

# Heavy rain and snow highlight inequality in California

Rafael Azul  
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Starting February 21, 2023, California has been battered by an unusually powerful series of winter storms. Blizzard conditions forced the closure of major north-south and east-west highways over the mountains surrounding Los Angeles. Winds gusting up to 65 miles (105 kilometers) per hour affected trucking and transportation throughout the region. Heavy rain in the lowlands and several feet of snow in the mountains have caused floods and blocked the movement of people, trapping many in their homes. So far there have been at least 22 confirmed casualties.

Conditions have become particularly dire in Los Angeles County and the surrounding counties, where such harsh winter weather conditions are extremely rare. Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency Wednesday night to aid residents of the San Bernardino Mountain communities who have been trapped in their homes for days.

Federal climate scientists currently estimate that the cost to the state of a wave of storms that began in late December 2022 will exceed \$1 billion in damage to public infrastructure (roads, bridges, water facilities, etc.). There have been 700 landslides across the state just since the start of the year. Thousands of homes are scheduled to be “red tagged,” declared uninhabitable, under conditions in which less than 2 percent of homeowners have flood insurance.

The storms have exposed economic and social inequality across the state. “People are living in very unsafe conditions,” declared Oakland homeless advocate Talya Husbands-Hankin, interviewed by BBC News. “People do not have appropriate access to sanitation, to clean drinking water, to electricity.”

“Many are disabled, most are medically vulnerable as a result of living outside,” she added.

For much of this week, customers of the Los Angeles

Department of Water and Power (DWP) were without electricity, and over 40,000 households serviced by the Southern California Edison (SCE) company have been affected.

Only a few days before the storms hit, Culver City, an upscale community on Los Angeles’ west side associated with the early days of filmmaking, imposed stringent prohibitions on so-called homeless camps, joining cities and counties across the state in making life even more miserable for the unhoused.

On January 4, San Francisco conducted homeless sweeps in the midst of a major storm. Many had their few belongings trashed.

Last year eight homeless people froze to death in Sacramento, the state capital, and two others, aged 40 and 61, died when trees fell on their tents. Local officials ordered the towing of SUVs that were being used by unhoused people as shelter. “They picked the worst day to do this,” said Joe Hill, a homeless person whose belongings were drenched by the rain, to the *Sacramento Bee*.

According to recent estimates, there are 170,000 unhoused people in California. One-third live in Los Angeles County. Confronted daily with the lack of housing, and under the impact of the storms, recently elected Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass asked that citizens provide shelter to the homeless during the storms.

Also vulnerable are low-income older adults, farm workers, the working poor and those who live in flood plains prone to flooding where housing costs are lower. The combination of low temperatures and natural gas shortages have caused heating bills to soar.

This is the second wave of winter storms to hit the state since the beginning of the year. In all, some 40 trillion gallons of water (in the form of snow and rain)

have dumped on the state by so-called atmospheric rivers, long and wide moisture currents, low pressure systems drawing moisture from the Arctic. Similar conditions have not been seen since 1989.

According a January 19 article in *Nature*, the magnitude and potential damage in lives and dollars of winter storms in the western United States are increasing as a result of climate change, both because of a rise in the number of storms and an increase in the moisture-carrying capacity of the atmosphere. “Under a high emission scenario, precipitation volume from the top 20% of winter storms is projected to increase by up to 40% across the region by mid-century. The average increase in precipitation volume (31%) is contributed by 22% from increasing area coverage and 19% from increasing storm intensity,” the article said.

The study’s author, Ruby Leung, a climate scientist at the US Pacific Northwest National Lab explained, “It could be even worse. We need to start planning how would we be able to deal with this.” The “sharpening” of storms (higher precipitation in the center, less on the edges) may change the overall impact somewhat, but the western United States and California, in particular, are expected to get higher increases in peak rain and snow fall compared to the South and Northwest regions.



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