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Hurricane Harvey: The Experiences of Immigrants Living in the Texas Gulf Coast

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Introduction

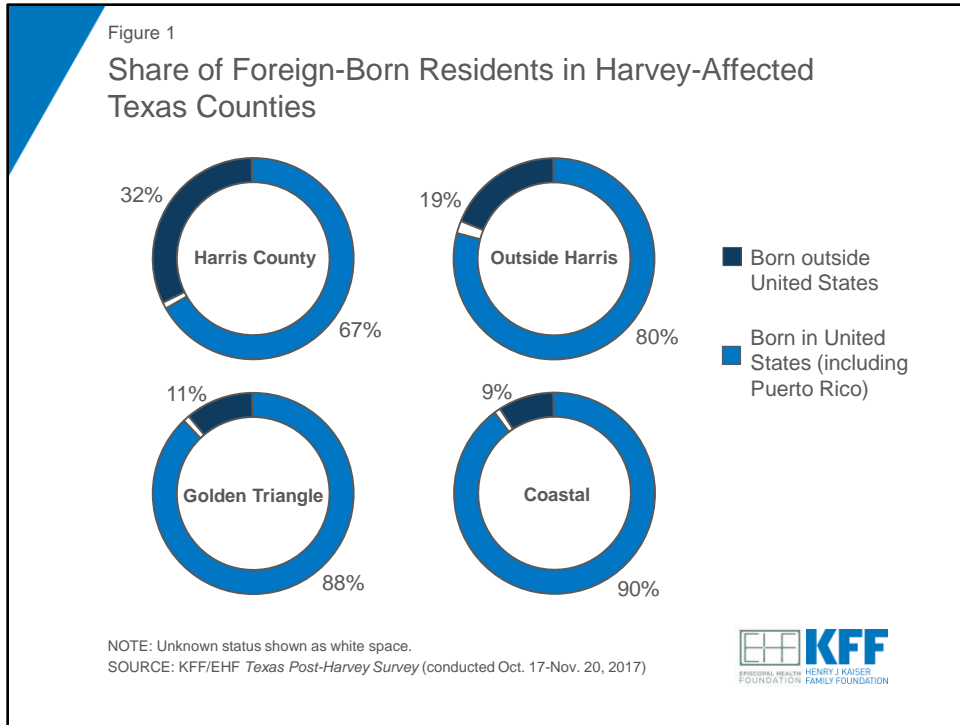
On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey began devastating large parts of the Texas Gulf Coast region. In order to provide policymakers, funders, and others working on the recovery effort with reliable information about how Texas residents were affected by Hurricane Harvey and what their needs and priorities are when it comes to recovery, the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Episcopal Health Foundation partnered to conduct a representative survey of residents in 24 counties along the Texas Gulf Coast that were heavily impacted by property damage from the storm. Using data from the survey, this brief gives an overview of the views and experiences of immigrants who were living in Texas Gulf Coast counties that were affected by Hurricane Harvey¹. For a variety of reasons, including potential language barriers, lack of social ties, and fears of drawing attention to their own or someone else's legal resident status, immigrants may be more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters and their aftermath compared to those who were born in the United States. This summary aims to highlight immigrants' experiences with Harvey in order to better understand the particular needs of this potentially vulnerable population both in recovering from Harvey and preparing for future storms. A full report on the survey can be found [here](#).

Key Findings

- Compared with native-born residents, immigrants in the Texas counties surveyed report more tenuous financial and social circumstances. Seven in ten say they have just a few or no people living nearby they can rely on for help or support, and more than half report incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Immigrants were more likely than other residents to report employment and income losses as a result of Hurricane Harvey (64 percent versus 39 percent). While immigrants were somewhat less likely than native residents to report damage to their homes as a result of the storm, among those who did have damage, immigrants were less likely to say they had applied for disaster assistance (40 percent versus 64 percent) or that they had any type of home or flood insurance (41 percent versus 55 percent).
- Half of immigrants whose homes were damaged (46 percent) said they were worried that if they tried to get help in recovering from Hurricane Harvey, they would draw attention to their or a family member's immigration status.
- Immigrants who were affected by Harvey were more likely than non-immigrants to say they needed additional help getting medical care following the storm, reflecting the fact that immigrants were less likely to report having health insurance or a regular source of care.
- Similar to residents overall, immigrants ranked rebuilding destroyed homes, along with financial and housing help for those who need it, as the top priorities for Harvey recovery efforts.

A Profile of Immigrants in Harvey-Affected Texas Counties

Across the 24 Texas counties included in the survey, a quarter of adult residents said they were born outside the United States. The share identifying as immigrants was highest in Harris County (32 percent), followed by the counties surrounding Harris (19 percent). In the Golden Triangle and Coastal areas, roughly one in ten said they were born outside the United States.²

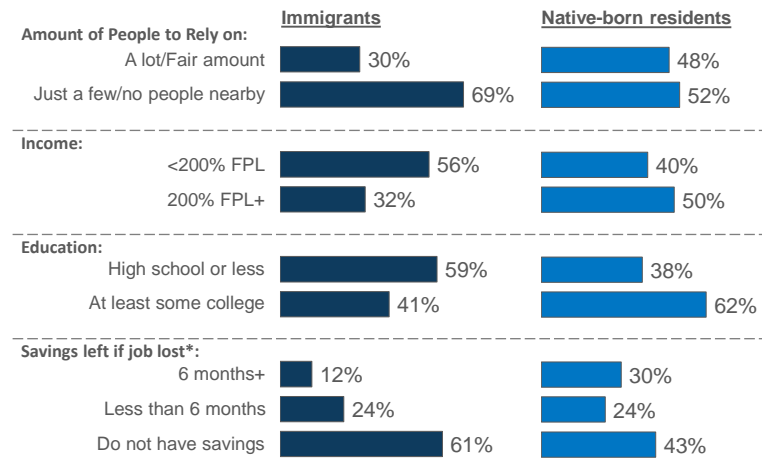


In the 24-county region, there are a number of characteristics that distinguish immigrants from their native-born counterparts. Some of these differences may point to the potential vulnerability of foreign-born residents in recovering from storms such as Harvey.

Compared to native-born residents, immigrants in these Texas counties report more tenuous financial and social circumstances. When asked how many relatives and friends they had living nearby who they could rely on for help and support, seven in ten immigrants (69 percent) said they had “just a few” or “no people living nearby.” This is compared to about half of native-born residents who said the same. In terms of their economic situation, immigrants were more likely than native-born residents to report having incomes under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (56 percent versus 40 percent), and less likely to have at least some college education (62 percent versus 41 percent). Among those who were directly affected by Hurricane Harvey, immigrants were much less likely than those born in the United States to say that if they lost their job or source of income, they would be able to live comfortably for at least 6 months (12 percent versus 30 percent).

Figure 2

Immigrants in Harvey-Affected Texas Counties Report Lower Incomes, Education than Native-Born Residents



*Asked among those affected by Hurricane Harvey. Don't know/Refused responses not shown.
 SOURCE: KFF/EHF Texas Post-Harvey Survey (conducted Oct. 17-Nov. 20, 2017)

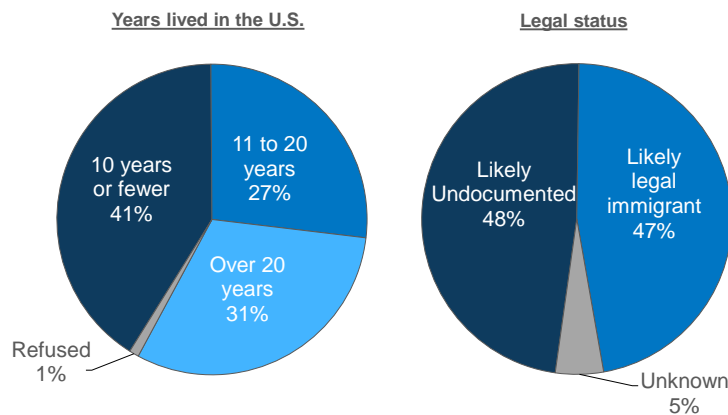


Four in ten foreign-born residents (41 percent) in the survey said they had lived in the United States for 10 years or fewer.³ Furthermore, about half were likely to be undocumented – a status that was determined by asking immigrants whether they were a permanent resident (i.e. had a green card) when they came to the United States or if their status had been changed to permanent resident since arriving.

Figure 3

Four in Ten Immigrants Lived in the U.S. for Ten Years or Fewer; Half Likely to Be Undocumented

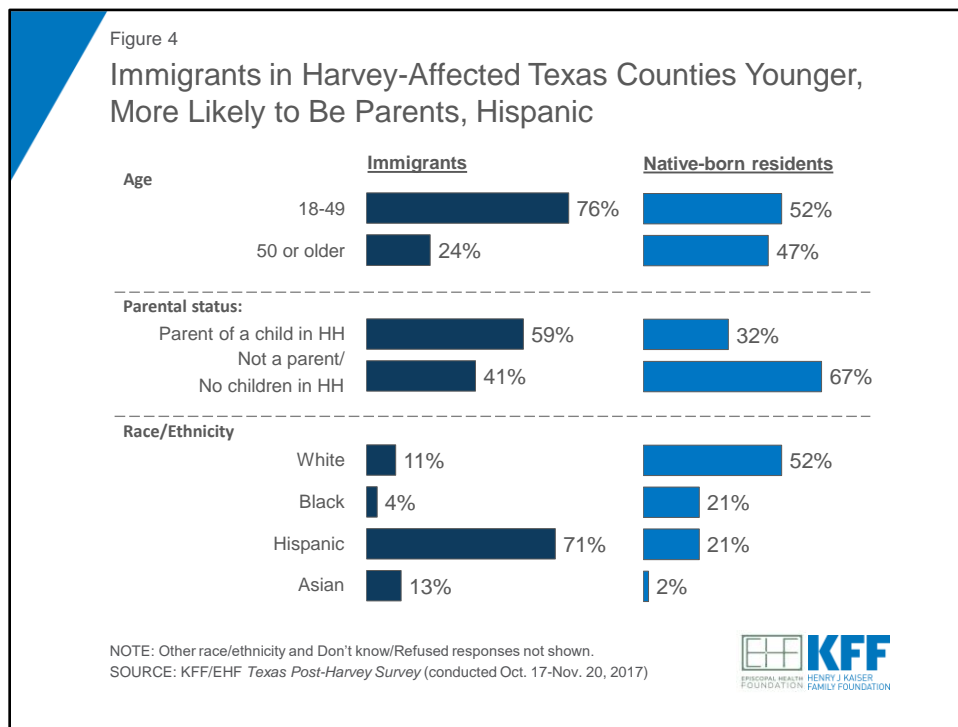
AMONG TEXAS GULF COAST IMMIGRANTS IN 24 HARVEY-AFFECTED COUNTIES:



SOURCE: KFF/EHF Texas Post-Harvey Survey (conducted Oct. 17-Nov. 20, 2017)



There are also other differences in the demographic profiles of immigrants and native-born residents in the Texas Gulf Coast – specifically by age, parental status, and race/ethnicity. Compared to residents born in the United States, immigrants were younger (three-quarters are under 50 years of age) and more likely to be the parent of a child in their household. About seven in ten immigrants in the 24-county region were Hispanic.

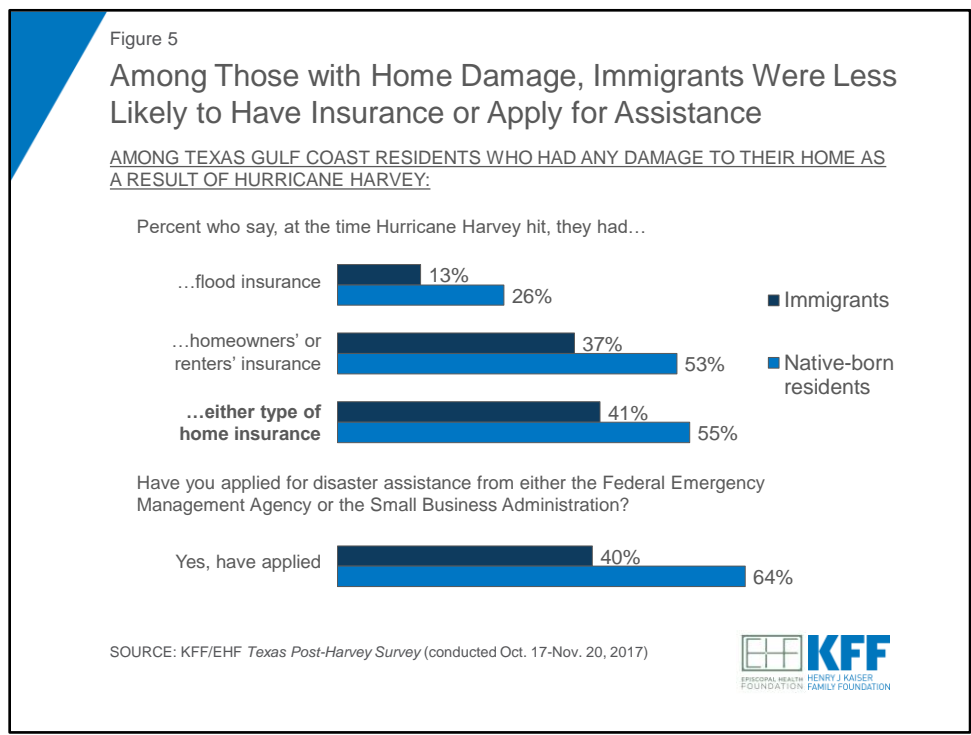


How Were Immigrants Affected by Hurricane Harvey?

Reflecting their more challenging financial circumstances and lower levels of education, immigrants were particularly vulnerable to employment and income disruptions as a result of Hurricane Harvey. A larger share of immigrants said they experienced some type of income or job loss as a result of the storm compared to native-born residents (64 percent versus 39 percent). Specifically, immigrants were more than twice as likely to say someone in their household had overtime or regular hours cut back at work (54 percent versus 24 percent). By contrast, immigrants were somewhat less likely than individuals born in the United States to say their home was damaged as a result of the storm (35 percent versus 45 percent).⁴ Overall three-quarters (74 percent) of immigrants in the region said they were affected by some type of property damage to their home or vehicle and/or some form of job or income loss, compared to 63 percent of native-born residents.

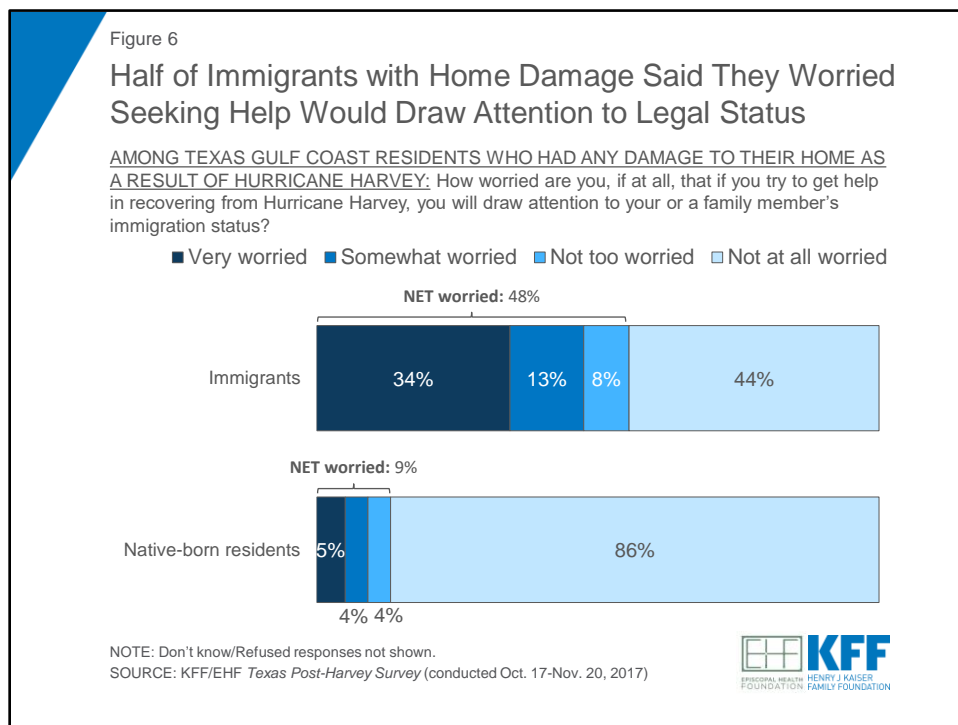
Table 1: Hurricane Harvey Effects by Residency Status		
Percent who report the following as a result of Hurricane Harvey:	Immigrants	Native-born
Someone in household experienced income/job loss (NET)	64%	39%
Someone in household was laid off/lost a job	16	10
Someone in household had hours cut back at work	54	24
Someone in household had any other loss of income	39	29
Home was damaged (NET)	35	45
Home had major damage or was destroyed	12	22
Home had minor damage	22	23
Vehicle was damaged	21	21
Any property damage/income effects	74	63

Again perhaps related to their economic status, immigrants who had damage to their home as a result of Hurricane Harvey were less likely than those born in the United States to say they had either flood insurance or homeowners'/renters' insurance at the time Hurricane Harvey hit (41 percent versus 55 percent). Immigrants who were affected by Harvey were also less likely to report applying for government assistance after the storm. Four in ten immigrants whose homes were damaged said they applied for disaster assistance from either FEMA or the SBA following the hurricane, while almost two-thirds of native-born residents said they applied.



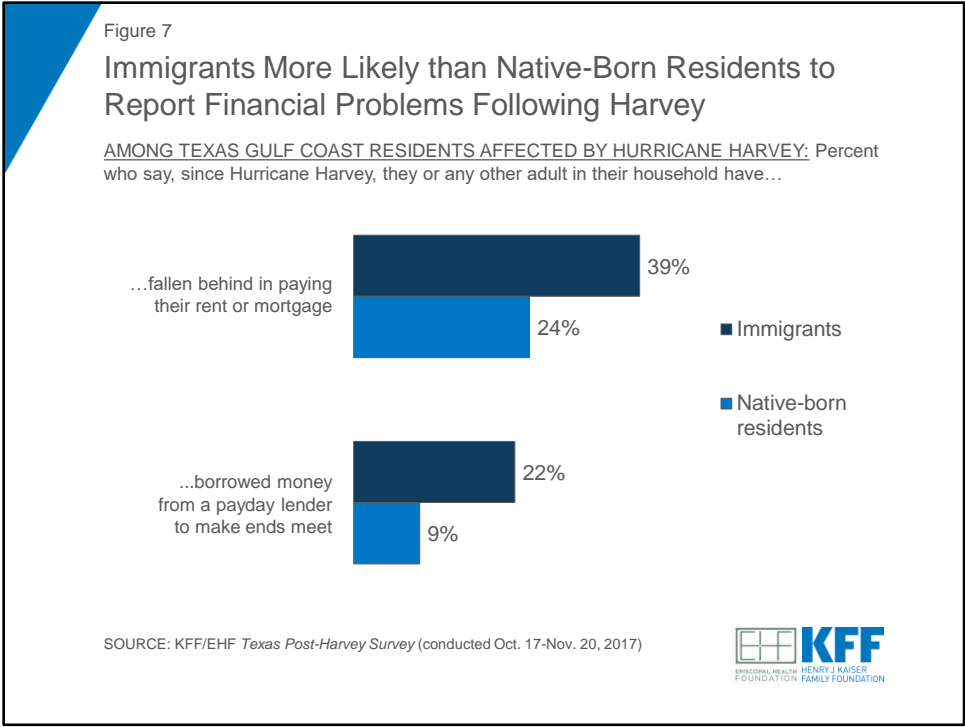
One potential reason immigrants may have been less likely to apply for disaster assistance is a possible fear of highlighting their own or someone else's legal resident status. Half of immigrants with home damage said they were "somewhat" or "very worried" (48 percent) that if they tried to get help in

recovering from Hurricane Harvey they would draw attention to their or a family member's immigration status, while one in ten (9 percent) native-born residents said they were worried.

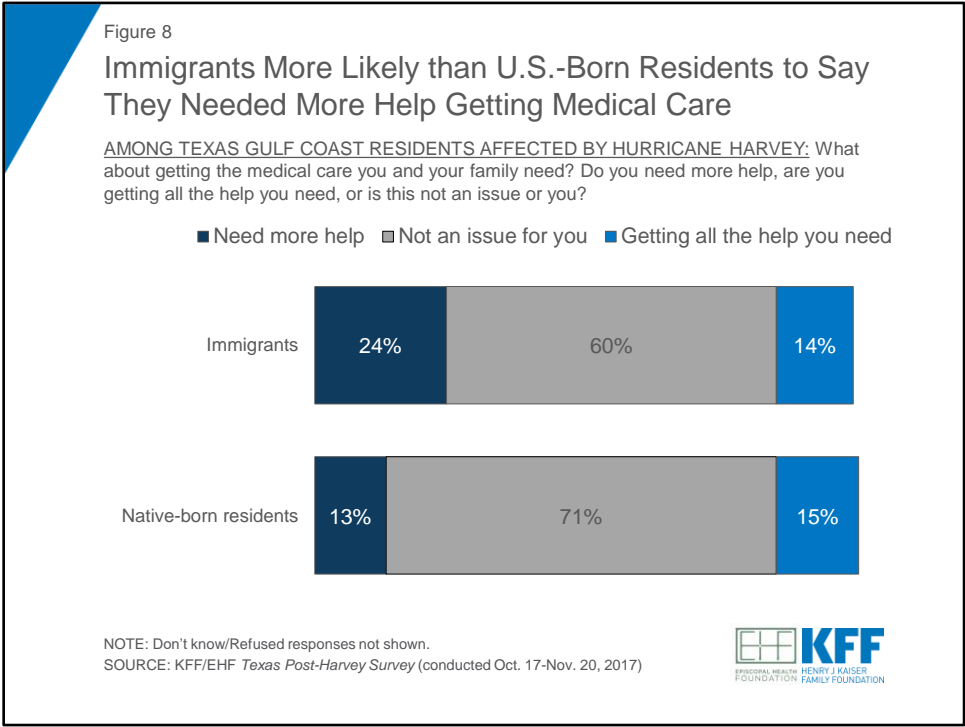


Financial Issues and Access to Health Care Following the Storm

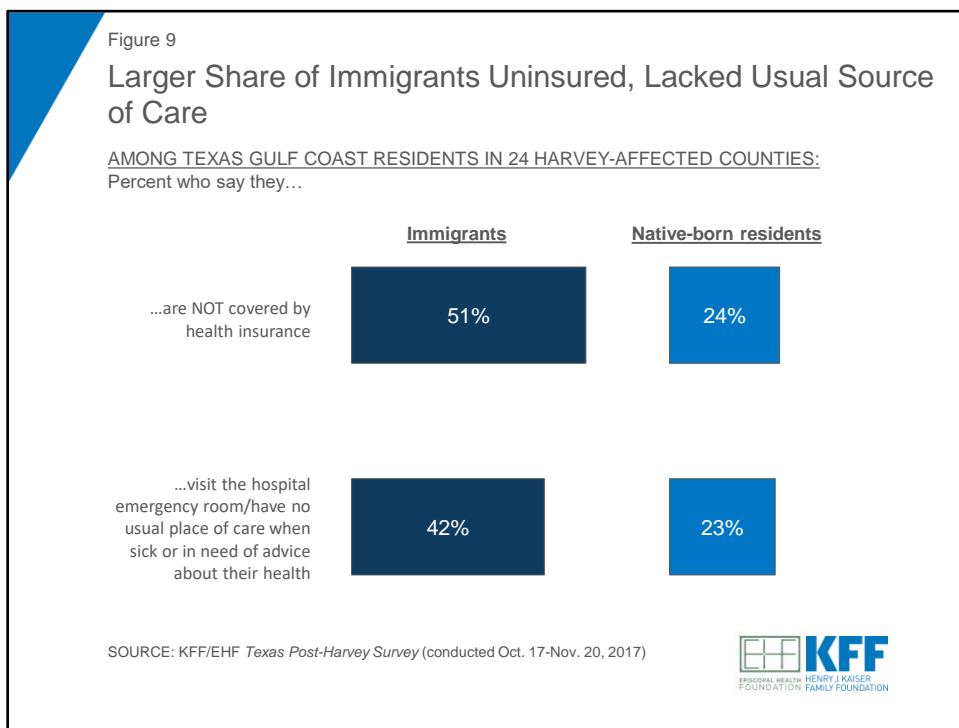
Further highlighting the income challenges that Texas Gulf Coast immigrants experienced as a result of Hurricane Harvey, the survey also finds foreign-born residents disproportionately likely to report financial difficulties in the months after the hurricane. Compared to residents born in the United States, immigrants affected by Harvey were significantly more likely to say that they or any other adult in their household had fallen behind in paying their rent or mortgage since the storm (39 percent versus 24 percent). Similarly, a larger share of immigrants said that they or a family member had borrowed money from a payday lender to make ends meet (22 percent versus 9 percent).



Immigrants were also more likely to report problems accessing health care in the wake of the storm. About a quarter (24 percent) of immigrants who were affected by the storm said they needed more help with getting the medical care they and their family needed, compared to a smaller share (13 percent) of native-born residents.



This difference may be related to the fact that immigrants are more likely than native-born residents to lack insurance coverage and access to health care providers. When asked about their health care, immigrants were about twice as likely as native-born residents to say they did not have health insurance (51 percent versus 24 percent). About four in ten immigrants also said they either visit the hospital emergency room or they have no usual place of care to go to when sick or in need of advice about their health (42 percent). This is compared to a much smaller share of residents born in the United States who said the same (23 percent).



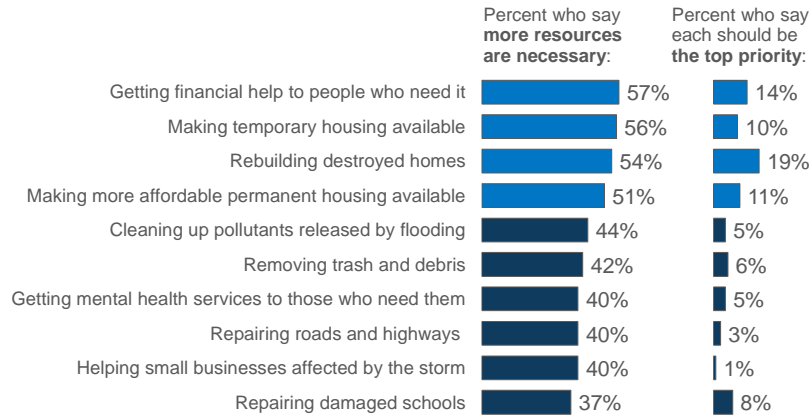
Priorities for Rebuilding Harvey-Affected Communities

Immigrants in the 24-county region – including those who were affected by the hurricane and those who weren't – identified many areas where more resources were needed for rebuilding and recovery efforts in Harvey-affected communities. Similar to all adults living along the Texas Gulf Coast, priorities for foreign-born residents focused on providing financial and housing help to those in need. A majority of foreign-born residents said more resources were necessary in getting financial help to people who need it (57 percent), making temporary housing available (56 percent), rebuilding destroyed homes (54 percent), and making more affordable permanent housing available (51 percent). When forced to choose the top priority, rebuilding destroyed homes ranked first (19 percent), followed by getting financial help to people who need it (14 percent), making more affordable permanent housing available (11 percent), and making temporary housing available (10 percent).

Figure 10

Immigrants' Top Priorities For Rebuilding Focus on Financial and Housing Help

AMONG TEXAS GULF COAST IMMIGRANTS IN 24 HARVEY-AFFECTED COUNTIES:



NOTE: Top priority includes those who said more resources necessary in only one area.
SOURCE: KFF/EHF Texas Post-Harvey Survey (conducted Oct. 17-Nov. 20, 2017)



Conclusion

Immigrants in the Texas Gulf Coast region faced some particular challenges compared to their native-born counterparts even before Hurricane Harvey hit, including more tenuous financial circumstances, poorer access to health care and insurance, and smaller nearby social support networks. The survey finds that the hurricane exacerbated some of these challenges, as immigrants were more likely than other Texans to experience job-related income loss as a result of the storm. As recovery efforts continue, these data indicate that help with financial recovery and access to health care may be of particular benefit to immigrants living in the Texas gulf coast region.

Endnotes

¹ In this brief, immigrants are defined as adults who were born outside of the United States (including the island of Puerto Rico) and were living in the 24-county area at the time Hurricane Harvey hit.

² The counties included in each county grouping are: Harris County; Surrounding Harris: Liberty, Chambers, Galveston, Brazoria, Matagorda, Wharton, Colorado, Austin, Waller, Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Walker counties; Golden Triangle: Orange, Jefferson and Hardin counties; and Coastal: Nueces, San Patricio, Refugio, Aransas, Calhoun, Victoria, Jackson, and Lavaca counties.

³ Due to sample size, we are unable to report on findings for the subgroup of more recent immigrants who had lived in the United States fewer than 10 years.

⁴ This difference in reported home damage is at least partially due to where immigrants reside within the 24-county area, with immigrants being less likely than native-born residents to live in the Golden Triangle or Coastal County areas where residents reported the highest rates of Harvey-related home damage.

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