Tainted Grapes, Tainted Lungs:
Lessons on Inclusive Wildfire Disaster and Climate Adaptation Planning for Undocumented Migrants

Dr. Michael Méndez
California Wildfire Smoke Reaches Europe

The (in)visible victims of disaster: Understanding the vulnerability of undocumented Latino/a and indigenous immigrants

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Abstract

As climate change advances, communities across the United States are adapting to the increased threat of wildfires, drought, heatwaves, and infectious diseases. Such disasters are expected to become more frequent and severe. Now more than ever, it is crucial to understand how these events amplify existing inequalities, and how to lessen the resulting harms. Differences in human vulnerability to disaster stem from a range of social, economic, historical, and political factors. We argue that given their social status, undocumented Latino/a and indigenous immigrants are particularly vulnerable to disasters and require special consideration in disaster planning. They are disproportionately affected by racial discrimination, exploitation, economic hardships, less English and Spanish proficiency, and fear of deportation in their everyday lives—their pre-disaster marginalized status. In the case of the Thomas Fire in California’s Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, we show that emergency response and recovery efforts ignored their needs. Resources were directed toward privileged individuals, leaving local immigrant rights and environmental justice groups to provide essential services such as language access to emergency information in Spanish and Indigenous tongues; labor protections for farmworkers endangered in the fields; and a private disaster relief fund for undocumented immigrants ineligible for federal aid. The article concludes with preliminary participant observations from the COVID-19 pandemic response in the region, indicating how lessons from the fire have informed official actions. As governments grapple with the increasing severity of disasters, understanding the differential impacts on undocumented immigrants can help improve disaster planning to protect the most vulnerable and stigmatized populations.
Behind the Bougainvillea Curtain:
The Context of Extreme Wildfires
Key Impacts from Wildfire to Undocumented Migrants

- Language Access
- Workers Health and Safety/Rights
- Immigration Status, Disaster Aid, and Unemployment Insurance
- Housing/Transportation
• Fine particulate matter (PM2.5) from wildfire smoke is more harmful than car exhaust (Aguilera et al., 2021).

• Annual mean PM2.5 has increased as a result of extreme wildfire events, which are now the main source of exceedances (Liang et al., 2021).

• The harm to farmworkers may be greater than previously thought; further research and new policies are needed (Méndez et al., 2020).
“We all got sick. Our throats closed in from breathing too much smoke and our kids couldn't go to school. We had to buy masks and medicine for our throats and some goggles because my eyes were irritated when I worked.”

--F.C.P., Indigenous Farmworker

*I*Black Saliva

“I could not get to the homes where I worked because the streets were closed. Two of the homes I worked at were destroyed. One of my good friends was lost during the disaster. He had only been living in area for 3 weeks before he died. I myself am a cancer survivor and am the only one who provides for the family.”

--SZ, Landscaper

*Syndemic and existing health disparities*
Research Implication: *Thinking beyond* Property Values

Credit: MICOP (2017)
Opinion: What happened in Pajaro isn’t just a ‘natural’ disaster