

Deadly floods in North Carolina overwhelmingly affect state's poorest residents

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A slowly unwinding catastrophe is ravaging the US state of North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, disproportionately affecting the state's poorest residents. At least 24 North Carolinians have died since Matthew sheared the coastline, most of them by drowning.

When Hurricane Matthew edged along North Carolina's coast last week, its rains fell upon saturated grounds and swollen rivers in the eastern portion of the state. September's rainfall had surpassed the regional averages by 200-300 percent. Even as the storm weakened and drifted away from the coast, its toll mounted. Rivers and streams throughout the area continue to top record levels, and more flooding is expected over the next two weeks.

Residents who could afford to vacate low-lying areas in eastern North Carolina did so. Those who had no way to leave—elderly residents on fixed incomes, the unemployed, or the underemployed—were left stranded as the waters began to rise. Forced out of their homes, they have crowded into shelters.

Most of the residents in the most devastated part of the state were already struggling. One-third of the residents of the flooded city of Lumberton live in poverty. In the city of Goldsboro, where floodwaters crested over a foot above records on Thursday, the poverty rate is 25 percent. In Lenoir County, where the Neuse River even now continues to rise and displace residents, 22.1 percent of residents live in poverty.

"The poorest of the poor in North Carolina are being hurt the most by these floods," Governor Pat McCrory acknowledged in a press conference on Thursday. "These people have nothing." Following this simple statement of fact, he merely appealed to the public to

contribute to a state disaster relief fund.

The appeal was a disingenuous way for McCrory to wash his hands of responsibility for the conditions faced by North Carolina's poorest residents. In 2013, McCrory signed into law some of the nation's most stringent unemployment insurance cuts. Benefits were capped at a maximum of \$350 a week, down from \$530. The law reduced the maximum duration for receiving benefits from 26 weeks to 11-20 weeks, depending on the unemployment rate.

Predictably, these cuts dealt a harsh blow to hundreds of thousands of North Carolina's workers. While McCrory and others have boasted about the state's lower unemployment rates, its labor force participation rate has actually fallen. North Carolina's prime-age employment-to-population ratio dropped three percentage points below the national average after the cuts were enacted. Moreover, the state's employment rate was bolstered by jobs paying less than \$10.10 an hour.

Today, North Carolina's average weekly unemployment benefit stands at a meager \$233.69, 46th in the nation. Only 11 percent of unemployed state residents actually receive unemployment benefits, the lowest rate in the country.

The response of the Obama administration has likewise been insultingly insufficient. As of Thursday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had disbursed only \$2.6 million. With over 14,000 people applying for disaster relief so far, this amounts to \$186 per applicant.

A spokesman for FEMA told the *New York Times*, "It's not designed to make survivors whole again. It's more of a life vest, rather than a lifeboat." This "life

vest” is hardly adequate. FEMA’s average disbursement in recent years has come to only \$2,000 per family—a paltry amount for families facing the loss of a home, possessions and work.

This miserly assistance stands in sharp contrast to the virtually unlimited funds the Obama administration poured into the banks. Each of the top Wall Street banks received \$25 billion after the 2008 crash in Troubled Asset Relief Fund handouts, to which must be added the trillions of dollars in “quantitative easing” measures.

The flood levels seen in North Carolina today are just surpassing the records set by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. That storm took 65 lives and inundated the same eastern region of the state. Six years after Hurricane Floyd, Hurricane Katrina highlighted the massive inadequacies of the nation’s flood prevention infrastructure, as well as FEMA’s inadequate funding and aid.

Lawmakers have had 17 years since Hurricane Floyd, and 11 years since Hurricane Katrina, to address the nation’s infrastructure deficiencies to prevent structural damage and loss of life. However, the American Society of Civil Engineers’ most recent infrastructure report card gave North Carolina a C. Many of its worst grades for infrastructure are directly related to flooding.

The ASCE gave the state a D- for its dams, citing a lack of consistent state or federal funding to address high-hazard dams, a third of which are over 50 years old. Most of these dams did not, as of the ASCE’s last public report, have an Emergency Action Plan in place. The ASCE stated that North Carolina’s expenditure on dams was well below the national average, and that it would take \$1.9 billion to bring its dams up to a passing grade.

The ASCE gave North Carolina a C- on its bridges. Due to its coastal location, North Carolina ranks 14th in the US for bridge surfaces to maintain, yet the state continues to neglect the maintenance and replacement of failing bridges. The ASCE recommends that the state allocate \$281 million more per year to upgrade its bridges.

The state also received a C- in coastal maintenance and coastal storm preparation, and a C- in storm water management. The ASCE points out that stormwater can be contaminated with numerous bacteria and other pathogens, and that it can carry large amounts of

sediment and debris—factors that caused hundreds of deaths in Haiti after Hurricane Matthew. The ASCE notes, “Most of North Carolina’s population lives in communities that have no dedicated source of funding to improve stormwater quality.”

The conditions in North Carolina and the catastrophe unfolding in the wake of Hurricane Matthew are characteristic of American society as a whole. Eight years after the economic crash of 2008, social inequality is at record levels. The corporate and financial elite have amassed vast fortunes, while millions of people face poverty, low-wage jobs and the consequences of decades of neglect of basic social infrastructure.



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