Mounting social and health disaster in Louisiana after Hurricane Laura

J. L'Heureau
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Three days after landfall in southwest Louisiana of Hurricane Laura, the most powerful hurricane to hit the state since 1856 and the fifth strongest ever to hit the continental US, the scale of destruction and accompanying social crisis is coming into sharp relief.

Almost 600,000 residents along the stretch of the Gulf coast covering southeast Texas to southeast Louisiana were ordered to evacuate their homes in advance of the hurricane. Following landfall last Thursday, the number of fatalities continues to rise and will no doubt continue to do so as rescue and recovery efforts proceed.

As of this writing, there are a total of 17 reported deaths from both Louisiana and Texas. Five fatalities are reported in east Texas, with four of the five succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning from improper indoor usage of a portable generator. In Louisiana, there are 12 reported deaths, including seven people killed by carbon monoxide poisoning from a generator.

Such a high number of deaths due to improper generator usage is alarming, considering that more than 900,000 people lost power during the storm. According to poweroutage.us, as of Sunday morning 350,000 people were without power in Louisiana, the majority in the southwestern, central and northern parts of the state. In Texas, 77,000 were without power, and 9,000 lacked power in Arkansas.

Christina Stephens, a spokeswoman for Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, said last Friday that "about 23 percent of the state was out of power." A resident of Lake Charles told the *New Orleans Advocate*, "So many people stayed... I'm just trying to figure out if they're dead or alive right now, but they don't have any power or service, so I couldn't get in touch with anybody."

The Red Cross stated that the hurricane destroyed up to 8,000 homes in both Louisiana and Texas, and that tens of thousands of people have sought shelter, including 3,000 in hotels across Louisiana.

Moody's Analytics estimated that the total economic cost of Hurricane Laura could be around $20 billion. Other estimates projected $25 billion in damages. According to the US Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters report for this year, the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), which is a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), estimates that as of July, "there have been 10 weather/climate disaster events with losses exceeding $1 billion each to affect the United States."

The same report states that the US "has sustained 273 weather and climate disasters since 1980 where overall damages/costs reached or exceeded $1 billion," and that "the total cost of these 273 events exceeds $1.790 trillion."

A report by the Environmental Defense Fund cited in a recent opinion piece published by the *Hill* found that "storms and hurricanes accounted for $954.4 billion" of these disasters since 1980. The NCEI report indicates that this year will mark the seventh consecutive year "in which 10 or more billion-dollar weather and climate disaster events have impacted the United States."

Thousands of homes in Lake Charles, which has a population of 75,000, had their roofs torn off, rendering them vulnerable to rainy weather over the weekend. This has forced many evacuees who cannot afford to remain evacuated for a prolonged period to return immediately.

But given the historic downturn in economic activity and resulting financial hardship the vast majority of the population is facing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic,

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the time it takes for businesses and homeowners to recover could be much longer than in the past. Many will not be able to cover the exorbitant cost of insurance deductibles. Tom Larsen of CoreLogic said that since Hurricane Harvey in 2017, he's seen that "only about 30 percent to 40 percent of homes that have flood damage have flood insurance."

In addition to the wind damage, storm surge and flooding, Hurricane Laura dropped more than a foot of rain in some areas. The small town of Cameron, Louisiana was left inundated with water. The day after Laura's impact, due to power outages, 98 water systems in Louisiana were inoperable, affecting more than 200,000 people, especially in Lake Charles, DeRidder and Alexandria. Many people might not have access to clean water for weeks.

The six water plants in Lake Charles took a heavy beating from the hurricane. Aly Neel, a spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Health, said that even after getting them back online, which might take one week, it cannot be guaranteed that they "will be fully functional, that they will be able to provide 100 percent or that they can fully treat the water."

Republican Mayor Nic Hunter has not given an estimate for when power and water service will be adequately restored. He wrote on Facebook, "If you come back to Lake Charles to stay, make sure you understand the above reality and are prepared to live in it for many days, probably weeks."

Discussing the widespread damage to the water and sewerage systems in southwest Louisiana, Amanda Ames, the chief engineer at the Louisiana Department of Health, stated: "This is definitely a bigger issue than we normally see. We always have power loss after a major storm... but significant damage to water systems is not something that occurs after storms like this."

President Donald Trump, upon Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards' request, approved a disaster declaration for 23 parishes (or counties) in the state, opening up assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The COVID-19 pandemic, still raging uncontrolled across the country due to the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school campaigns of the Democrats and Republicans, is also greatly exacerbating Laura's impact. Given that testing for the virus was limited to only hospitals and clinics across the state last week in preparation for Tropical Storm Marco and Hurricane Laura, and that, as Bel Edwards noted, southwest Louisiana "was the most active region in the state for new cases before the storm arrived," the state has essentially been "flying blind" regarding the virus' current reach, according to Dr. Alex Billioux, the head of the state's Office of Public Health.

State officials announced 30 more COVID-19-related deaths last Friday, and hospitalizations for the virus have been rising again.

"If we think of Laura on top of COVID or COVID on top of Laura, it's new and overwhelming," said Susanne Straif-Bourgeois, an associate professor at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences School of Public Health. Expressing the anti-scientific and indifferent response of the ruling class to the social, economic and psychological impacts of the pandemic and worsening weather disasters, Bel Edwards summed up the situation by stating, "It is just not possible for me to tell you what we are going to do in two weeks."

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