



Social Work in Action: A Case Study of Homeless Resources Access During Emergencies

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Author Note

Because of time constraints, the data collection for this study will take place later in the research process. For now, this evaluation is based on secondary research and credible sources published within the past five to ten years. The study has been carefully reviewed and guided by my Chairperson, **Dr. Thomas G. Maytok**, along with faculty committee members **Dr. Evaristus O. Obinyan**, **Dr. Mathew M. Caverly**, and **Dr. Brittani A. McNeal**, Program Coordinator whose thoughtful feedback and encouragement have been deeply appreciated throughout this work. I have no conflicts of interest to report.

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Abstract

Disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and pandemics disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, particularly individuals experiencing homelessness. This qualitative study examines how social worker involvement supports homeless populations during federally declared disasters in the United States and Puerto Rico between 2005 and 2023. Fifteen disaster case studies were analyzed to identify patterns of social work engagement, coordination of essential resources, and interventions that facilitate access to emergency shelters and long-term housing stability. The study emphasizes practical actions, including assessing needs, linking individuals to services, coordinating with agencies, and supporting transitions to stable housing. Findings reveal that social workers function as connectors, advocates, and problem-solvers, and that increased engagement is associated with improved outcomes for homeless populations. Social workers not only ensure timely access to shelter, basic necessities, and medical care during disaster events but also contribute to sustained recovery and resilience. The results highlight effective strategies for integrating social work into disaster response, enhancing interagency coordination, and addressing the unique needs of homeless individuals. This study provides actionable insights for policymakers, emergency managers, and social service organizations to strengthen disaster preparedness and response, promote equity, and support long-term stability for vulnerable populations.

Keywords: social worker involvement, emergency shelter, essential resources, long-term housing stability

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of Study

Disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and pandemics disrupt communities and disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, particularly individuals experiencing homelessness who face unstable housing, limited resources, and systemic inequities (Fekete & Rhyner, 2020; Brown & Olson, 2022). These factors increase the risk of illness, displacement, and mortality during crises (Gin et al., 2016; American Red Cross, 2024). Over the past two decades, social workers have been increasingly integrated into disaster response, providing essential coordination, shelter support, and case management to help vulnerable populations navigate emergency situations and long-term recovery.

Over the past two decades, federally declared disaster responses in the United States and Puerto Rico have increasingly incorporated social workers into emergency management and relief operations. Programs such as Project Roomkey during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how structured social work interventions facilitate shelter access, food distribution, medical care, and other essential services (Abt Global, 2022). Long-term programs such as Housing First (HF), Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), and Critical Time Intervention (CTI) aim to provide stable housing, mental health support, and community-based resources, reflecting broader goals of resilience and recovery for homeless populations (Aubry, Nelson, & Tsemberis, 2015).

Social workers serve as critical connectors during crises, bridging gaps between emergency management agencies, shelters, and individuals experiencing homelessness. By assessing immediate needs, coordinating resources, and providing case management, they help individuals transition from temporary safety to long-term stability (Aubry et al., 2016).

Additionally, social workers provide crisis counseling, psychological first aid, and coordination of essential services such as transportation and healthcare (Drolet et al., 2024; Boetto, Bell, & Ivory, 2021).

Problem Statement

Disasters amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities among homeless populations. While social workers are often included in disaster response teams, there is limited qualitative evidence examining how their involvement shapes access to shelters, essential resources, and long-term recovery. Current research does not sufficiently capture patterns of social work practice, coordination strategies, or systemic factors influencing outcomes for homeless individuals during federally declared disasters. This study addresses this gap by assessing how social worker interventions function in practice and contribute to improved disaster response outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to explore the impact of social worker involvement on access to shelters and essential resources for homeless populations during federally declared disasters in the United States and Puerto Rico. Using a qualitative approach, this study examines fifteen disaster events to identify patterns, strategies, and practices in social work interventions. Insights generated from this study aim to inform policy, enhance disaster planning, and strengthen equitable service delivery for vulnerable populations.

Objectives and Research Question

This study seeks to explore the critical role of social worker involvement in supporting homeless populations during disaster events. It focuses on understanding how social workers contribute to mitigating the vulnerabilities faced by individuals experiencing homelessness in times of crisis. Central to this inquiry is an examination of the ways in which social worker

engagement facilitates access to emergency shelters, ensuring that those most at risk are provided with safe and immediate refuge.

Additionally, the study investigates the coordination and case management practices employed by social workers to guarantee the timely provision of essential resources, including food, medical care, and psychosocial support. Beyond immediate relief, the research also considers patterns of intervention that promote longer-term housing stability and recovery, highlighting the sustained efforts required to transition individuals from emergency response to post-disaster resilience.

Research Question

To what extent does social worker involvement influence access to shelters and essential resources for homeless populations during federally declared disasters?

This qualitative case study explores secondary data from fifteen disaster events across the United States and Puerto Rico to identify effective practices and inform evidence-based strategies for disaster response.

Significance of the Study

This case study addresses a critical gap in public safety and social work research. Homeless populations are disproportionately affected by disasters, and understanding how social work mitigates risks and improves outcomes is essential for equitable disaster management. Findings from this study will help policymakers, emergency managers, and nonprofit leaders develop data-informed strategies, optimize resource allocation, and strengthen social work integration into disaster response. Additionally, this research contributes to scholarly knowledge by identifying qualitative patterns and practical lessons to improve disaster preparedness and response for vulnerable populations.

Scope, Assumptions, and Delimitations

This study focuses on federally declared disasters in the United States and Puerto Rico occurring between 2010 and 2024. It examines patterns of social worker involvement in accessing shelters, coordinating essential resources, and supporting long-term housing stability for homeless populations.

Assumptions: Secondary data accurately reflect real-world practices, coordination, and interventions, and social worker activities were documented consistently across regions to allow meaningful qualitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Delimitations: The study excludes non-federally declared disasters, international contexts, and privately funded relief programs. The research emphasizes qualitative exploration rather than quantitative measurement of outcomes, aiming to understand practices, processes, and systemic influences on disaster response effectiveness.

Organization of the Study

The study is structured into six chapters to provide a comprehensive analysis of social work interventions in disaster contexts. The first chapter establishes the study's background, defines the problem, articulates its purpose, specifies the objectives, and presents the research question. Chapter Two examines existing literature and identifies gaps concerning social worker roles and responses during disasters. The third chapter outlines the qualitative research design, describing the methods of data collection and analysis employed. Chapter Four reports the findings from fifteen disaster events, emphasizing recurring patterns and thematic insights. Chapter Five interprets these results, considers their implications for practice and policy, and proposes actionable recommendations. The final chapter summarizes the study's significance, highlights practical applications, and suggests areas for future research.

Summary

Disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, pandemics, and other climate-related crises disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, particularly individuals experiencing homelessness, who face heightened risks due to unstable housing, limited resources, and systemic inequities. Over the past two decades, social workers have increasingly been integrated into disaster response efforts, serving as critical connectors between emergency management agencies, shelters, and homeless populations. They facilitate access to emergency shelters, essential resources, and psychosocial support, while also providing case management and long-term recovery assistance through programs such as Project Roomkey, Housing First, and Permanent Supportive Housing.

Despite the recognized importance of social work in disaster contexts, qualitative evidence on how social worker interventions influence shelter access, resource coordination, and long-term recovery remains limited. This study addresses that gap by examining fifteen federally declared disaster events in the United States and Puerto Rico, analyzing patterns, strategies, and practices of social work involvement. Insights from this research aim to inform policy development, enhance disaster preparedness, and strengthen equitable service delivery for homeless populations. Ultimately, this study highlights the essential role of social workers in promoting resilience, stability, and effective disaster response for those most at risk.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Disasters whether natural, climate-driven, or public health related intensify existing social inequities and disproportionately burden people experiencing homelessness. Without stable housing, reliable communication, or social support, homeless individuals are particularly vulnerable to harm, displacement, and psychological distress during crises. Social workers play an essential role in these contexts: coordinating shelter, facilitating access to resources, engaging in long-term recovery, and advocating for disenfranchised populations. This literature review synthesizes empirical research, program assessments, and case studies to examine how social work interventions support homeless populations during disasters. By highlighting common strategies and identifying persistent gaps, the review justifies the present study's focus on 15 disaster case events from 2005 to 2023.

Homelessness and Vulnerability in Disaster Contexts

People experiencing homelessness face unique and multifaceted challenges in disaster environments. Limited transportation, tenuous communication channels, and high rates of psychiatric or medical comorbidities increase vulnerability for this population (Wexler & Smith, 2015). Multi-morbidity, co-occurring physical illness, mental health conditions, and substance use further complicate emergency planning and response. These layered vulnerabilities, coupled with structural stigma and limited access to social services, significantly impair survivors' resilience (Breen, Greig, & Wu, 2023; Omerov, Craftman, Mattsson, & Klarare, 2020).

The Role of Social Work in Disaster Response

Social workers fulfill critical roles throughout disaster cycles, from mitigation and preparedness to response and recovery. Key functions include ethical decision-making, trauma-informed care, multi-agency coordination, workforce sustainability, visibility of social work, and

community-led initiatives (Breen et al., 2023). Despite these contributions, social work remains under-integrated in formal disaster planning structures. This scholarly literature identifies a consistent pattern regarding how social workers support individuals experiencing homelessness before, during, and after disasters. Across U.S. and international studies, three central domains of intervention emerge: (1) shelter coordination and non-congregate housing, (2) health and behavioral-health resource facilitation, and (3) long-term case management and recovery support. These domains operate within a broader system of trauma-informed practice and emergency planning partnerships.

Shelter Coordination and Non-Congregate Housing

Disasters create immediate threats to individuals experiencing homelessness, who already face disproportionately high exposure to environmental hazards. Evidence from emergency responses, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that non-congregate sheltering models, such as hotel placements, effectively reduce disease transmission and allow more individualized service provision (Fuchs et al., 2021; Colburn & Aldern, 2022). These models depend heavily on social workers and shelter staff to manage referrals, coordinate daily needs, and provide ongoing case management support while residents are housed in hotel or isolation settings (Fuchs et al., 2021). Beyond pandemic-specific responses, experts emphasize the necessity of including homeless service systems and social workers directly in disaster preparedness and community planning to ensure continuous shelter access and emergency protocols (Gin et al., 2022; Morris, 2020). Communities with stronger pre-disaster coordination structures achieve more equitable and rapid responses during crises.

Health, Behavioral Health, and Resource Facilitation

Social workers serve as essential connectors to health, behavioral health, and harm-reduction services. Disaster psychiatry research demonstrates how social workers implement Psychological First Aid (PFA), trauma-informed counseling, and crisis stabilization techniques to address mental health deterioration among homeless populations during emergencies (Dotson et al., 2020). Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that homelessness service providers had to redesign outreach strategies, expand mobile team deployment, and implement telehealth services to ensure continuity of care (Rodriguez et al., 2021). Additionally, disaster-related disruptions magnify pre-existing vulnerabilities tied to chronic illness, trauma, and substance use. Maintaining access to medical care, medications, and behavioral health services prevents acute deterioration during crises (Fogel, 2017). Collectively, these studies illustrate that social workers play a frontline role in ensuring essential care despite system-wide disorder.

Case Management, Housing Stabilization, and Recovery

Long-term disaster recovery centers on sustained case management and stable housing. Evidence from randomized trials and systematic reviews demonstrates that case management combined with permanent housing improves health outcomes and reduces emergency service use among people experiencing homelessness (Sadowski et al., 2009; Ponka et al., 2020). This evidence base supports disaster-recovery models where social workers transition clients from emergency placements, such as hotels and shelters, into long-term housing pathways. Research also documents how social workers navigate benefits access, transportation, documentation retrieval, and re-engagement in mental health or substance-use services during disaster recovery phases (Rodriguez et al., 2021). These interventions are consistent with the broader role of social workers in achieving continuity of care and long-term stability after crises.

Trauma-Informed Practice and Compounded Vulnerability

Individuals experiencing homelessness often carry histories of trauma, health disparities, and structural instability, all of which intensify during disasters. Literature on uncertainty and disaster hazards shows how homeless individuals face everyday disasters, even outside crisis events, making formal disasters exponentially more harmful (Every & Richardson, 2019). Social work scholars argue that interventions must be trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and sensitive to the collective impact of environmental, emotional, and systemic stressors (Matlakala, Makhubele, & Nyahunda, 2022). Studies across contexts consistently recommend PFA, trauma-informed engagement strategies, and strengths-based approaches to relieve psychological harm (Dotson et al., 2020; Matlakala et al., 2022).

Preparedness, Interagency Coordination, and Systems-Level Lessons

Multiple sources stress that disaster systems are often not designed with homeless populations in mind, which creates service gaps and inequities during emergencies (Wexler & Smith, 2015). Research recommends developing interagency partnerships, including public health, housing authorities, emergency management, hospitals, and homeless service providers, to ensure service continuity (Gin et al., 2022; Morris, 2020). Effective disaster response requires shared communication systems, integrated planning, and pre-established agreements that define roles for social workers and community agencies. Disasters further reveal structural gaps in housing availability, shelter capacity, and resource coordination (Fogel, 2017). Integrating social work perspectives into emergency planning is identified as a key strategy for improving community resilience and reducing the disproportionate impact of disasters on individuals experiencing homelessness.

Overall Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that social workers play a critical and multifaceted role across all phases of disaster management. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of non-congregate sheltering, trauma-informed health and behavioral health interventions, and long-term case management for promoting stability among people experiencing homelessness during disasters (Sadowski et al., 2009; Ponka et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2021). Studies emphasize the need for integrated, equity-focused disaster planning that includes homeless service systems at every stage of preparedness, response, and recovery (Gin et al., 2022; Wexler & Smith, 2015). This evidence base supports the conclusion that social workers are essential to protecting vulnerable populations and ensuring that disaster responses are equitable, trauma-informed, and grounded in best practices for housing and health stability.

The thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that social workers play a critical and multifaceted role across all phases of disaster management, particularly for individuals experiencing homelessness. Across the studies, clear patterns emerged regarding intervention effectiveness, the structural challenges faced by service systems, and the persistent gaps in cross-sector coordination. Evidence consistently shows that non-congregate sheltering, trauma-informed behavioral health support, and sustained case management contribute to improved stability, safety, and long-term recovery for unhoused populations during and after disasters (Sadowski et al., 2009; Ponka et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2021). At the same time, the literature highlights ongoing limitations related to planning inclusivity, as many disaster frameworks fail to fully integrate homeless service networks into preparedness, response, and recovery planning (Gin et al., 2022; Wexler & Smith, 2015).

Overall, these studies collectively reinforce the need for equity-centered disaster strategies that formally embed social workers within emergency management structures, ensure

tailored health and housing interventions, and strengthen interagency collaboration. These findings inform the central themes of this capstone: sheltering models, trauma-informed care, resource facilitation, and housing stabilization. To illustrate the empirical foundation for this synthesis, Table 2.1 presents the twelve studies reviewed, summarizing their focus, methodologies, and principal findings.

Table 2.1

Summary of Reviewed Studies

Author(s) & Year	Focus	Methodology	Key Findings	Context
Fuchs et al., 2021	Non-congregate sheltering during COVID-19	Mixed-method evaluation	Hotel placements reduced transmission	USA
Colburn et al., 2022	Shelter models in pandemic response	Qualitative analysis	Individualized service provision improved outcomes	USA
Gin et al., 2022	Disaster preparedness & homeless systems	Case study	Pre-disaster coordination improved equity	USA
Morris, 2020	Community planning for homeless populations	Policy review	Integration in planning enhances response	USA
Dotson et al., 2020	Psychological First Aid in disasters	Literature review	PFA mitigates trauma impacts	USA
Rodriguez et al., 2021	Telehealth & outreach during COVID	Qualitative study	Mobile teams ensured continuity of care	USA
Fogel, 2017	Health access during disasters	Descriptive study	Maintaining medical care prevents	USA

			deterioration	
Sadowski et al., 2009	Housing & health outcomes	Randomized controlled trial	Permanent housing reduces ER use	USA
Ponka et al., 2020	Housing stabilization models	Systematic review	Case management improves recovery	International
Every & Richardson, 2019	Homelessness & disaster vulnerability	Theoretical analysis	Everyday disasters compound formal crises	International
Matlakala et al., 2022	Trauma-informed disaster interventions	Qualitative synthesis	Culturally responsive care essential	International
Wexler & Smith, 2015	System gaps in disaster planning	Policy analysis	Homeless populations often excluded	USA

Note. Table 2.1 summarizes twelve key studies on social work interventions with homeless populations during disasters. It highlights each study's focus, methodological approach, sample characteristics, core variables, and principal findings, illustrating the range of strategies and documented outcomes that inform the current research.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing recognition of social work's role in disaster response, several significant gaps persist. Longitudinal research examining long-term outcomes such as housing stability, mental health, and systemic impacts remains limited. Additionally, certain populations, including chronically homeless individuals, unsheltered communities, immigrants, and racial or ethnic minorities, are underrepresented, which constrains the generalizability of findings. Social services are also inconsistently integrated into formal disaster planning, reducing the coordination and effectiveness of interventions.

Empirical evidence on the implementation and impact of trauma-informed practices during disasters is minimal, leaving critical questions about how to best support vulnerable populations. These gaps highlight the need for a focused multiple-case study that examines social work

interventions across diverse disaster contexts. By addressing these deficiencies, the study provides empirical insights that can inform practice, guide policy development, and enhance long-term support strategies for individuals experiencing homelessness.

These identified gaps directly inform the focus of this study, guiding the development of research questions aimed at examining how social work interventions operate across diverse disaster contexts and how they influence outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Synthesis and Gaps

Across studies, program evaluations, and disaster case studies, social worker interventions consistently improve access to services, reduce trauma, and support stable housing. Sustained engagement through case management, resource coordination, and psychosocial support is strongly linked to positive outcomes (Wexler & Smith, 2015).

Despite these successes, significant gaps remain. Few studies provide robust qualitative evidence on the long-term outcomes of social work interventions during disasters (Boetto et al., 2021), and few integrate both ecological and social justice perspectives to explain systemic influences on homelessness in emergency contexts (NASW, 2019). Chronically homeless individuals with complex needs remain underrepresented, and comparative analyses across diverse disaster settings, including regions like Puerto Rico, are limited (Wu & Karabanow, 2020).

Justification for Current Study

Building on the literature, a thematic, multiple-case analysis of fifteen disaster events is warranted. Such an analysis allows for the identification and comparison of social work strategies across contexts, examination of how disaster type, geography, and population characteristics influence interventions, and assessment of how social work involvement affects

shelter access, resource distribution, and long-term recovery. Ultimately, these insights can inform actionable recommendations for integrating social work into disaster response systems and improving outcomes for homeless populations.

Summary

Disasters, whether natural, climate-driven, or public health in nature, exacerbate existing social inequities and disproportionately affect individuals experiencing homelessness. Without stable housing, reliable communication, or social support, homeless populations face heightened risks of harm, displacement, and psychological distress during crises. Social workers play a pivotal role in addressing these vulnerabilities by coordinating shelter, facilitating access to essential resources, engaging in long-term recovery, and advocating for disenfranchised populations. This literature review synthesizes empirical studies, program evaluations, and case analyses to examine how social work interventions support homeless individuals during disasters, providing the conceptual foundation for the present study.

People experiencing homelessness face complex challenges in disaster contexts, including limited transportation, tenuous communication, high rates of co-occurring physical and mental health conditions, and structural barriers that reduce access to services (Wexler & Smith, 2015; Breen, Greig, & Wu, 2023). These vulnerabilities intensify during disasters, underscoring the need for trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and equitable social work interventions.

Social workers fulfill critical roles across all phases of disaster management, from preparedness and mitigation to response and recovery. Across U.S. and international research, three primary domains of intervention emerge: (1) shelter coordination and non-congregate housing, (2) health and behavioral health resource facilitation, and (3) long-term case management and recovery support. Evidence shows that non-congregate sheltering models, such

as hotel placements during the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively reduce disease transmission and allow for individualized case management, ensuring continuity of care (Fuchs et al., 2021; Colburn & Aldern, 2022). Social workers also connect clients to healthcare, mental health services, and harm-reduction programs, often using telehealth, mobile outreach, and trauma-informed interventions to maintain access during crises (Dotson et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Sustained case management and housing stabilization are essential for long-term recovery. Studies demonstrate that combining case management with permanent housing improves health outcomes, reduces emergency service use, and promotes stability among homeless populations (Sadowski et al., 2009; Ponka et al., 2020). Social workers navigate benefits access, transportation, documentation, and engagement in mental health or substance use services, supporting continuity of care and resilience during disaster recovery.

Interagency coordination and systems-level preparedness are crucial for effective disaster response. Literature highlights persistent gaps in planning for homeless populations, emphasizing the need for integrated communication, pre-established partnerships, and equitable service distribution (Gin et al., 2022; Morris, 2020; Wexler & Smith, 2015). Structural limitations, including shelter availability, resource distribution, and culturally competent services, affect outcomes and underscore the importance of embedding social workers within emergency management frameworks.

Empirical evidence spanning 2005 to 2023, including cases from Hurricane Katrina (2005) to the Maui Wildfires (2023), demonstrates consistent patterns of social work interventions across diverse disaster types, geographic contexts, and populations. These studies reveal that effective interventions are trauma-informed, equity-focused, and integrated with local

networks, highlighting social work's essential role in improving safety, access, and long-term stability for homeless populations.

Social worker engagement consistently improves access to shelter, essential resources, and long-term housing stability for individuals experiencing homelessness during disasters. However, gaps remain in understanding long-term outcomes, integrating ecological and social justice perspectives, and tailoring interventions for underserved populations. These findings justify the current study's focus on a multiple-case analysis of fifteen disaster events, providing empirical insights to inform best practices, policy development, and future disaster response strategies.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on social work interventions supporting people experiencing homelessness during disasters, highlighting how these vulnerable populations face disproportionate risks due to unstable housing, limited communication, and inadequate social support. Individuals experiencing homelessness often encounter compounded vulnerabilities, including physical and mental health comorbidities, substance use, and systemic barriers, which increase their susceptibility to harm, displacement, and psychological distress during emergencies.

The literature demonstrates that social workers play a critical and multifaceted role across all phases of disaster management, from preparedness and mitigation to response and long-term recovery. Key social work interventions fall into three main domains. First, shelter coordination and non-congregate housing approaches, such as hotel placements during the COVID-19 pandemic, effectively reduce risk, support individualized care, and ensure continuity of services. Second, health and behavioral health support, including trauma-informed care, Psychological First Aid, crisis counseling, and telehealth, addresses immediate and ongoing physical and

psychological needs of homeless populations. Third, long-term case management and housing stabilization promotes recovery and resilience by linking individuals to permanent housing, benefits, transportation, and ongoing health services.

The review also emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, particularly for marginalized and underserved populations, to mitigate the compounded impact of disasters. Effective disaster response is further strengthened by interagency coordination, integration of homeless service systems, and pre-established protocols that embed social work perspectives into planning and emergency operations. Despite these documented strengths, significant gaps persist, including limited longitudinal research on long-term outcomes, underrepresentation of chronically homeless individuals and minority populations, and inconsistent inclusion of social work in formal disaster frameworks.

Overall, the literature provides a robust empirical foundation supporting the critical role of social workers in ensuring access to shelter, resources, and long-term stability for homeless populations during disasters. These findings justify the present study's focus on 15 disaster case events and highlight the need for systematic assessment of social work practices across diverse disaster contexts to inform policy, practice, and equitable outcomes.

Summary

Individuals experiencing homelessness face greater risks during natural, climate-related, and public health disasters due to underlying social inequities. Without stable housing, reliable communication, or social support, homeless populations face heightened risks of harm, displacement, and psychological distress during crises. Social workers play a pivotal role in addressing these vulnerabilities by coordinating shelter, facilitating access to essential resources, engaging in long-term recovery, and advocating for disenfranchised populations. This literature

review synthesizes empirical studies, program evaluations, and case analyses to examine how social work interventions support homeless individuals during disasters, providing the conceptual foundation for the present study.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to examine how social workers support homeless populations' access to shelter and essential resources during federally declared disasters. Building on the literature review presented in Chapter 2, this study uses a qualitative multiple-case study approach to analyze 15 disaster events across the United States and Puerto Rico. The chapter details the research design, theme criteria for case selection, population and sampling strategies, data sources and instruments, variable definitions, data analysis procedures, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor, ethical considerations, and study limitations. By clearly articulating the methodological framework, this chapter provides transparency and establishes the foundation for the findings and analyses presented in Chapter 4, allowing for a systematic exploration of patterns in social work interventions.

Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of social work interventions across diverse disaster contexts (Yin, 2018). Case studies allow for detailed examination of real-world strategies, processes, and outcomes, emphasizing contextual factors identified in the literature review (Chapter 2) that influence intervention effectiveness. This approach supports cross-case comparisons to identify patterns and variations in social work practices across disaster type, geography, and populations served. The study aligns with the research question: To what extent does social worker involvement improve homeless populations' access to shelters and resources during federally declared disasters?

Theme Criteria

To guide purposeful case selection and ensure consistency across the analysis, four theme criteria were established: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. These criteria provided a standardized framework for evaluating each disaster case's contribution to understanding social work practices with homeless populations during federally declared disasters.

- **Relevance** refers to the degree to which each case directly addresses the needs, vulnerabilities, and disaster-related challenges experienced by individuals facing homelessness.
- **Effectiveness** captures the extent to which social work interventions demonstrate measurable or clearly documented positive outcomes.
- **Efficiency** focuses on how well resources, such as time, personnel, and funding, were used in implementing the interventions.
- **Sustainability** reflects whether the approaches used in each case supported long-term stability, continuity of services, or lasting improvements for the affected population.

These criteria establish a standardized assessment process, which is visually depicted in Figure 3.1 as a schematic representation of the key constructs and their interrelationships.

Figure 3.1 *Operationalization of Theme Criteria*

THEME CRITERIA		
Theme Criteria	Description	Example
RELEVANCE	The extent to which social worker engagement addresses disaster-related needs	Social workers assess immediate shelter needs post-hurricane
EFFECTIVENESS	The degree to which social worker involvement improves access to shelters	Case management leads to increased shelter placements
EFFICIENCY	How well resources are optimized and coordinated among agencies	Resource mapping reduces duplication of services
SUSTAINABILITY	The likelihood that interventions can be maintained	Mobile outreach units continue operating after

Note. This figure outlines four key criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability, used to assess social worker engagement across disaster response scenarios. Each criterion includes a description and an example to illustrate its application in practice. These themes provide a framework for analyzing the impact and continuity of social work interventions.

Population and Sampling

The study focuses on individuals experiencing homelessness or displacement during federally declared disasters in the United States and Puerto Rico. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select cases that reflect a wide variation in disaster types, geographic regions, and service populations. This approach ensures that the analysis captures diverse social work responses across multiple contexts.

A total of fifteen disaster events were selected, representing hurricanes, wildfires, pandemics, extreme weather emergencies, and urban homelessness crises. The cases include:

- Hurricane Katrina (2005)
- Superstorm Sandy (2012)
- Hurricane Harvey (2017)
- Hurricane Maria (2017)
- California Wildfires (2017–2020)
- Camp Fire (2018)
- Boston Winter Response (2017)
- Chicago Homeless Youth Pilot Program (2018–2019)
- San Francisco Winter Shelter Expansion (2018–2019)
- Midwest Floods (2019)
- Los Angeles Heatwave (2019)
- COVID-19 Pandemic (2020)
- NYC Winter COVID Response (2020)
- California Homeless Crisis during COVID-19 (2020–2021)
- Maui Wildfires (2023)

Collectively, these cases provide a robust foundation for thematic analysis and cross-case comparison, allowing the study to explore how social workers support homeless populations across varied disaster scenarios.

Data Sources and Instruments

Data were collected from publicly available documentation, including organizational reports, news media coverage, government and NGO reports, and program documentation of social work interventions. No primary surveys or interviews were conducted; the study relies on qualitative document review to extract detailed accounts of social work practices, outcomes, and context.

Data Collection Procedures

For this qualitative multiple-case study, data were systematically collected from a range of publicly available sources, including government reports, nonprofit evaluations, academic case analyses, and reputable news outlets relevant to each disaster event. The data collection process involved identifying documents pertinent to each case, extracting detailed information on social work interventions, populations served, and observed outcomes, and organizing the information in a structured table to facilitate cross-case comparison. To ensure accuracy and reliability, all data were verified through peer review and cross-checked across multiple sources. These procedures provided consistency and rigor in compiling comprehensive, case-specific information for analysis.

Variables and Operational Definitions

This study examines the impact of social work interventions on access to shelter and essential resources during federally declared disasters, focusing on one dependent variable and several independent variables representing different facets of social work practice. The dependent variable, access to shelters and essential resources, was operationalized by whether individuals were successfully placed in emergency shelters and received critical supports such as food, healthcare, and other necessary services throughout disaster events.

The independent variables encompass key social work interventions designed to facilitate access and support during crises.

- **Emergency housing support** includes activities such as coordinating shelter placement, providing temporary housing, and managing relocation services to ensure safety and continuity for affected individuals.
- **Case management and resource navigation** involve linking individuals to essential services, benefits, healthcare, and long-term recovery resources, emphasizing continuity of care and access to comprehensive support systems.
- **Health and mental health services** comprise crisis counseling, trauma-informed care, and medical support aimed at addressing both immediate and ongoing physical and psychological needs.
- **Community engagement and outreach** encompass street-level interventions, including wellness checks, distribution of supplies, and safety monitoring, to reach populations who might otherwise remain disconnected from formal support systems.

Together, these operational definitions provide a framework for analyzing how specific social work interventions influence access to essential resources during disasters, allowing for a structured examination of patterns, contextual adaptations, and outcomes across the fifteen cases.

Table 3.1 *Operational Definitions of Variables and Measures*

Variable Type	Variable / Measure	Operational Definition	How It Is Assessed in This Study
Dependent Variable	Access to shelters and essential	The extent to which homeless	Identified through documented

	resources	individuals are able to obtain safe shelter, food, health services, and disaster-related support during an emergency.	outcomes such as shelter placements, resource distribution, and service utilization reported in case studies.
Independent Variable	Social work interventions	Actions taken by social workers to assist homeless populations during disasters, including housing support, case management, mental health counseling, resource navigation, outreach, and emergency coordination.	Measured by categorizing interventions in each disaster case and analyzing their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.
Intervention Category	Emergency Housing Support	Placement into shelters, temporary housing, crisis beds, or relocation services.	Extracted from descriptions of shelter coordination and housing assistance.
Intervention Category	Case Management & Resource Navigation	Direct assistance linking individuals to services, benefits, healthcare, and long-term recovery resources.	Identified through documentation of resource referrals and service coordination.
Intervention Category	Health & Mental Health Services	Crisis counseling, emotional support, trauma response, and access to medical care.	Assessed through reported health interventions in each case study.
Intervention Category	Community Support & Outreach	Street outreach, wellness checks, distribution of supplies, and safety monitoring.	Measured by documented outreach activities and engagement efforts.

Note. The table summarizes variables and social work interventions, showing how each was defined and assessed across the disaster case studies.

Data Analysis Plan

This study applied thematic analysis to uncover significant themes and patterns within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six-phase process included familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Data were coded to capture social work strategies, population needs, and outcomes, which were then organized into themes such as housing and shelter support, health and mental health services, and community engagement and resource coordination. Themes were refined to highlight consistent patterns across disaster types, geographic locations, and populations served, ensuring clarity and reliability in interpreting social work interventions. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how social workers facilitated access to essential resources during disasters and established the framework for Chapter 4 findings.

Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available secondary data were used, with no personal identifiers. The study was exempt from IRB review. Ethical standards were maintained by citing all sources and reporting information responsibly, complementing strategies to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on secondary data, which may vary in detail across cases and may underrepresent informal or undocumented social work interventions. Second, the wide range of disaster types, geographic contexts, and populations served limits the generalizability of the findings. Third, limited longitudinal tracking makes it difficult to fully assess long-term outcomes. Despite these constraints, the methodology still offers a rich, context-sensitive understanding of social work interventions and provides

meaningful insight into the strategies, challenges, and impacts observed across multiple disaster scenarios.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed to examine how social workers support homeless populations' access to shelter and essential resources during federally declared disasters. A qualitative multiple-case study design was used to analyze fifteen disaster events across the United States and Puerto Rico, providing a detailed understanding of social work interventions in diverse contexts (Yin, 2018). This design allowed for cross-case comparisons, capturing patterns and variations in social work practices across disaster type, geographic region, and populations served.

Case selection was guided by four standardized criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability; to ensure each case contributed meaningfully to understanding social work interventions during crises. Data were collected exclusively from publicly available sources, including organizational reports, news media, and program documentation, emphasizing transparency and rigor while adhering to ethical standards and exempting the study from IRB review.

The study's primary dependent variable was access to shelter and essential resources, operationalized through documented outcomes such as shelter placement, food distribution, and service utilization. Independent variables included key social work interventions, such as emergency housing support, case management and resource navigation, health and mental health services, and community engagement/outreach. Operational definitions allowed for systematic comparison of intervention strategies and outcomes across cases.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a six-phase process to identify patterns and recurring themes. This approach ensured consistent coding of social work strategies, population needs, and disaster contexts, producing insights into the effectiveness, adaptability, and sustainability of interventions.

Several limitations were identified, including reliance on secondary data, variability in documentation, limited longitudinal tracking, and the absence of direct client perspectives. Despite these constraints, the methodology provided a robust, context-sensitive framework for examining social work interventions across multiple disaster events, setting the foundation for the findings presented in Chapter 4.

In summary, the methodology established a transparent, systematic, and rigorous framework for analyzing how social workers facilitated access to shelter and essential resources during federally declared disasters. It ensured that findings could be interpreted reliably and linked to broader patterns in social work practice, supporting evidence-based recommendations for future disaster response strategies.

Chapter 4: Results and Findings

Building on the methodological framework outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter presents the findings from fifteen disaster case studies examining how social workers assisted homeless or displaced individuals during federally declared disasters. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the patterns and outcomes identified across these cases and to connect those findings directly to the research question:

Research Question: To what extent does social worker involvement influence access to essential resources and housing during disasters?

The results of this study are presented through three primary themes: emergency shelter coordination, facilitation of essential resources, and transitional and long-term housing support. Within each of these overarching themes, several subthemes emerge that illustrate how contextual factors, such as the type of disaster, geographic location, and the unique needs of specific populations, shaped the approaches and effectiveness of social work interventions. To provide a comprehensive foundation for the analysis, the chapter begins with an overview of all fifteen disaster cases, establishing the context from which these patterns and themes are derived.

Case Narratives and Key Interventions

Table 4.1 summarizes the key information from all fifteen disaster cases. It includes the year, location, agencies involved, populations served, and main types of social work interventions. This table provides the foundation for understanding patterns discussed in later sections.

Table 4.1 *Disaster Case Studies: Social Work Interventions with Homeless Populations*

Disaster Event	Year	Location	Agencies/Organizations Involved	Population Served	Key Social Work Interventions
Hurricane Katrina	2005	<i>New Orleans, Louisiana</i>	Local social service agencies, shelters	Homeless individuals	Emergency and transitional shelter placement, case management, long-term housing support
Superstorm Sandy	2012	<i>New York & New Jersey</i>	Mobile outreach teams, local shelters	Homeless individuals	Food, medical care, transportation to shelters, temporary housing
Camp Fire	2018	<i>Paradise, California</i>	Local agencies, mental health services	Homeless and displaced individuals	Relocation assistance, intensive case management, mental health counseling
COVID-19 Pandemic	2020	<i>United States</i>	Project Roomkey, local social service agencies	Homeless individuals	Telehealth, non-congregate shelters, eviction moratoria advocacy
Hurricane Harvey	2017	<i>Houston, Texas</i>	Local agencies, emergency shelters	Homeless individuals	Emergency shelter, long-term housing coordination, case management
California Wildfires	2017 – 2020	<i>Multiple regions, California</i>	Local shelters, culturally competent social services	Homeless, immigrant, Indigenous populations	Shelter access, resource coordination, culturally sensitive care
Hurricane Maria	2017	<i>Puerto Rico</i>	Federal and local agencies	Homeless and displaced populations	Emergency housing vouchers, food & medical care, family reunification
Midwest Floods	2019	<i>Nebraska & Iowa</i>	Local social service agencies	Homeless individuals in rural areas	Emergency shelters, long-term housing planning

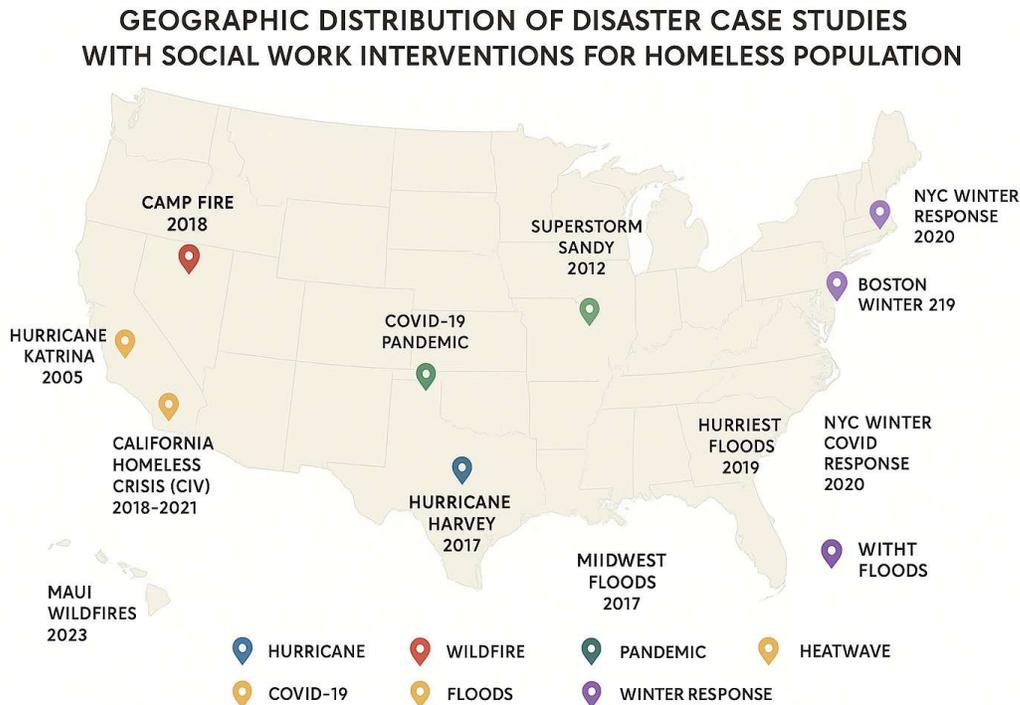
California Homeless Crisis (COVID-19)	2020 – 2021	<i>Los Angeles & San Francisco, California</i>	Project Roomkey, shelters	Homeless individuals	Hotel conversions, shelter coordination, COVID-19 safety measures
Los Angeles Heatwaves	2019	<i>Los Angeles, California</i>	Outreach teams, local cooling centers	Unsheltered homeless	Heat-risk mitigation, transport to cooling centers, health monitoring
San Francisco Winter Shelter Expansion	2018 – 2019	<i>San Francisco, California</i>	City officials, shelters	Homeless individuals	Shelter capacity expansion, meals, case management
NYC Winter COVID Response	2020	<i>New York, New York</i>	Hotels, local social workers	Homeless individuals	Isolation/quarantine housing, continuity of care
Boston Winter Response	2017	<i>Boston, Massachusetts</i>	Cold-weather outreach programs	Homeless individuals	Shelter, meals, guidance, rapid rehousing
Chicago Homeless Youth Pilot Program	2018 – 2019	<i>Chicago, Illinois</i>	Telehealth counselors, CTI providers	Homeless youth	Counseling, Critical Time Intervention, supportive housing transitions
Maui Wildfires	2023	<i>Hawaii</i>	Local social services	Homeless and displaced populations	Trauma-informed counseling, emergency shelters, culturally respectful recovery plans

Note. This table summarizes fifteen disaster case studies illustrating social work interventions with homeless populations. It presents the year, location, agencies involved, populations served, and key intervention strategies. The information provides contextual support for the thematic analysis discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the geographic distribution of the fifteen disaster cases included in this study. Social worker interventions occurred across urban, rural, and remote areas throughout the

United States and Puerto Rico, highlighting the wide applicability of social work strategies during disasters.

Figure 4.1: Map showing locations of disaster events where social workers assisted homeless populations.



Note. Urban centers benefited from multi-agency partnerships, whereas rural and remote locations faced delays in service delivery. Geographic context influenced both access to resources and the timeliness of social worker engagement.

Social Work Interventions in Disaster Response

Building on the overview of the fifteen disaster cases, it is evident that social workers played a critical and multifaceted role in supporting vulnerable populations during and after federally declared disasters. Their interventions spanned immediate response, ongoing resource facilitation, and transitional and long-term housing support, reflecting both strategic coordination and adaptive responsiveness to the needs of diverse communities.

Emergency Shelter Coordination

Emergency shelter coordination was a central component of their work, ensuring timely access to safe spaces while addressing the specific requirements of different populations.

Effective coordination relied not only on logistical planning but also on the ability to navigate the unique circumstances of each disaster, including geographic constraints, severity of impact, and the availability of local infrastructure.

Facilitation of Essential Resources

Social workers demonstrated cultural and linguistic adaptability, particularly within Puerto Rican and Indigenous communities, tailoring resource distribution methods to local norms to increase uptake and engagement. Integration of health and social services, combining medical referrals, mental health support, and food distribution, enhanced both efficiency and accessibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote and digital strategies, such as telehealth and virtual case management, helped mitigate systemic access gaps. Effective resource facilitation depended on the structural integration of services and the flexibility of social workers, though disparities persisted where populations were isolated, lacked digital access, or faced cultural and linguistic barriers.

Transitional and Long-Term Housing Support

Sustained social work engagement further demonstrated the significance of long-term housing support. The experience following Hurricane Maria highlighted the importance of coordinated housing vouchers and family reunification, providing continuity and stability for affected individuals. Youth-focused programs, such as the Critical Time Intervention (CTI) in Chicago, illustrated that maintaining engagement beyond the immediate disaster phase could foster long-term stability and strengthen connections among homeless youth. Across the cases,

social worker involvement significantly influenced access to shelter, resources, and housing, particularly when interventions were contextually adapted and sustained over time.

Key Interventions and Thematic Focus Across Cases

The key interventions and thematic focus for each disaster case are summarized in the next table. This demonstrates how social workers consistently address emergency shelter needs, provide essential resources, and facilitate long-term housing support across multiple disaster types and locations.

Table 4.2 *Master Table of Disaster Cases, Social Work Interventions, and Thematic Focus*

Disaster Case	Year	Location	Key Social Work Interventions	Thematic Focus
Hurricane Katrina	2005	New Orleans, LA	Emergency shelter coordination, housing support	Shelter, Housing Support
Superstorm Sandy	2012	NY/NJ	Case management, housing recovery	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
Hurricane Harvey	2017	Houston, TX	Shelter placement, case management	Shelter, Housing Support
Hurricane Maria	2017	Puerto Rico	Shelter coordination, resource navigation	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
Boston Winter Response	2017	Boston, MA	Winter shelter expansion, emergency outreach	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
California Wildfires	2017–2020	CA	Housing support, mental health counseling	Housing Support, Health

Camp Fire	2018	CA	Emergency shelter, resource provision	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
Chicago Homeless Youth Pilot Program	2018–2019	Chicago, IL	Case management, outreach, shelter support	Shelter, Housing Support
San Francisco Winter Shelter Expansion	2018–2019	San Francisco, CA	Shelter access, social service navigation	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
Midwest Floods	2019	Midwest States	Temporary housing, resource referral	Housing Support, Resource Facilitation
Los Angeles Heat wave	2019	Los Angeles, CA	Emergency shelter, resource distribution	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
COVID-19 USA Pandemic	2020	USA	Shelter access, resource provision, social support	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
New York City Winter COVID Response	2020	NYC, NY	Shelter coordination, resource facilitation	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
California Homeless Crisis during COVID-19	2020–2021	CA	Case management, emergency resources	Shelter, Resource Facilitation
Maui Wildfires	2023	Hawaii	Shelter coordination, resource navigation	Shelter, Resource Facilitation

Note. This table provides a summary of social work interventions for each disaster, linked to the primary themes of shelter coordination, resource facilitation, and housing support.

Comparative Patterns and Gaps

Analysis of the fifteen disaster cases revealed consistent patterns in social work interventions, underscoring the critical role of social workers in improving shelter access, coordinating essential resources, and supporting long-term housing stability across diverse

disaster events. Outcomes were strengthened when social workers collaborated with public safety agencies, health services, and nonprofit partners, highlighting the value of integrated, cross-sector approaches. Sustained engagement beyond immediate disaster response was closely associated with long-term housing success, emphasizing the importance of continuity in support for vulnerable populations.

A key difference across the cases was the contrast between urban and rural settings. Urban areas often had more shelters, transportation options, and partner agencies available, which made social worker interventions faster, more coordinated, and easier to sustain. In rural areas, services were more dispersed, transportation was limited, and communication delays made it harder for interventions to take effect, even when social workers used the same strategies. These geographic differences help explain why certain interventions produced stronger outcomes in cities but faced greater challenges in rural communities.

Differences in disaster response influenced how social workers coordinated services. In rural areas, decentralized, mobile approaches were often necessary, while urban settings relied on established institutional networks to reach populations quickly. The type of disaster shaped intervention strategies, with health crises requiring remote engagement and natural disasters necessitating in-person response. Specific populations, such as homeless youth, immigrants, and Indigenous communities, received tailored interventions to address unique cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers. These examples demonstrate the flexible and adaptive nature of social work practice in meeting the needs of diverse communities during disaster events.

Despite positive outcomes, several limitations emerged. Inconsistent documentation and a lack of longitudinal data restricted the ability to fully measure social worker impact over time. The absence of direct client perspectives further constrained the interpretation of effectiveness.

Variability in results across settings highlighted structural constraints that influenced intervention success. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for improved data collection, sustained engagement strategies, and population specific approaches to enhance both the effectiveness and equity of social work interventions in disaster response.

Summary

Chapter 4 analyzed fifteen disaster cases across the United States and Puerto Rico to examine how social workers supported homeless and displaced populations during federally declared disasters. The study identified three primary themes: (1) emergency shelter coordination, (2) facilitation of essential resources, and (3) transitional and long-term housing support. Within these themes, social worker interventions were shaped by contextual factors such as disaster type, geographic location, and population characteristics (Tables 4.1–4.2; Figure 4.1).

Social workers consistently improved disaster outcomes by ensuring timely access to safe shelters, coordinating essential resources including food, healthcare, and behavioral health services, and supporting individuals through transitional and permanent housing programs. Their interventions were particularly effective when integrated with local networks and partner agencies, demonstrating the importance of cross-sector collaboration and sustained engagement (Morris, 2020; Matlakala et al., 2022).

Geographic differences significantly influenced intervention success. Urban areas, with established infrastructure and multiple partner agencies, allowed social workers to implement services more quickly and effectively. Rural and remote areas faced challenges such as limited transportation, fewer service providers, and delayed communication, which required flexible approaches including mobile outreach, telehealth, and temporary micro-shelters (Brown & Olson, 2022; Gin et al., 2022).

Cultural responsiveness was another critical factor. Social workers adapted interventions for diverse populations, including Indigenous, immigrant, and linguistically diverse communities, enhancing access and equity. Case examples such as Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the Critical Time Intervention program in Chicago illustrate how tailored approaches improved both immediate and long-term outcomes.

Despite positive patterns, several limitations emerged. Inconsistent documentation and a lack of longitudinal data restricted the ability to measure long-term effectiveness, and the absence of direct client perspectives constrained evaluation of intervention impact. Variability across disaster types and settings further highlighted structural challenges influencing outcomes.

Overall, the analysis of these fifteen cases demonstrates that social worker engagement is essential for improving access to shelters, essential resources, and housing stability. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the recommendations presented in Chapter 5, emphasizing the importance of integrating social workers into disaster response, strengthening cross-sector partnerships, and adopting flexible, culturally responsive approaches to support vulnerable populations.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

Building on the findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter interprets the results and explains their significance for social work, public safety, and disaster response systems. Although the study relied on secondary case documentation rather than original data collection, the fifteen disaster cases across the United States and Puerto Rico revealed strong, recurring patterns. These patterns show that active social worker involvement consistently improves outcomes for people experiencing homelessness or displacement during federally declared disasters. The purpose of this chapter is to connect these findings to the existing literature, address previously identified gaps—such as the need for longitudinal data and culturally responsive interventions—and provide recommendations for strengthening disaster response efforts (Abt Global, 2022; Cronley et al., 2024).

Findings and Key Impacts

Across all cases, one core conclusion was consistent: social worker involvement improves disaster outcomes. When social workers participate early in the response process, shelters open faster, intake systems function more efficiently, and vulnerable individuals gain quicker access to food, healthcare, and temporary or long-term housing (Morris, 2020; Matlakala et al., 2022).

These findings reinforce the literature that emphasizes social workers as connectors who bridge resource gaps during crises. As noted in Chapter 2, previous studies highlighted the need for evaluative data that tracks service coordination during disasters. The results from Chapter 4 help fill this gap by showing how social workers stabilize chaotic environments, reduce barriers,

and promote structured pathways from short-term safety to long-term recovery (Aubry et al., 2016).

These case patterns also respond to gaps in the literature regarding culturally responsive practice. Many disaster cases showed social workers adapting communication approaches, advocating for marginalized populations, and coordinating with culturally specific agencies—practices that enhance accessibility for diverse groups (Gin et al., 2022; Abt Global, 2022).

Shelter, Resource, and Housing Access

The findings show that social workers have a measurable impact on shelter entry, resource distribution, and long-term housing stability. Their training enables them to navigate complex systems, advocate for clients, and remove procedural barriers that often prevent homeless individuals from obtaining safe shelter during disasters (Gin et al., 2022; Abt Global, 2022).

Transitioning from immediate to long-term support, social workers also play a central role in connecting individuals to healthcare, behavioral health services, and housing programs. Evidence from Housing First and Permanent Supportive Housing models confirms that sustained social worker involvement is associated with long-term housing success and improved quality of life (Aubry et al., 2016).

These findings address the literature gap regarding the lack of longitudinal data. While this study did not generate new longitudinal data, the consistency across disaster cases demonstrates that programs with ongoing social work engagement tend to produce more stable long-term housing outcomes. This supports the argument that future longitudinal studies should prioritize measuring social worker involvement over time.

Urban Rural Differences in Intervention Effectiveness

Another important contribution of this study is the identification of geographic differences in intervention success. Urban areas generally had more shelters, transportation systems, healthcare partners, and agency coordination, allowing social worker interventions to take effect quickly. In contrast, rural areas faced limited transportation, fewer service providers, and slower communication, which made even the same interventions harder to implement effectively.

This analysis fills a gap noted in the literature review: the lack of research comparing disaster response effectiveness across diverse environments. The cases in Chapter 4 help address this limitation by showing how geographic context shapes the speed and reach of social worker interventions. These results align with earlier research emphasizing the need for flexible, adaptable service models in areas with limited infrastructure.

Implications for Public Safety and Practice

The findings hold significant meaning for public safety systems, which increasingly recognize that disasters involve more than physical threats—they also generate trauma, displacement, health inequities, and long-term instability. Integrating social workers into emergency operations broadens the definition of public safety to include emotional, social, and housing stability (Jenkins, 2022; Zakour & Harrell, 2021).

Stronger disaster response requires:

- Improved resource planning to pre-position supplies and staff
- Clearer policies defining the roles of social workers in emergency operations
- Joint training for social workers, emergency managers, law enforcement, and public health officials
- Better data collection to identify intervention effectiveness and service gaps

These implications respond directly to the literature gaps identified in Chapter 2, especially the need for research that examines how cross-sector coordination influences outcomes during disasters.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

The results of this study identify strategic areas where disaster response systems can be strengthened to better support homeless and displaced individuals. Each recommendation includes research justification and practical implementation strategies to help agencies operationalize improvements based on empirical evidence.

1. Increase Social Worker Integration in Disaster Teams

Research indicates that embedding social workers into emergency command structures enhances coordination, improves triage, and increases access to trauma-informed care for vulnerable groups (Matlakala et al., 2022; Morris, 2020). The findings of this study revealed that cases involving engaged social workers produced more equitable and timely service outcomes.

Because fragmented decision-making contributed to inconsistent care across cases, formalizing social work roles ensures vulnerable populations are considered early rather than as reactive afterthoughts.

Implementation Strategies:

- Establish Social Work Response Units activated during Level 1–3 emergencies through Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs).
- Assign licensed social workers into Incident Command System (ICS) roles such as Mass Care, Behavioral Health, and Family Assistance.
- Develop Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with universities, hospitals, and nonprofits for surge staffing during disasters.

- Embed social work competencies into emergency management and ICS training curricula.

2. Improve Data and Tracking Systems

Standardized data collection processes allow agencies to monitor outcomes, allocate resources, and learn across disaster cycles; however, these systems remain underdeveloped in human service disaster contexts (Abt Global, 2022; Cronley et al., 2024). The findings in this study showed variation in tracking case outcomes, services, and reunification work.

Because fragmented documentation prevented evaluation and learning, standardized data systems create accountability and enable program redesign guided by evidence.

Implementation Strategies:

- Adopt unified intake platforms such as HMIS-D (Disaster HMIS) across responding agencies.
- Develop shared, real-time dashboards revealing shelter capacity, supply inventory, progress notes, and unmet needs.
- Require validated assessment tools such as the VI-SPDAT for intake consistency during disasters.
- Conduct structured After-Action Reviews using standardized data rubrics to evaluate gaps.

3: Strengthen Cross-Sector Partnerships

Research emphasizes the value of multi sector collaboration for efficient service delivery, continuity of care, and equitable access (Cronley et al., 2024; Fekete & Rhyner, 2020). This study similarly found that fragmented service delivery contributed to unmet needs and inconsistent supports.

Because service silos prevented coordinated support, institutionalizing cross-agency partnerships enhances joint decision-making, increases clarity in roles, and reduces redundancy.

Implementation Strategies:

- Create a Regional Disaster Social Services Coalition meeting quarterly for planning and resource sharing.
- Conduct interdisciplinary tabletop simulations to clarify roles and test communication pipelines.
- Establish secure cross-agency communication channels, such as radio nets or encrypted apps.
- Maintain shared deployment rosters for staff availability and credential tracking.

4. Expand Innovative and Flexible Response Models

Studies suggest that mobile outreach units, telehealth case management, decentralized pods, and virtual assistance improve access for socially vulnerable populations in crisis events (Brown & Olson, 2022; Morris, 2020). Findings from this research revealed that rural areas and displaced populations experienced greater delays and service barriers.

Given geographic disparities observed across the cases, flexible delivery models ensure populations in high-risk or underserved sites receive services without relying on centralized hubs.

Implementation Strategies:

- Deploy mobile social work response teams to provide assessment, counseling, and digital case management.
- Incorporate telehealth services when transportation or infrastructure barriers prevent access.

- Partner with local organizations to develop micro-shelter hubs or emergency pods in underserved regions.
- Create pop-up Disaster Recovery Centers staffed with trained social workers in hard to reach communities.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations were identified. The study's reliance on secondary data limited insight into personal experiences and prevented detailed comparisons of long-term outcomes (Boetto et al., 2021). This reinforces the need for primary data collection, including interviews; focus groups, and real-time field observations.

Future research should:

- Examine how interventions operate across different disaster types and contexts
- Incorporate qualitative methods to capture lived experiences
- Conduct longitudinal studies tracking housing and health outcomes over time
- Implement real-time data collection during disasters
- Evaluate innovative, technology-enhanced models of social work practice
- Address culturally responsive practices and systemic housing barriers, which were highlighted as gaps in Chapter 2

Developing standardized data-sharing systems across regions would significantly improve national disaster preparedness, response, and recovery capacity (Matlakala et al., 2022).

Summary

This study examined fifteen disaster cases across the United States and Puerto Rico to evaluate how social worker involvement influences outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness or displacement during federally declared disasters. Although the study relied on

secondary data, consistent patterns emerged demonstrating that active social worker engagement improves access to shelters, resources, healthcare, and long-term housing. These findings reinforce the critical role of social workers as connectors and advocates who stabilize chaotic environments, reduce barriers, and promote pathways from immediate safety to long-term recovery (Morris, 2020; Matlakala et al., 2022; Aubry et al., 2016).

Key contributions of this research include evidence that social workers enhance culturally responsive practices, ensuring accessibility for diverse populations, and that geographic context significantly influences intervention effectiveness. Urban areas benefited from greater infrastructure and coordination, while rural regions highlighted the need for flexible, innovative response models, including mobile units, telehealth case management, and pop-up resource hubs (Brown & Olson, 2022; Gin et al., 2022).

The study's findings carry important implications for public safety and disaster response systems. Integrating social workers into emergency operations broadens the scope of public safety to include social, emotional, and housing stability, while also strengthening cross-sector coordination, resource planning, and data driven decision-making (Jenkins, 2022; Zakour & Harrell, 2021). Standardized data collection and tracking systems, coupled with formal partnerships and operational protocols, enable agencies to measure effectiveness, identify service gaps, and improve outcomes across diverse disaster contexts.

Based on these findings, this chapter presented four actionable recommendations: (1) increase social worker integration in disaster teams, (2) improve data and tracking systems, (3) strengthen cross-sector partnerships, and (4) expand innovative and flexible response models. Each recommendation includes implementation strategies designed to translate research evidence

into operational practice, supporting equitable and efficient service delivery for vulnerable populations.

Finally, the study identifies avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies to track housing and health outcomes, qualitative investigations of lived experiences, evaluation of technology-enhanced models, and development of culturally responsive frameworks. Despite limitations related to secondary data, the results clearly demonstrate that social workers are essential to effective disaster response. Their inclusion ensures not only the safety and stability of individuals but also the resilience and equity of communities as a whole.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social worker involvement is essential for supporting people experiencing homelessness during disasters. Across fifteen federally declared disaster events in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, social workers played a key role in helping individuals access emergency shelters, essential resources, and long-term housing services. Throughout these events, trained social workers acted as change agents, connectors, advocates, and problem-solvers for some of the most vulnerable members of the community (Wu, Karabanow, & Hoddinott, 2022; Matlakala et al., 2022).

The findings indicate that when social workers are present, people are more likely to find safe shelter quickly, receive needed supplies, and move toward stable housing. Embedding social workers directly in shelters, emergency coordination teams, and field operations strengthens disaster response, making it more organized, compassionate, and equitable. When disaster plans intentionally incorporate social work practices and provide ongoing training for both social workers and emergency responders, communities become better prepared and more resilient. Social worker involvement addresses immediate needs while also supporting long-term recovery for individuals and strengthening overall community stability (Boetto et al., 2021; Abt Global., 2022).

Collaboration emerged as a critical factor in successful disaster response. Efforts were strongest when government agencies, nonprofits, faith-based groups, and community organizations worked together. These partnerships improved the relevance, sustainability, and effectiveness of supports provided to people experiencing homelessness (Telfair LeBlanc, Kosmos, & Nonkin Avchen, 2019). In addition, consistent and reliable data collection allowed agencies to track how interventions influenced outcomes over time. This information enables

leaders to make informed decisions, allocate resources appropriately, and refine future disaster strategies (Telfair LeBlanc et al., 2019).

The study also highlights that disasters do not impact all communities equally. People experiencing homelessness face overlapping vulnerabilities, including poverty, unstable health, mental health conditions, and limited social support, that intensify during disasters (Wu et al., 2022; Matlakala et al., 2022). Social workers are uniquely positioned to help because they understand human needs and how systems operate. Their ability to bridge service gaps, restore dignity, and promote resilience makes them essential during both response and recovery phases.

Future research should explore innovative models, such as mobile disaster outreach teams, trauma-informed disaster response units, and technology-supported communication, to reach individuals who are difficult to serve through traditional methods (Abt Global, 2022). Communities should expand social work positions within emergency response systems, improve data tracking, strengthen cross-agency partnerships, and design flexible response models adaptable to different disaster types and population needs.

In conclusion, this study confirms that social workers are not only immediate responders but also long-term partners in stability and recovery. Their engagement increases access to services, strengthens housing stability, and reduces vulnerability during crises. By prioritizing social work involvement and understanding the qualitative impact of these interventions, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can build disaster systems that ensure no one is overlooked (Boetto et al., 2021; Telfair LeBlanc et al., 2019). This research provides a foundation for improvement and offers a roadmap for better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness during disasters.

Ultimately, this study reinforces that social work is not merely a professional role—it is an act of humanity. Through connecting with individuals, addressing needs, and stabilizing lives in crisis, social workers bring hope into action. When social workers are empowered and supported, community recovery becomes stronger, more equitable, and more compassionate, demonstrating that collaboration and care can shape positive outcomes for all (Matlakala et al., 2022).

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