

Seven dead, hundreds homeless in Houston, Texas flood

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Hundreds of people have been displaced and at least seven have been confirmed dead in Houston as a result of historic floods that submerged entire neighborhoods. The city received 17.6 inches of rain in less than 24 hours on Monday, a level of rainfall Houston has not seen since tropical storm Allison inundated the city in 2001, costing 23 people their lives.

Water levels of forty feet above average were reported in some parts of the city. Twelve hundred people were forced to evacuate. Over 140,000 residents lost power on Monday; 7,500 remained without power on Tuesday.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared a state of emergency on Monday evening, and Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner advised residents to await evacuation and remain in place.

Residents of North Houston's Greenspoint neighborhood, however, found it necessary to evacuate themselves as the water rose above the tops of cars. Families fearfully loaded their children onto inflatable beds and wading pools, and, in one case, a refrigerator, attempting to make it through the flooded streets to a community shopping center that residents had set up to host evacuees.

Many people from Greenspoint expressed indignation and frustration over the evacuation efforts. Using Twitter and Facebook, residents praised the cooperation of their neighbors while denouncing the city's response. "Rescue teams aren't available for the Greenspoint residents?" one resident posted on Facebook. "Houston response teams must do better. THIS is unacceptable!"

Responses to her post echoed her dismay. Some questioned whether the city would have responded as lackadaisically had Greenspoint been a wealthier neighborhood. For many, the situation in Greenspoint

harked back to the anemic rescue efforts after Hurricane Katrina, when entire families in New Orleans sat stranded on bridges with no assistance.

The comparisons to Katrina could be found throughout social media. "Cruel irony is that many people living in #greenspoint are Katrina survivors," a Twitter user noted. Another Twitter user lamented, "I'm seeing a flashback of Hurricane Katrina in the Greenspoint area."

Mayor Turner disputed the criticisms at a press conference Monday evening, stating, "No one has been ignored. This has been a dynamic situation across the city... No area has been ignored. No area has been treated unduly, unfairly... For anyone to suggest that a community isn't being attended to or we are not placing the proper resources there, that would be a serious misstatement."

He dismissed contentions that predominantly Hispanic, working class Greenspoint was given less consideration than wealthier areas of the city, saying, "It's a situation where all throughout the city, and quite frankly all throughout our region, we're dealing with high water."

The debate about the city's response to the crisis in Greenspoint highlights significant wealth disparities in Houston. While the Houston metropolitan area boasts the sixth-highest personal income rate among US cities, its median income is only \$40,000.

In 2015, a report by Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute revealed that Houston ranked number four in a survey of America's most economically segregated cities (Texas cities Austin and San Antonio made the top ten as well). The average household income in Houston's wealthiest neighborhood is over \$300,000. It is just at \$30,000 in its poorest neighborhood.

Greenspoint's residents are primarily working class.

Most of them are employed in the service industry. The neighborhood lies within a 100-year floodplain that has been incompletely delineated by the city.

Researchers at Houston's Rice University have been urging the city to address the floodplain for years. In 2013, Lester King, sustainability fellow at Rice's Shell Center for Sustainability, reported that the city needed to map the floodplain completely and use the information to fund flood mitigation, drainage and home buyouts in the areas most likely to be affected by flooding. King reported that per-capita capital improvement spending ranged from \$602 per person in Houston's poorest district in the floodplain to \$1,359 per person in its wealthiest.

This discrepancy has not gone unnoticed by Greenspoint's residents.

There is no relief in sight for Houston's flood-weary population. Several more inches of rain are predicted in the upcoming days. Furthermore, rain-swollen Cypress Creek, which flows through northwest Houston, has not yet crested. While some Houstonians wait out the flood, others are leaving their homes for higher ground, or await evacuation.

These residents nervously eye Cypress Creek's swelling while watching the weather forecasts. "The worst is yet to come" is a common refrain on social media, as people watch the waters rise in their neighborhoods ahead of more rain.



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