The social conditions behind the deadly US tornado outbreak

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Families and local agencies are still searching through the rubble of Sunday's deadly tornado in Joplin, Missouri. When all the bodies are counted, it will likely be the deadliest tornado since at least 1947, when a tornado tore through the town of Woodward, Oklahoma, killing 181. (See: "Tornado kills at least 116 in Joplin, Missouri")

Russell Schneider of the National Weather Service's Storm Prediction Center said Monday that the US was "on pace for a record year for tornado fatalities." He added, "I think we have to be aware that we are just now entering the peak of the tornado season."

While there are many factors that combine to produce such deadly events, social conditions and infrastructure play an enormous role. In the first part of the 20th Century, it was routine for hundreds of people to die in the United States every year from tornadoes. The rate of deaths began to fall off in the postwar period, with the improvement of living conditions and advances in scientific warning systems.

In 1953, the last year in which there were more deaths than 2011, 519 were killed. If the death toll for this year exceeds that number (it is presently at least 481), it will be the deadliest year since 1936, when 552 were killed. This was before the development of tornado forecasts, which first appeared in the 1940s.

Poor families living in mobile homes or unprotected structures, including homes without basements or foundations, are much more vulnerable. At least 119 of the deaths due to tornadoes this year involved mobile homes, with the government National Weather Service listing 159 as unknown. In comparison, only 65 deaths were individuals sheltering in traditional houses.

The percentage of fatalities involving mobile homes is increasing. The National Weather Service data show that approximately half of all fatalities from tornadoes over the past three years have involved mobile homes, compared to about a third in the 1980s and 1990s. Mobile homes are particularly common in the poor regions of the south, where tornadoes are most frequent.

According to a 2001 report by Harold Brooks and Charles Doswell of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, while overall death rates from tornadoes declined during the 20th Century, "Current death rates for mobile home residents…are still nearly what the overall national rate was prior to 1925 and about 20 times the rate of site-built home residents." (See: "A Brief History of Deaths from Tornadoes in the United States")

The percentage of housing units in the US that are mobile increased from 0.7 percent in 1950, when they were first marketed as cheap alternatives to full houses, to 1.3 percent in 1960, 3.1 percent in 1970, 7.1 percent in 1980 and 7.2 percent in 1990.

It is not yet clear whether mobile homes were affected in the Joplin tornado, which struck mainly the downtown area. Poverty is certainly an issue, however. Joplin, which in fact is one of the most developed areas in the region, has a per capita income of $17,738, less than half of the national average. The poverty rate is 18 percent in the city itself, with even greater distress in the outlying areas.

Like every disaster that has struck the US in recent years, the tornado again highlights the undeveloped state of infrastructure. Immediately, communications systems failed, the electrical grid (consisting of above-ground wires) went down, transportation was severely hindered. The tornadoes in Alabama last month were also exacerbated by infrastructure problems, including the failure of electrical systems and therefore warning systems.

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Another element of the disaster is the lack of insurance for many residents. Adequate insurance is often prohibitively expensive, leaving victims destitute in the aftermath of a crisis.

There are already indications that private insurers are responding to the rash of disasters this year by increasing rates. NPR's Marketplace program noted Monday, "Premiums and deductibles in US coastal areas skyrocketed" in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992. "Analysts expect insurance premiums will go up in states like Missouri," in the wake of the tornado outbreak.

The Joplin tornado is only the latest disaster to strike the region. It comes at the same time as historic flooding along the Mississippi River and its tributaries have destroyed the homes, farmland, and the livelihoods of thousands of people.

As in previous disasters, coverage dominates the news media for a time, before quietly disappearing from headlines. In similar fashion, the Obama administration pays lip service to recovery and offers condolences. Responsibility for the disaster, however, is borne by the victims themselves.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has repeatedly emphasized the leading role of funding-starved state and local governments. Beyond the temporary deployment of National Guard detachments, rebuilding is primarily the work of a patchwork of charities, religious groups, and volunteers. Residents are essentially left to their own devices.

The Ozarks region of southern Missouri—already registering deep economic distress—has seen its agricultural economy ruined and key transit lines interrupted. The destruction of Joplin has forced the closure of Interstate 44, a critical trucking corridor.

The region is a portrait of class relations in the US. Historically, economic life in the Ozarks has centered on the extraction of lead, zinc, and other minerals. The export of ore, timber, and other basic commodities forged at once an intimate link to global production and the international markets on the one hand, and a large and poorly paid working class on the other.

The interests of the ultra-wealthy have starkly defined the region's development. Numerous Fortune 500 companies including Wal-Mart, industrial supplier Leggett & Platt, and O'Reilly Auto Parts, are headquartered in the region. Infrastructure such as rail and roadways for corporate freight takes precedence over social infrastructure such as decent housing or environmental safeguards, and all governmental policy is crafted to benefit the corporate elite.

The social disaster demands a social response, including the mobilization of vast resources to engage in rescue operations, rebuild devastated regions and make all those affected by this latest disaster, as well as those that came before, whole. None of this is forthcoming from the Obama administration and the US political establishment.

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