

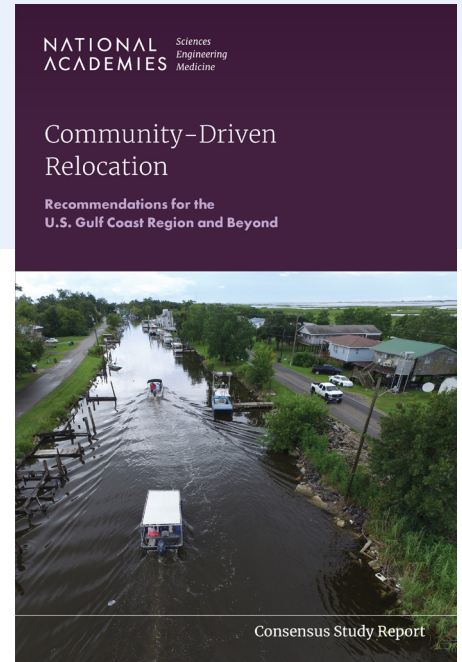
Community-Driven Relocation

Recommendations for the U.S. Gulf Coast Region and Beyond

More than 200 one-billion-dollar disasters – including flooding, freezes, severe storms, tropical cyclones, wildfires, and winter storms – have occurred in the United States Gulf Coast region between 1980 and 2023. These events displace residents and, in some cases, challenge the possibility of entire communities remaining in place as the sea rises and the land subsides across the region. Yet year after year, disaster after disaster, housing and infrastructure are rebuilt in these same areas for reasons that range from deep cultural attachments and economic incentives to a lack of relocation options, among others.

As disaster recovery costs escalate, federal, state, and local governments cannot keep up. As households struggle to recover from one storm before the next one hits, families experience chronic stress with few opportunities for respite. Stress exacerbates other preexisting health conditions even as exposure to flooding and extreme heat aggravate those same conditions. These circumstances present an untenable, long-term cycle of risks that increase vulnerability and inhibit effective participation in decision-making processes from communities most at-risk.

In 2021, the Gulf Research Program of the National Academies initiated a consensus study to examine and analyze the unique challenges, needs, and opportunities associated with managing the relocation of people, infrastructure, and communities away from environmentally high-risk areas. The Board on Environmental Change and Society in the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education convened a committee of experts to provide in-



depth analysis and identify short- and long-term steps necessary for community stakeholders to plan and implement relocation in ways that are equitable, culturally appropriate, adaptive, and resilient to future regional climate conditions.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RELOCATION

Neither the Gulf Coast region nor the nation has a consistent and inclusionary process to address risks, raise awareness, or explore options for relocating communities away from environmental risks while seeking out and honoring communities' values and priorities. Even the commonly used term "managed retreat" can invoke emotional and traumatic responses from residents for a variety of reasons, including the concept of defeat and losing one's homeland.

Communities have emotional, symbolic, and physical attachments to place, thus, the terminology used is important. The committee recommends a *community-driven approach* to relocation, which implies participation and active management rather than the largely ad hoc and post-disaster reactive approach to mitigation and adaptation. Ad hoc approaches impede the fostering of trust and create barriers to genuine collaborative engagement and decision-making. Instead, community-driven approaches could address what may be entrenched perceptions of government and institutionalized factors underpinning vulnerability. To denote the communities that people are moving away from, the report uses the term "originating community"; to denote communities that people are relocating to, the report uses the term "receiving community". The study committee recognizes the importance of shared decision making in any policy-supported and institutionalized process of community-driven relocation, meaning:

- the originating community is at the center of decision-making about relocation and needs for well-being;
- policy and material supports are provided for optimally enlarging a community's option for a safe landing in the receiving community or relocation destination; and

- supports are provided for the receiving community, including land use planning, economic investments, and social resilience.

UNDERSTANDING RELOCATION IN THE GULF REGION

A holistic approach illustrates how community well-being and adaptive capacities to respond to climate threats are undermined by pre-existing and enduring social, economic, and health inequities.

The Critical Importance of History and the Current Realities of Gulf Coast Communities

The U.S. Gulf Coast is a dynamic and evolving socioecological system. Throughout history, human movement and adaptation to this system have been influenced by the knowledge and expertise of Indigenous and place-based communities. The ramifications of colonization and enslavement, environmental fluctuations, the politics of development, and the regional primacy of the petrol-chemical industrial sector have also played a part in the adaptation and resilience of communities.

Sustaining Community Well-Being: Physical, Mental and Social Health

Addressing the traumas, stressors, and a dearth of resources, while enhancing collective and individual psychological resources and strengths, are critical prerequisites to providing a foundation for communities to participate in community-driven relocation projects. Therefore, bolstering individual and organizational capacity for well-being in climate-threatened communities is essential to public health and climate adaptation across the nation.

Communication, Knowledge, and Engagement

Relocating is a complex process of change and adaptation that involves more than the physical act of moving. It is a social process that involves the cooperation, coordination, and participation of affected people at the originating and receiving nodes. Yet, processes around relocation often exclude people, neighborhoods, and communities from problem solving and developing adaptive solutions, and often do not support opportunities for collective action. Relocation processes

will only be just and equitable through a community-driven approach, of which participatory planning, access to knowledge, transparency of process and outcome, and shared decision-making, are core elements.

Planning for Receiving and Originating Communities

Community-driven relocation requires significant planning on the part of receiving and originating communities, including the social and financial support needed for originating communities, the physical and social infrastructure needed in receiving communities, and how to adaptively manage the resulting open space (e.g., water retention, commemorative sites, wildlife habitat enhancement). In addition to effective communication and engagement of residents in receiving communities, effective preparation entails collaboration among government agencies across jurisdictions (e.g., federal, state, local) and regional planning entities, including data sharing, guiding appropriate adaptation investments in receiving areas (e.g., infrastructure [energy, water, roads], housing, public services [schools, fire and police]), disinvestment in maladaptation in originating areas, and the facilitation of relationships between and among originating and receiving communities.

FUNDING, POLICY, AND PLANNING

The committee identified a complex web of federal programs, laws, and plans that communities must navigate when pursuing community-driven relocation and considered how to make these more inclusive of and responsive to the needs of originating and receiving communities. A major obstacle is that relocation is currently managed using a “disaster-recovery model,” meaning that most funding and technical assistance

comes episodically as a reaction to a specific disaster or in the form of annual nationally competitive programs, rather than being available year-round and allocated based on risk and need to include addressing the root causes of vulnerability. The compressed timeframe in which people are required to act often hampers effective community engagement, collective decision making, and collaborative planning processes needed to address the myriad complexities tied to community-driven relocation.

Overcoming Challenges and Identifying Opportunities

The committee provided an overview of the numerous challenges that households, local and state governments, and other community stakeholders might face when navigating the relocation process including: shared responsibilities between governments and households; the role of insurance and its benefits and drawbacks under the current system (e.g., parametric insurance, NFIP); individual and household eligibility determinations and prioritization in current relocation assistance programs (e.g., per-disaster rulemaking, heirs’ property rights, renter support); and challenges related to the complex and time-consuming process of obtaining funding for a buyout. These challenges can result in unequal access to relocation-related funding and dissuade people and communities from participating in existing relocation programs. However, the committee also identified opportunities under the existing legal framework which would help to address these challenges, including: establishing knowledge sharing networks and a universal federal application for relocation assistance; adjusting benefit-cost analysis methods; and providing additional financial and technical assistance to households in need.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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To read the full report, visit <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/27213>.

Board on Environmental Change and Society
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