

Understanding Subnational Capacity for Long-Term Housing Recovery: Insights from Literature and Practice

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Introduction

While the disaster recovery field emphasizes the need for "capacity-building," a precise, housing-focused definition of capacity that can be used to organize efforts, target assistance, and evaluate progress has not yet been fully articulated. We attempt to advance a concrete definition of government capacity for medium- to long-term disaster recovery that can be operationalized to improve resilience for housing recovery at the subnational government level.

We conducted a targeted review of more than 50 years of interdisciplinary scholarship to identify core components of subnational government capacity for disaster and housing recovery. We then validated our findings with approximately 20 original interviews with local officials, planners, and recovery managers from two contrasting cases of Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR funding): the 2018 Camp Fire in Paradise, California and the 2018 floods in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas.

Aims

1. Clarify what capacity means for housing recovery within U.S. federalism.
2. Distinguish medium- and long-term housing recovery needs from short-term disaster response needs.
3. Identify components of government capacity essential to housing recovery.
4. Propose measurement of capacity concepts and components.

Methodology

- Qualitative case study approach
- Study areas: Lower Rio Grande Valley, TX and Northern California
- Disaster events: 2018 Lower Rio Grande Valley floods and 2018 Camp Fire

Literature Review

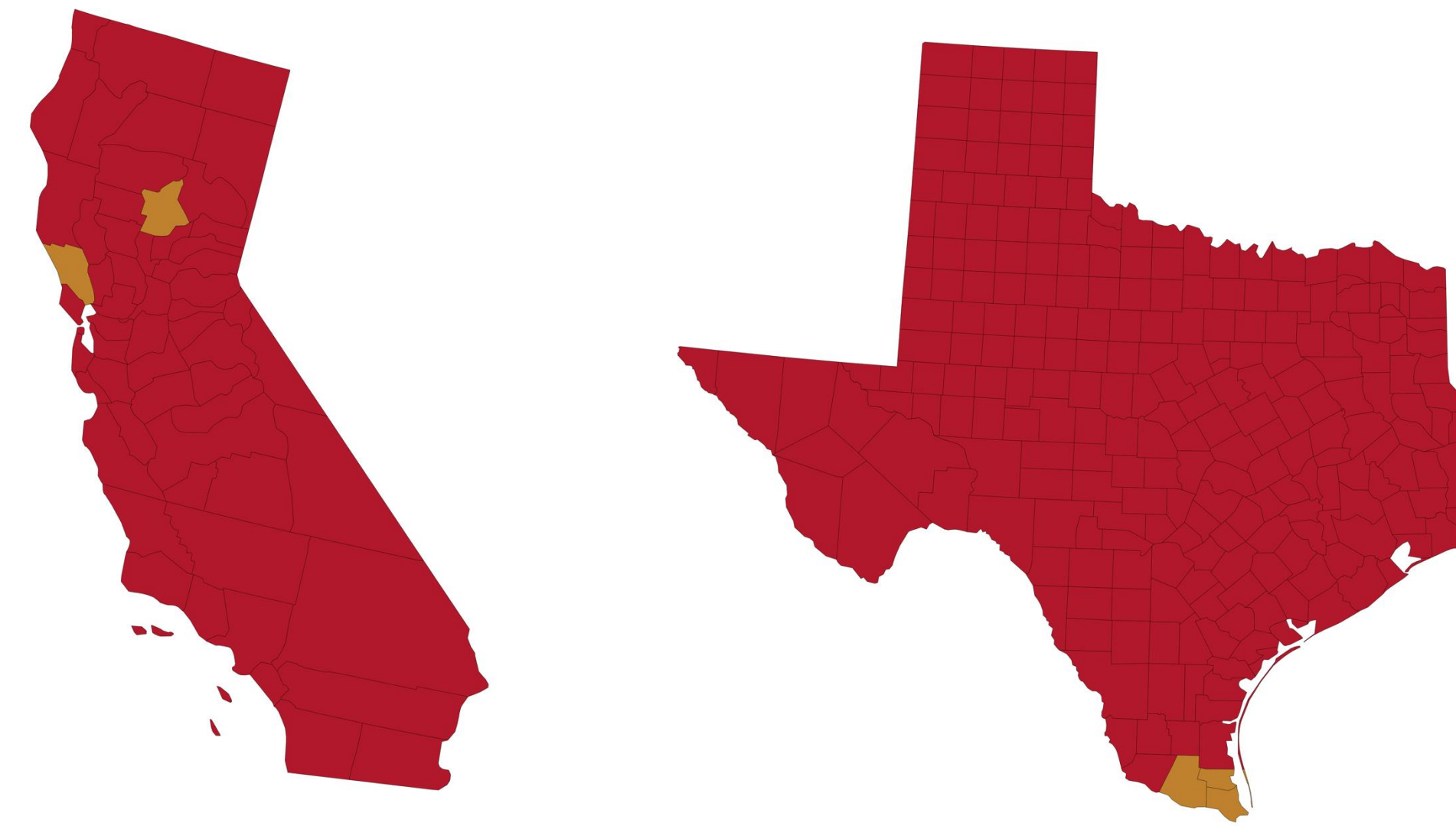
- Began with 10 seminal articles in the political and disaster science and public administration literature
- Wider literature search and snowball sampling of references
- Search included government capacity for disaster recovery and community capacity for housing recovery

Primary Data Collection

- 8 interviews conducted with city/town and county government officials in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas
- 8 interviews conducted with local and state government officials in Northern California
- Initial outreach list compiled with publicly available information, then snowballing to identify interviewees

Research Question

How is subnational (state and local) government capacity defined and conceptualized in relation to housing recovery, specifically?



Results

Subnational government capacity includes the ability to:

1. Manage and direct resources,
2. Carry out essential functions, and
3. Implement programs and policy to achieve (housing recovery) goals.

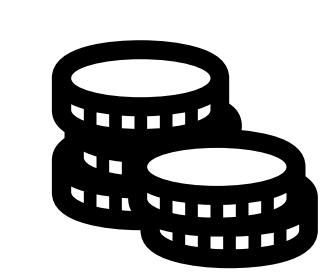
Five components of subnational government capacity are essential for post-disaster housing recovery:



Administrative: The ability to develop and implement policies, procedures, and human resources



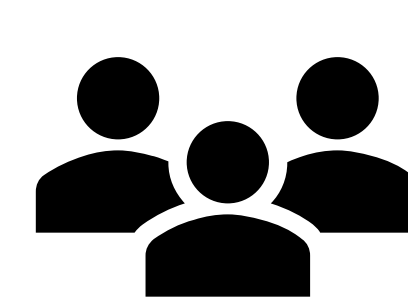
Technical: The software and hardware needed to handle technical tasks



Financial: The ability to generate, access, manage, and allocate funds



Intergovernmental: Coordination, collaboration, and clear articulation of authority and roles between and across all levels of government



Civic and community engagement: The ability to meaningfully engage, build trust, and coordinate recovery efforts with communities and civil society

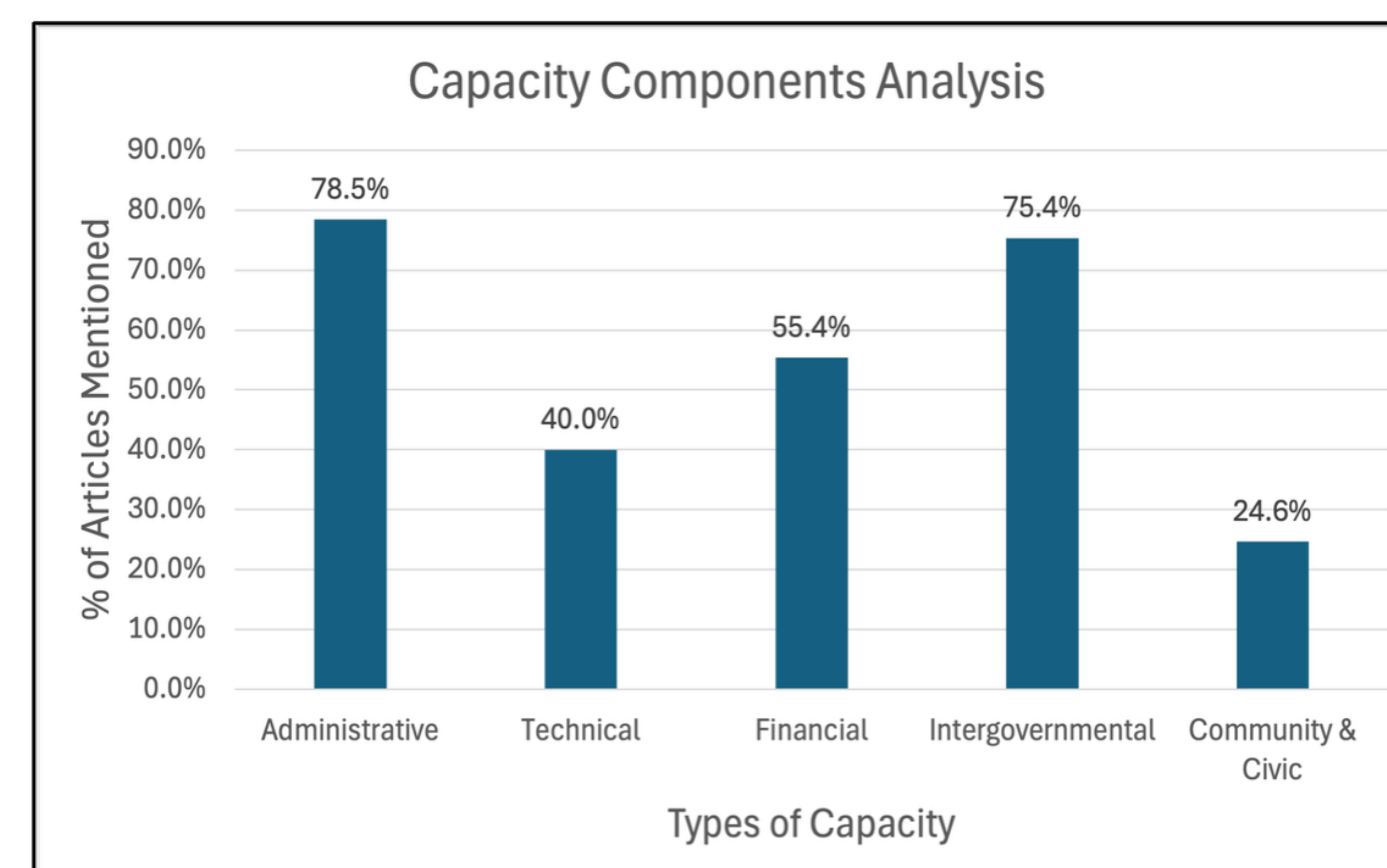


Figure 1. Distribution of components of capacity defined and analyzed in the literature.

Key Findings

- There is no consensus in the literature on **which component of capacity is most important** nor discussion of weighting of capacity components.
- Disaster publications focused on the shorter-term response phase, while housing recovery research focused on long-term community development. **Research on medium-term post-disaster housing recovery is lacking.**
- Understanding the **interplay between political dynamics and capacity** is important for effective recovery responses.

Mismatch between academic literature and lived experience

- Literature focused on **administrative/staffing, financial, and technical needs** for disaster recovery, but practitioners emphasized **the importance of effective community engagement** to ensure funds meet residents' needs.
- Baseline fiscal and staffing resources are **necessary but not sufficient** to meet residents' housing recovery needs.
- **Functional and collaborative intergovernmental relations**, both vertically and horizontally, are vital for limiting duplication, sharing best practices, and ensuring CDBG-DR funding meets the most affected groups' needs.
- **Community engagement capacity is a prerequisite for successful housing recovery.** Without the ability to engage residents to understand their lived experience and incorporate local needs into program design and implementation, programs will fail to build resilience, entrench existing inequities, and leave residents unprepared for the next disaster.
- More research is needed to **better understand and measure capacity specific to post-disaster housing recovery** and to ensure academic findings are validated and informed by the lived experience of those leading receipt and implementation of CDBG-DR funding.

Applications

- This project advances a practical definition of capacity for post-disaster housing recovery that can be used by government officials to implement housing recovery programs that address residents' needs.
- We plan to share our findings with government officials and community organizations in a digestible, useful format that enables them to apply learnings to their operations.
- By contrasting different case studies, we can examine commonalities and differences in capacity challenges and needs across different contexts and disasters.

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