



SUMMARY OF REPORTS

Profits Over Protection: The Systemic Abuse of Resilience Workers

Core Finding

Labor trafficking and labor exploitation are not incidental in post-disaster recovery - they are predictable outcomes of disaster-driven labor demand combined with informal recruitment, subcontracting, aggressive federal immigration enforcement, and weak regulatory oversight.

Key Takeaways

- Post-disaster relief work is performed primarily by immigrants - many undocumented or on temporary status - as well as formerly and currently incarcerated people and U.S.-born people of color. These are also the groups which face entrenched discrimination and disproportionate displacement after climate disasters.
- "Disaster relief work" spans from cleanup (gutting insulation, consolidating wreckage, disposing of waste, scrubbing walls, vacuuming, removing broken glass and mold), activities which require specialized training or equipment (sheetrock removal, environmental remediation roofing repair, removing fallen trees, utility restoration, debris piling and removal, clearing pools of toxic sludge, and a variety of projects which fall under the construction umbrella such as sheetrock repair, drywall installation, remodeling and rebuilding.
- The risk of labor trafficking more than doubles in post-disaster construction and cleanup sectors.
- Wage theft is the most commonly reported abuse among disaster workers.
- Wage theft operates as a coercive tool that entrenches forced labor conditions.
- Health and safety violations are endemic, not anomalous.
- Health and safety violations are likely underreported as most disaster workers lack safety net resources and are often scared to seek assistance due to their immigration status
- Workers routinely lack required training and basic personal protective equipment (PPE). In cases where workers did have proper PPE, they were often using it or wearing it incorrectly due to lack of training.
- Disaster restoration companies are capturing growing public and private funds while increasing profits by cutting labor protections and compromising worker safety.
- Chronic enforcement failures by OSHA and state agencies enable widespread abuse, intimidation, and trafficking with near impunity.
- Beyond the exploitative and hazardous conditions of many disaster relief jobs, disaster restoration workers are scared to engage in recovery efforts because of increased immigration enforcement.

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Disaster Recovery as a High-Risk Labor Trafficking Environment

Key Findings	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Across multiple quantitative studies, post-disaster construction and cleanup workers experience significantly higher rates of deception, coercive recruitment, debt bondage, surveillance, and threats. • Immigrants are especially vulnerable to coercive and forced labor because employers exploit lack of legal status as a tool of control. • Threats of arrest or deportation are routinely used to compel workers into unsafe and exploitative conditions. • Risk persists across all phases of disaster recovery - short, intermediate, and long-term. • Disaster workers are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ > 2x more likely be deceived about their working and living conditions ○ > 2x more likely have high or increasing debt related to an employer ○ > 2x more likely to be forced to perform additional services or responsibilities. <p>Human trafficking occurs at more than twice the rate among construction workers at post-disaster sites compared to non-disaster sites.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfeffer, et al., Labor Trafficking in Construction: Is Working in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster a Risk Factor? <i>Journal on Human Trafficking</i> (Apr. 16, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23322705.2025.2492514 • Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfeffer, Stephen Tueller and Michael Bradshaw, <i>Labor Trafficking in Construction During Recovery and Reconstruction from Natural Disaster</i>, Human Trafficking Policy & Research Analyses Project (Sept. 2024), <i>available at</i> https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/opre-HTPRAP-natural-disasters-oct24_0.pdf • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," <i>USA Today</i> (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/05/migrants-key-to-rebuilding-florida-after-hurricane-ian-but-vulnerable-to-scams/8177904001/ • Nik Theodore, <i>Recovering from Climate Disasters: Immigrant Day Laborers as "Second Responders"</i> NDOLN and Center for Urban Economic Development University of Illinois Chicago (Apr. 2022), <i>available at</i> https://ndlon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Recovering-from-Climate-Disasters-Report-2.26.22.pdf • <i>Post-Katrina Labor Trafficking Case Studies</i>, Thomson Reuters Institute (2024), <i>available at</i> https://www.thomsonreuters.com/content/dam/ewp-m/documents/thomsonreuters/en/thomson-reuters-institute/emergency-management/post-katrina-labor-trafficking-case-studies.pdf • Katherine Hoogesteyn, Leanne McCallum Desselle, Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfefffer, Lauren Vollinger, "The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: A Scoping Review," (Feb. 13, 2024), <i>available at</i> https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/

Recruitment Pathways That Enable Exploitation

Key Mechanisms	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal recruitment (street corners, flyers Home Depot, WhatsApp, shelters) • Labor brokers and layered subcontracting • Guestworker visa programs with restricted mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarah Stillman, "The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters," <i>The New Yorker</i> (Nov. 1, 2021), <i>available at</i> https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters • Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfeiffer, et al., Labor Trafficking in Construction: Is Working in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster a Risk Factor? <i>Journal on Human Trafficking</i> (Apr. 16, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23322705.2025.2492514 • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," <i>USA Today</i> (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/05/migrants-key-to-rebuilding-florida-after-hurricane-ian-but-vulnerable-to-scams/8177904001/ • Nik Theodore, <i>Recovering from Climate Disasters: Immigrant Day Laborers as "Second Responders"</i> NDOLN and Center for Urban Economic Development University of Illinois Chicago (Apr. 2022), <i>available at</i> https://ndlon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Recovering-from-Climate-Disasters-Report-2.26.22.pdf • Katherine Hoogesteyn, Leanne McCallum Desselle, Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfeiffer, Lauren Vollinger, "The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: A Scoping Review," (Feb. 13, 2024), <i>available at</i> https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/ • Sarah Stillman, "The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters," <i>The New Yorker</i> (Nov. 1, 2021), <i>available at</i> https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters • Dorany Pineda, From LA Wildfires to Hurricanes, immigrants help rebuild after disasters. Some may face deportations, <i>Associated Press</i> (Jan. 16, 2025) <i>available at</i> https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigrants-climate-change-disaster-recovery-150392f58da4a6607125d01fbf08a542 • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," <i>USA Today</i> (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/05/migrants-key-to-rebuilding-florida-after-hurricane-ian-but-vulnerable-to-scams/8177904001/
<p>Why this matters</p> <p>Because disaster workers are recruited through informal and unreliable channels, they are frequently defrauded into coercive and exploitative working conditions. Compared to non-disaster workers, disaster workers are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3x more likely to be deceived about the nature of the job • Over 2x more likely to experience coercive recruitment <p>These risks are compounded by multi-layered subcontracting chains that rely on informal recruitment, obscuring employer accountability and making it difficult for workers to seek recourse for wage theft, health and safety violations, and abuse.</p> <p>Additionally, temporary visa programs are used to fill disaster-related labor shortages, recruiting workers from abroad whose visa status often ties them to a single employer - creating structural vulnerabilities that increase the risk of coercion, exploitation and trafficking.</p>	

Wage Theft as a Tool of Coercion

Synthesis	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wage theft is the most prevalent abuse reported by resiliency workers. • Nonpayment is used as a tool of coercion as it increases worker dependency on the employer for housing, food, and immigration safety. This tactic also forces a vulnerable individual to keep showing up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarah Stillman, "The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters," <i>The New Yorker</i> (Nov. 1, 2021), <i>available at</i> https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters • Katherine Hoogesteyn, Leanne McCallum Desselle, Kelle Barrick, Rebecca Pfeiffer, Lauren Vollinger, "The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters: A Scoping Review," (Feb. 13, 2024), <i>available at</i> https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/ • Emily Timm, "The Connection Between Wage Theft and Climate Disasters," <i>RouteFifty</i> (July 6, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.route-fifty.com/management/2022/07/connection-wage-theft-and-climate-disasters/373912/ • Hilary Beaumont, "Exploitative contracts and hazardous conditions: life for some of the immigrants cleaning up wildfire-stricken LA," <i>The Guardian</i> (Apr. 28, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/la-wildfires-cleanup-hazards • Rachel Metz, "The Plight of New Orleans Workers" <i>In These Times</i> (Jun. 21, 2007), <i>available at</i> https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-plight-of-new-orleans-workers • Nik Theodore, <i>After the Storm: Houston's Day Labor Markets in the Aftermath of Hurricane Harvey</i>, University of Illinois at Chicago (Nov. 2017), <i>available at</i> https://greatcities.uic.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/After-the-Storm-Theodore-2017.pdf • Nik Theodore, "Recovering from Climate Disasters: Immigrant Day Laborers as 'Second Responders'" <i>NDOLN and Center for Urban Economic Development University of Illinois Chicago</i> (Apr. 2022), <i>available at</i> https://ndlon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Recovering-from-Climate-Disasters-Report-2.26.22.pdf • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," <i>USA Today</i> (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://tinyurl.com/yc5wjrp
Key Statistics & Information	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25%–90% of workers engaged in post-disaster work report wage theft across multiple surveys. • Average unpaid wages often exceed \$1,000 per incident - with certain reports indicating \$20,000-\$30,000 withheld for certain projects <p>"In a disaster zone, wage theft isn't really just wage theft - it's an index of forced labor... If your employer owes you money, you're paradoxically more, not less, likely to keep showing up to the job, holding out hope of being granted what you're owed. After a major storm or fire, your only access to safe drinking water and food may come through your employer. The fear of retaliation is strong, and, if you sit down to strike, you'll be fired and lose all of your pay..."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saket Soni, Executive Director of Resilience Force <p>"Employers withhold wages throughout the course of a specific project, sometimes withholding as much as \$30,000, and when the project concludes instead of paying they will threaten to call ICE or the police"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sergio Chávez, Sociologist at Rice University 	

Health & Safety Violations: Predictable and Preventable

Common hazards across disasters work sites	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toxic exposure (ash, asbestos, mold, chemicals)+ exposure to harmful pathogens • Injury and death: Falls, electrocution, heat illness, structural collapse • Pervasive lack of PPE or incorrect usage • Long term health risks: asthma, heart attacks, strokes, cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, chronic skin conditions, dermatitis, skin cancer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hilary Beaumont, "Immigrants Cleaning Up Wildfire-Stricken LA Face Hazardous Conditions," The Guardian (Apr. 30, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/articles/entry/immigrants-cleaning-up-wildfire-stricken-los-angeles-hazardous-conditions • Dorany Pineda, From LA Wildfires to Hurricanes, immigrants help rebuild after disasters. Some may face deportations, Associated Press (Jan. 16, 2025) <i>available at</i> https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigrants-climate-change-disaster-recovery-150392f58da4a6607125d01fbf08a542 • Emily Timm, The Connection Between Wage Theft and Climate Disasters, RouteFifty (July 6, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.route-fifty.com/management/2022/07/connection-wage-theft-and-climate-disasters/373912/ • Hilary Beaumont, "<u>Exploitative contracts and hazardous conditions: life for some of the immigrants cleaning up wildfire-stricken LA</u>", The Guardian (Apr. 28, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/la-wildfires-cleanup-hazards • Jeanne Kuang, Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "As workers tackle dangerous job of cleaning up after LA fires, can authorities keep them safe?" CalMatters (Jan. 17, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://calmatters.org/environment/wildfires/2025/01/la-fires-worker-cleanup-safety/ • Janelle Retka, Samantha McCabe, Jiahui Huang and María Inés Zamudio, "Toxic Labor," The Center for Public Integrity (Sept. 28, 2023), <i>available at</i> https://publicintegrity.org/environment/toxic-labor/toxic-labor-disaster-workers/ • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," USA Today (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/10/05/migrants-key-to-rebuilding-florida-after-hurricane-ian-but-vulnerable-to-scams/8177904001/ • Nik Theodore, Recovering from Climate Disasters: Immigrant Day Laborers as "Second Responders" NDOLN and Center for Urban Economic Development University of Illinois Chicago (Apr. 2022), <i>available at</i> https://ndlon.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Recovering-from-Climate-Disasters-Report-2.26.22.pdf • <i>Rebuilding Altadena: Critical Gaps in Worker Safety after the Eaton Fire</i> (May 2025), <i>available at</i> https://denariseup.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Rebuilding-Altadena.pdf • Colleen Shalby, "In the Firezone, an immigrant workforce warily carries out cleanups" LA Times (Oct. 8, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-10-08/in-the-fire-zones-an-immigrant-workforce-carries-out-cleanups
<p>Pattern</p> <p>Informal and subcontracted workers consistently receive fewer protections than formally contracted crews.</p>	
<p>Key Statistics & Information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only 15% of workers working in disaster affected areas received training • Only 17-20% of workers were informed of health risks involved in disaster restoration work • Most workers do not have proper PPE <p><i>From the Altadena Fire:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of workers observed wearing N100, N95 or half-face respirators • 18% of workers observed wearing safety glasses- in many cases, workers were simply wearing sunglasses rather than protective eyewear • One-quarter observed wearing safety gloves, though in some cases appeared to be latex gloves v. nitrile gloves • 9% of workers were outfitted with Tyvek Suits 	

Structural Drivers of Abuse: Subcontracting & Private Equity

Key Findings	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over the past 20 years, an industry consisting of mostly small local businesses has been consolidated by private-equity • Franchising and subcontracting obscure accountability • Workers do not receive training through employers - Ensuring worker safety falls on community-based organizations • The Disaster Restoration Industry is a \$150-\$200-billion-dollar industry nationally and has grown in a largely unregulated market • Annual growth of 3.6% in this industry between 2020-2025 in California 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private Equity Stakeholder Project and Resilience Force, <i>Private Equity Profits from Disaster at the Expense of Workers, Communities and Climate</i>, (August 2023), <i>available at</i> https://pestakeholder.org/reports/new-report-private-equity-profits-from-disaster/ • Jeanne Kuang, Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "As workers tackle dangerous job of cleaning up after LA fires, can authorities keep them safe?" CalMatters (Jan. 17, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://calmatters.org/environment/wildfires/2025/01/la-fires-worker-cleanup-safety/ • IBISWorld, US Industry State Report: Natural Disaster & Emergency Relief Services in California (August 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/industry/california/natural-disaster-emergency-relief-services/14939/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20market%20size,6.8%25%20from%202020%20to%202025. • Colleen Shalby, "In the Firezone, an immigrant workforce warily carries out cleanups" LA Times (Oct. 8, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-10-08/in-the-fire-zones-an-immigrant-workforce-carries-out-clean-ups • Hilary Beaumont, "Immigrants Cleaning Up Wildfire-Stricken LA Face Hazardous Conditions," The Guardian (Apr. 30, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/articles/entry/immigrants-cleaning-up-wildfire-stricken-los-angeles-hazardous-conditions • Sarah Stillman, "The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters," The New Yorker (Nov. 1, 2021), <i>available at</i> https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters • Dorany Pineda, From LA Wildfires to Hurricanes, immigrants help rebuild after disasters. Some may face deportations, Associated Press (Jan. 16, 2025) <i>available at</i> https://apnews.com/article/trump-immigrants-climate-change-disaster-recovery-150392f58da4a6607125d01fbf08a542 • Nina Lakhani, "Private Equity Profits from Climate Disaster Clean-Up- while investing in fossil fuels," The Guardian (Sept. 7, 2023), <i>available at</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/la-wildfires-cleanup-hazards • Hilary Beaumont, "Exploitative contracts and hazardous conditions: life for some of the immigrants cleaning up wildfire-stricken LA", The Guardian (Apr. 28, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/28/la-wildfires-cleanup-hazards • Nina Lakhani, No rebuilding without them': Trump's immigration crackdown will affect disaster recovery, The Guardian (Jan. 29, 2025), <i>available at</i> https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/29/trump-immigration-disaster-recovery • Janelle Retka, Samantha McCabe, Jiahui Huang and María Inés Zamudio, "Toxic Labor," The Center for Public Integrity (Sept. 28, 2023), <i>available at</i> https://publicintegrity.org/environment/toxic-labor/toxic-labor-disaster-workers/ • Rick Jervis, "Migrants are helping rebuild Florida after Hurricane Ian. They might not get paid for it," USA Today (Oct. 5, 2022), <i>available at</i> https://tinyurl.com/yc5wjrp
<p>Consequences of this current system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profits are maximized by undercutting workers' safety and labor rights. • Public funds are used to exploit workers • Profits are privatized while labor risks are socialized and borne by workers and the state. • Private equity reinvests money into fossil fuels which cause increased frequency of climate borne disasters 	

Trafficking & Exploitation with Impunity: Enforcement Gaps

Key Findings	Supporting Evidence and References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FEMA and California Emergency Agencies (CalOES, CalFire, etc.) do not attach any conditions to their funding • OSHA and state agencies are structurally under-resourced - in the aftermath of a natural disaster these agencies are increasingly spread thin • OSHA estimates about 1 compliance officer for every 70,000 workers • FEMA and insurance-funded rebuilding lacks enforceable labor standards • Enforcement is increasingly dependent on employers <p>"[Workers] are at the mercy of the people who bring them to the site..." - Rachael Jones, Exposure scientist and Professor, UCLA Fielding School of Public Health's Environmental Health Sciences Department.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hilary Beaumont, "Immigrants Cleaning Up Wildfire-Stricken LA Face Hazardous Conditions," <i>The Guardian</i> (Apr. 30, 2025), available at https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/articles/entry/immigrants-cleaning-up-wildfire-stricken-los-angeles-hazardous-conditions • Emily Timm, <i>The Connection Between Wage Theft and Climate Disasters</i>, RouteFifty (July 6, 2022), available at https://www.route-fifty.com/management/2022/07/connection-wage-theft-and-climate-disasters/373912/ • Rachel Metz, "The Plight of New Orleans Workers" In <i>These Times</i> (Jun. 21, 2007), available at https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-plight-of-new-orleans-workers • <i>Rebuilding Altadena: Critical Gaps in Worker Safety after the Eaton Fire</i> (May 2025), available at https://denariseup.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Rebuilding-Altadena.pdf • Sarah Stillman, "The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters," <i>The New Yorker</i> (Nov. 1, 2021), available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/08/the-migrant-workers-who-follow-climate-disasters
Consequences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private companies profit with minimal oversight and near-total impunity. • The disaster-restoration industry expands within a fragmented and weakly enforced regulatory framework. • The public ultimately absorbs the costs of employer misconduct through long-term health impacts and lost wages of abused and exploited workers 	

ABOUT THE SUNITA JAIN ANTI TRAFFICKING INITIATIVE

Sunita Jain Anti-Trafficking Policy Initiative (SJI) is an evidence-based and survivor-informed think tank based out of Loyola Law School. SJI intentionally works towards systemic change and filling the gaps in human trafficking prevention by focusing its policy advocacy at the intersection of 5 pillars: Government Accountability, Racial Justice, Immigrant Justice, Climate Justice and Economic Justice.