

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104039](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Disasters affect numerous American communities and cause billions of dollars of damage. Many factors affect individual and community recovery. Recently, federal actions have focused on equitable administration of federal recovery assistance.

Members of Congress asked GAO to report on the impact of federal disaster recovery programs on various societal groups. This report addresses (1) research findings on recovery outcomes related to select federal programs, (2) research findings and recovery stakeholder perspectives on participation in select federal recovery programs, and (3) the extent to which federal disaster recovery agencies have taken actions to identify and address potential access barriers and disparate outcomes.

GAO conducted a literature review to summarize key research findings and interviewed state, tribal, and nonprofit recovery stakeholders to gain their perspectives. GAO analyzed program documentation and interviewed federal program officials from the six federal programs selected because of their historically large obligations for disaster recovery.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FEMA, HUD, and SBA lead an interagency effort to develop (1) a plan to ensure use of comprehensive information and (2) processes to identify and address access barriers and disparate outcomes. FEMA and SBA concurred. HUD did not agree or disagree with the recommendations, but officials stated they would work with federal recovery partners on these issues.

View [GAO-22-104039](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov

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DISASTER RECOVERY

Additional Actions Needed to Identify and Address Potential Recovery Barriers

What GAO Found

Limited research exists on the relationship between disaster outcomes and the six federal recovery programs included in this GAO review: the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Individual Assistance and Public Assistance programs, National Flood Insurance Program, and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program; the Small Business Administration's (SBA) Disaster Loan program; and Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery. The design of the nine available studies did not allow GAO to draw conclusions about causal relationships between federal disaster recovery programs and overall recovery outcomes. Of the studies that were available, GAO grouped the findings into two categories: (1) socioeconomic outcomes and (2) community resilience outcomes. Our review of socioeconomic studies suggested that outcomes of disaster assistance for individual programs may be uneven across communities. This review also suggested that federal programs may enhance community resilience and prevent flood-related fatalities for vulnerable residents.

Limited research exists on the relationship between participation in select federal recovery programs and individual, community, and program characteristics. However, GAO found that some studies and stakeholder perspectives provided insight into the relationships between socioeconomic, demographic, community, and programmatic characteristics and participation. For example, a study of counties in one state found greater levels of flood mitigation in communities with larger tax revenues and larger budgets for emergency management. In addition, officials representing states said larger cities can hire a third party to manage disaster recovery, but small towns and rural areas may lack resources to contract for disaster recovery services. Similarly, an official representing tribal nations told GAO that not all tribal nations have sufficient funding to develop emergency management departments, which can be a barrier to accessing federal resources. Further, representatives from voluntary organizations told GAO that conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability—such as lower-income households or homelessness—may present barriers to participating in federal recovery programs.

Some of the six federal recovery programs in this report have taken some actions that could help officials identify and address potential access barriers and disparate outcomes. However, programs lack key information—data and analysis—that would allow them to examine patterns and indicators of potential access barriers and disparate recovery outcomes. Moreover, the programs have not taken action to determine (1) the universe of data needed to support this kind of analysis; and (2) sources and methods to obtain those data when the programs do not already collect them, including overcoming key challenges. These programs also lacked routine, interagency processes to address such barriers within or across recovery programs on an ongoing basis. Systematic efforts to collect and analyze data, and routine, interagency processes to address any identified access barriers or disparate outcomes, would help ensure equal opportunity to participate in disaster recovery in a meaningful way. Such actions would be consistent with the National Disaster Recovery Framework and recent governmentwide equity initiatives.