

# Lack of shelters a factor in Oklahoma tornado death toll

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As Moore, Oklahoma residents grapple with the devastating destruction from Monday's tornado, information is coming out about the way in which the lack of adequate infrastructure significantly increased the death toll.

At least 24 people were killed, including nine children, when a massive twister hit the Oklahoma City suburb Monday afternoon. Seven of the children were students at an elementary school in the direct path of the storm. At least 240 others were injured; of those, 60 are children.

The Oklahoma City Medical Examiner's Office modified their early fatality estimate of 51 early on Tuesday, saying that the lack of phone communications had resulted in double reporting of casualties. However, the death toll will likely climb as search teams carry out their work.

The National Weather Service upgraded the Moore tornado to a category EF5, the highest rating, with winds more than 200 miles per hour. The storm cut a path up to two miles wide and 20 miles long, and was reportedly on the ground for more than 40 minutes. Flyover footage and first-hand video taken by residents reveal a vast scene of shredded neighborhoods, twisted vehicles and utility poles and four-foot-deep drifts of rubble.

The Plaza Towers Elementary School was destroyed as children and teachers sheltered in the hallways and bathrooms. "All you could hear were screams," first responder Stuart Earnest Jr. said. "The people screaming for help. And the people trying to help were also screaming."

At least three children remain unaccounted for.

With disturbing frequency, natural disasters like tornadoes expose the underlying social disaster of American life.

Once again the undeveloped state of infrastructure in the US is revealed: Masses of people are exposed to the elements, with no access to underground storm shelters. Public schools are built in the heart of "Tornado Alley" with no basements or storm safe rooms. Although tornado sirens sounded 16 minutes ahead of the twister and meteorologists warned of the approaching dangers for hours, many hundreds of people simply had nowhere to go. The tornado hit during the early rush hour just before school let out.

Many people were on the roads during that time and simply could not find shelter.

Five public schools in the area were hit by the storm. None of them had shelter areas, such as reinforced "safe rooms" or basements. A report on NBC News Tuesday noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency estimates that school safe rooms would cost \$1.4 million.

"We have limited numbers of funds, so you set priorities," Oklahoma's Emergency Management Agency Director Albert Ashwood told a press conference. "It's not a matter of they're being left out for any reason. They hadn't been brought forward yet." Only 100 schools in the state have safe rooms.

The surrounding residential area was also bereft of safety rooms because of a months' long delay in FEMA aid disbursement. A grant for safe rooms was promised in 2011, but the \$2 million in federal aid had not been allocated nearly a year and a half later. Local officials explained that the county's emergency initiatives were funded based on previous disaster declarations. "Oklahoma has had a few of these declarations in the past couple of years, so there is not a lot of grant money available."

Residential safe rooms can be built for \$8,000 to \$10,000 each. Out of 16,000 applicants for financial assistance in constructing safe rooms statewide, only 500 were chosen, based on a lottery drawing.

Moore had not built a common tornado shelter, because, according to the city, it was not likely to be hit by a tornado. The city's web site said it faced only a "1-2 percent" chance of a tornado hitting the town on any spring day. Tornado season in the US is typically 60 to 90 days long, and tornadoes are a daily occurrence in the nation's midsection.

That public shelters do not exist in a city perhaps best known for its weather tragedies is a crime for which the entire political establishment bears responsibility.

Moore has been hit by four tornadoes in the last decade and a half: October 4, 1998; May 3, 1999; May 8, 2003; and three years ago, on May 10, 2010. The 1999 storm carried wind speeds of 318 miles per hour—the strongest ever

recorded near the earth's surface. The tornado killed 42 people and injured 800 others. Monday's storm followed approximately the same path as the 1999 twister.

In 2002, engineer Timothy Marshall issued a report, published in the Journal of the American Meteorological Society, on housing construction in Moore following the 1999 tornado. Marshall found that many neighborhoods were rebuilt for a higher population density than before, using the same substandard methods that had failed under the impact of the tornado.

Of the subdivisions surveyed, only a single house was found to be rebuilt better than before. Houses in the region are generally unable to withstand winds of even 90 miles per hour, let alone the more than 200 mile per hour winds that came with Monday's twister.

"Most newly built homes were attached to their concrete [slab] foundations with tapered cut nails or shot pins as had been noted in homes destroyed by the tornado," he wrote. "None of the houses inspected had hurricane clips or other wind-resistant connections." Marshall lamented that far from leading to more stringent building codes and enforcement, the tornado bolstered the claim that "no building could survive a tornado" and led to even weaker standards.

The decrepit and unplanned state of physical infrastructure compounded Monday's disaster. As the storm hit, communications systems failed, the above-ground electrical grid was instantly destroyed, and the transportation system was thrown into chaos.

Local officials responded to such situations by erecting police checkpoints. Interstate ramps in and out of the city have been closed. A live report from KOCO-TV showed long lines of traffic in neighborhoods across the city, with residents stranded trying to check on their homes.

The disaster bears long-term consequences for thousands of residents, who lack insurance. Time after time, the response of the industry is to jack up rates even further in areas hit by storms.

The political establishment has responded predictably. President Barack Obama spoke for barely five minutes at a perfunctory address at the White House Tuesday morning.

While saying that the government would provide aid, Obama emphasized repeatedly that the responsibility for rebuilding would fall on the victims themselves. "If there is hope to hold on to, not just in Oklahoma but around the country," he declared, "it's the knowledge that the good people there and in Oklahoma are better prepared for this type of storm than most."

Given that schools and many houses demolished in Moore were without basements or storm shelters, this statement amounts to little more than a declaration of indifference to the loss of life there.

What residents of Moore, Obama assured, "can be certain of is that Americans from every corner of this country will be right there with them, opening our homes, our hearts to those in need... We've seen that spirit in Joplin, in Tuscaloosa; we saw that spirit in Boston and Breezy Point," Obama stated.

Indeed, the outpouring of charity by ordinary Americans in the aftermath of disasters is always enormous—and always utilized by the government to substitute for meaningful federal aid. The Obama administration left the tornado-ravaged cities of Joplin, Missouri and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, along with Sandy-stricken Breezy Point in New York to languish without aid for months. Many residents of these cities were left with little beyond blue tarps and unfilled insurance claims.

This is the time-worn script of the Obama administration. The president issues a disaster declaration and pledges his prayers and the support of "the country." The National Guard is deployed for a brief stint. Corporations and wealthy figures are applauded for tossing out tax-deductible donations to the relief efforts. Then the cameras turn away from the disaster zone.

The weight of the work is placed on a patchwork of religious organizations, charities, and volunteers. Cash-starved states and municipalities scrape together paltry sums. FEMA, itself grossly underfunded, doles out a fraction of the aid needed, most of it to contractors and major corporations.

In concluding his remarks, Obama suggested that concerned citizens should send text-message donations to the American Red Cross, the only entity that had set up emergency response efforts in Moore. In other words, the government would organize no serious relief effort.



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