



# Caregiving in Crisis: An Exploration of Foster Family Experiences Post-Disaster

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## ABSTRACT

Children in foster care who have experienced disasters represent a uniquely **vulnerable population** often overlooked within traditional emergency management frameworks and not previously included in research on children and disasters. While emergency plans frequently categorize residents into broad, generalized groups, this approach fails to recognize the **complex subpopulations within a community**, such as foster families, who face **distinct needs, risks, and legal restrictions** that biological families may not experience.

This research poster highlights the **critical need** for emergency managers to move beyond one-size-fits-all planning and instead acknowledge foster youth and families as a specific subcategory that requires adjustments to preparedness, response, and long-term support strategies to **provide appropriate assistance** through our work and time in the communities we serve. By understanding these extensive differences and assets foster families have, emergency managers can create more **equitable, inclusive, and effective disaster systems** that reflect the diverse realities of the communities they serve.

## INTRODUCTION

- **Children in foster care represent a uniquely vulnerable population in disaster contexts** due to their legal status, placement instability, and elevated exposure to prior trauma.
- Foster care is defined as a temporary service provided by the state in which children are placed with alternative caregivers while legal custody remains with government authorities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).
- This structure creates **additional barriers** during emergencies, including limitations on the guardian decision-making, challenges related to evacuation and reunification, and disruptions in access to services.
- Despite these complexities, emergency management frameworks frequently rely on broad population classifications that fail to account for foster youth and foster families as a distinct subgroup with specialized needs.



## EXPECTED DELIVERABLES

- Pilot dataset documenting foster family experiences
- White paper/editorial on policy & practice gaps
- Conference poster & presentation (Natural Hazards Workshop)
- Public-facing infographic for practitioners & policymakers
- Data to inform external grant proposals

## Research Question:

*“What are the post-disaster experiences of foster families and how are they impacted by emergency management policies?”*

## METHODS

- Design: **Qualitative pilot study** using rapid ethnographic methods
- Snowball Sampling
- Timeline: March–June 2026
- Data collection:
  - Rapid deployment to U.S. disaster areas (March–May)
  - Semi-structured **virtual interviews** (look-back: 3 years)
  - Participants: Foster caregivers in the U.S. or territories (n=40).
- Recruitment: Social media, child welfare agencies, National Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD) nonprofit networks

## Results (In Progress)

- Institutional Review Board Approval - April 2026
- Participant recruitment and interviews in Late Spring - Early Summer 2026

## CONCLUSION

- Foster families face unique vulnerabilities:
  - Legal & administrative constraints
  - Placement instability
  - Emotional & caregiving responsibilities
- Disaster research must center foster parents lived experiences
- Findings inform trauma-informed, foster-specific disaster policies
- Pilot study provides foundation for future research & actionable recommendations



## LITERATURE REVIEW

- Disasters impact children’s physical & behavioral health:
  - Anxiety, difficulty concentrating, persistent fear (Osofsky et al., 2007; Pynoos et al., 1996)
- Prior trauma (common in foster care) → higher post-disaster risk (Bowlby, 1973; Osofsky, 2004)
- Foster care system during disasters:
  - Temporary, state-supervised placements (Mandelbaum, 2007)
  - Barriers: evacuation, housing, reunification, service continuity
- Historical evidence: Interstate placements often delayed (Mandelbaum, 2007; Davis & Miller, 2014)
  - Hurricane Katrina displaced >2,300 foster children (Jones, 2005)
  - Lack of coordinated disaster planning (Paris, 2010)
- **Critical gap: Foster families lived experiences rarely documented** (Fothergill & Peek, 2015)

