath of every disaster, the working class expresses its humanity with a spontaneous outpouring of

generosity. Some 5,600 volunteers have sought to involve themselves in the emergency response, 1,100 have given blood, and donations have poured into the city.

The immense infusion of this aid is crippled, however, by lack of coordination, fragmented delivery, inadequate emergency response infrastructure, and the sheer scale of the damage. Joplin emergency management spokesperson Jono Anzalone told the *Kansas City Star* Thursday that the vast number of donations was overwhelming the city's response capabilities. "We're seeing lots of unsolicited items, perishable goods, used clothing, used shoes," he said, adding that the American Red Cross had to displace tornado survivors from a shelter in order to store donations.

The aid pledged by the state and federal governments pales in comparison to the desire of ordinary people to help. Governor Nixon has pledged only \$25 million in state funds from next year's budget to aid the devastated city. The figure does not even begin to address the cost of recovery; initial estimates of damage range upwards of \$3-5 billion.

Thousands of residents who were already struggling financially now face long-term ruin.

Some 300 of the city's 2,000 businesses have been lost, destroying the livelihoods of at least 4,000 workers. The figure, issued by the local chamber of commerce, will likely rise as the impact of the storm ripples through the region's economy. St. John's Regional Medical Center, which was devastated by a direct hit from the tornado, employed 2,480 workers.

Workers at the demolished chain grocery store Dillon's were told they would receive pay for the last week they worked plus two weeks' "pay in lieu of work." The company said displaced employees' health insurance would continue if workers were able to find positions in parent-company Kroger in the next few weeks—an unlikely prospect for those worst affected by the storm. Otherwise they will be cut off at the end of June.

States that have been hardest hit by the spate of tornadoes have among the nation's highest rates of homes lacking hazard insurance, according to an analysis by the Associated Press of federal Census Bureau and Insurance Information Institute data. AP found those living in the most tornado-prone areas are least insured, and have difficulties attaining compensation after a disaster.

The South registered an uninsured rate of 17.4 percent; the Northeast stood at 12.2 percent; in the Midwest, the rate was 8.4 percent; the West recorded a 3.3 percent rate.

Missouri, the fourth most tornado-prone state, registered

a 10.5 percent rate of uninsured owner-occupied homes. Poverty is a major contributing factor, as premiums in higher-risk regions can run in excess of \$1,000 per year, and insurance companies can refuse to back older properties. "The loss ratios on those houses that are insured are generally pretty high," Arkansas Insurance Commissioner Jay Bradford told AP. "They don't have central heat and air. They are older homes. Sometimes, the plumbing and wiring are not up to standard. The rates are higher, and the coverage is limited."

A Joplin couple, Tammy and Kevin Cudy, told AP they were forced to drop their homeowner's insurance after Kevin lost his job and they could no longer afford the \$50-per-month premium. They wanted to reinstate the policy last week, but were unable to reach their insurance agent by phone. Their house was destroyed by the tornado. "That's why I'm kicking myself right now," Tammy said. "The fact that we were thinking about it, that we needed to work our budget around it, it just makes you kind of heartsick at this point."

Those who were insured are now confronted with red tape and likely under-valuations by the insurance companies. Missouri Department of Insurance spokesman Travis Ford emphasized that the onus of recouping insured losses rested with residents, even if many did not have access to phones or Internet.

"The time to act is now," he said. "If you have damage, you need to get with your insurance company as soon as you can. If you have a hole in your roof, you need to do mitigation, you need to tarp that." For those who had subsequent rain damage, Ford said, "Your company may argue the damage could have been reduced had you done proper mitigation."



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