

# Disasters: Australia's Fires Show How Wealth Inequality Compounds Climate Disasters

Friday 24 January 2020, by [ZHANG Sharon](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2020).

**This is not the first time that Australia has been devastatingly burned. More than ten years ago, in February 2009, fires in Australia killed 173 people, injured thousands more and destroyed 2,000 homes. The day of the February 2009 blaze, which became known as Black Saturday, constituted the country's most deadly wildfire event in history. The fires were sudden and moved with alarming speed**

Fast-forward to the present. Firefighters [said in November](#) that this season's weather was similar to that of Black Saturday, with extreme heat and drought conditions. But this time, on the tail of the [hottest and driest year](#) on record in the country due to conditions created by the climate crisis, the fires have spread even further and burned even longer than they did a decade ago.

The death toll is lower so far this season — estimates hover around 28 deaths so far — but the acres of land, houses and animal lives lost have eclipsed previous fires. Where 1.1 million acres and over 1 million animals were lost in 2009, this season's blazes have burned nearly 18 million acres, over 3,000 homes and a billion ([if not billions](#)) of native animals so far.

These numbers are unfathomable. Eighteen million acres is nearly 1 percent of Australia's land mass. A million dead animals is difficult to fathom, much less [a billion](#). And the toll on humans who have to live with the aftermath will endure for decades.

"Many survivors will struggle with the death of loved ones; loss of belongings; loss of livelihood; lack of shelter; destruction of local environment; inadequate support by the state; loss of hope for the future; and fear," says [Sharon Friel](#), a professor of health policy who wrote the 2019 [book](#) *Climate Change and the People's Health*. A [2016 report](#) on victims of Black Saturday found that, five years after the bushfires, more than a fifth of impacted residents were experiencing more than double the rate of mental health issues like post-traumatic stress disorder and depression compared to the rest of the population. Those who lived alone or were otherwise more isolated from community groups were more affected, the report found.

For the poor, recovery will be more difficult. Especially for poor people who live in rural areas, there is scant access to [mental and physical health resources](#), even though Australia has universal health care.

Climate disasters are worsening worldwide and are only compounded by wealth inequality. [Research has found](#) that disaster preparedness can be too expensive for people living in poverty; evacuating isn't possible for poor people without access to transportation or who can't miss work; renters may have issues securing housing after a disaster. As Friel points out, "Affluent people can afford to live in insulated buildings with air conditioning and air purifiers," whereas those with lower incomes may have to breathe the air, indoors or not. The list of impacts for the poor goes on and on and on.

One way that this stratification emerges is in housing issues after natural disasters. In the U.S., “if you’re a renter who doesn’t own where you live, you have a kind of a double disadvantage,” says [Junia Howell](#), a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh. Even if a disaster victim has renter’s insurance — and the majority of renters don’t — insurance likely won’t cover the losses, says Howell. On top of that, as housing is scarcer after a disaster and temporary workers move in to help restore an area, rents typically rise.

Poor homeowners aren’t off the hook, either. Hurricane Katrina is a classic example of stratification in disaster recovery; the government and nonprofits were [slower to provide aid](#) to low-income and Black communities after the hurricane. Over a decade after Katrina, the historically poor and Black Lower Ninth Ward is [still recovering](#). And this is all happening in a wealthy country.

In 2016, the World Bank found that natural disasters cause [26 million people to go into poverty](#) each year. The president of the World Bank said they “threaten to roll back decades of progress against poverty.” As natural disasters worsen because of the climate crisis, global and national wealth gaps will only widen; not only are the poor the hardest hit by natural disasters, more people are becoming poor as a result of them.

On January 6, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a \$2 billion recovery fund for the current bushfires, but that will not be nearly enough to cover the damage done — the Black Saturday fires cost an estimated \$4.4 billion. Concerningly, government leaders are also [refusing to acknowledge](#) that there is a link between the severity of the fires and climate change, stunting their ability to plan for even worse fire events. And, as a cherry on top, [government leaders](#) have also been helping to spread disinformation about the cause of the fires, which has been running rampant online.

In the first week of January, right-wing conspiracy theorists were pushing several [false narratives](#), claiming that the fires were arson — some of these conspiracies went further to say that environmental activists had started these fires to push climate action, and others said that the [UN had set those fires](#) in order to clear space for high-speed rail. (Needless to say, these claims are false.)

In reality, it is the actions of the right wing that are often perpetuating such horrible fires. Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right president of Brazil, encouraged the devastating burning of the Amazon rainforest last year, [specifically targeting indigenous people](#).

Indigenous populations typically suffer more from wildfire impacts. Studies in [Canada](#) and [the U.S.](#) have found that Indigenous people are typically hit the hardest by fires. In Australia, on top of the disenfranchisement they have experienced through colonization as well as the loss their homes to blazes brought on by land mismanagement, Aboriginal people are also having [significant parts of their culture](#) destroyed through the burning of sacred sites and heritage sites.

Currently, there is a large concentration of fires in New South Wales, which also has the [highest Aboriginal population](#) in the country. “Fire, an element indigenous groups across the continent once lived in harmony with, is now putting their cultural and sacred sites at risk,” writes Yessenia Funes for Earther. Looking to the future, many Aboriginal people have been asking Australian officials to [heed their knowledge](#) on fire management and implement practices such as yearly controlled burns to prevent such disastrous fires.

As for ensuring poor people aren’t left behind in the climate crisis, reducing inequality is the name of the game. Preventatively, “a focus on redistribution rather than the relentless pursuit of economic growth is a necessary precondition ... for reducing poverty and a whole range of inequities” like

health and climate outcomes, says Friel. For disaster relief specifically, Howell says policymakers can specifically examine how aid can be distributed in a more equitable way, before and after a disaster.

Last week, Australian Council of Social Service called on Morrison to raise the amount of disaster funds, specifically saying that they're inadequate to help poor families recover. "We are very concerned that the current Disaster Recovery Payment is seriously inadequate, particularly for people on lower incomes," ACOSS's CEO wrote in a letter to the prime minister.

Despite the presence of [climate deniers in Morrison's government](#), Morrison has acknowledged that the climate crisis might be linked to these fires. But [Morrison also said last week that](#) climate policies are "job-destroying, economy-destroying, economy-wrecking targets and goals" that "won't change the fact that there have been bushfires or anything like that in Australia." So, there's that.

Without the climate policies that the right wing so despises, Australia [may soon not be habitable](#). The rich will have much higher chances of surviving, as they pack up themselves and their money to move to places that are less hot and disaster-prone. The poor, lacking the thousands of dollars needed to emigrate to and establish themselves in a different country, are much more likely to be left behind.

**Sharon Zhang**, Truthout

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