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Q&A: How Sandy Affected Low-Income Residents

By Joshua Dawsey



Emile Wamsteker for The Wall Street Journal

A child's toy sits in front of a home that burned to the ground during Hurricane Sandy at the end of the block in Brick, N.J.

Housing for low-income New York and New Jersey residents was particularly hurt by superstorm Sandy, according to two studies released this week.

Of the more than 500,000 residents who have registered for FEMA assistance, 49% in New York City and 45% in New Jersey have incomes less than \$30,000 per year, according to Enterprise Community Partners.

Another study from NYU's Furman Center also found 41% of New York City housing units damaged by the storm are low-income, subsidized, rent-stabilized houses or Mitchell-Lama houses, and about 10% are single-family homes.

The studies come as [state officials said they would probe](#) whether mortgage lenders are making homeowners pay lump sums of monthly payments that the banks had agreed to postpone after the storm. And some residents say [insurance payments are falling short](#) of what they need

Max Weselcouch, an analyst at NYU's Furman Center, discussed the findings of her study with **Metropolis**. Below is an edited version of the interview.

Metropolis: *What were the surprising takeaways from your report?*

Weselcouch: "We were surprised at how many renters were affected. There were more renter households that had registered with FEMA than owner households. I think a lot of what we've seen covered in the media are these single-family homeowners trying to rebuild."

Metropolis: *So what impact do you hope this study will have?*

Weselcouch: “There are some new funds coming down the line from the federal government, specifically from HUD, and we hope this study helps inform the local governments and non-profit groups better plan for how to best direct the funding through the neighborhoods.”

Metropolis: *Why were so many low-income owners or renters affected?*

Weselcouch: “Part of it is just the fact that New York City’s housing stock is quite a bit different from the rest of the U.S. About 2/3 of all households in New Yorkers are renters, which is about the inverse of the rest of the U.S. Although FEMA does not make grants available to both owners and renters, a lot of the guidance toward how to register, how to use funding is geared toward single-family homeowners. And we have a lot of dense, multi-family housing areas in coastal areas, with much of it public housing and privately-owned or publicly-subsidized housing.”

Metropolis: *What are the affordability challenges going forward for these low-income households?*

Weselcouch: “Our study shows about 80% of buildings in Sandy’s surge area were built before 1983 – the year most flood building codes were adopted. That combined with the fact that a lot of households affected have very low income. It’s going to be very expensive to rebuild or modernize these neighborhoods. A lot of these households are kind of struggling month-to-month before Sandy so they don’t really have extra resources to put toward this rebuilding.”

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