

Diversifying Documentation with UndocuFund: An Examination of Post-Disaster Narratives

Introduction

During and after the 2017 Tubbs Fire, significant news coverage revolved around the experiences of undocumented individuals in times of disasters. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, as of 2014, more than 2 million undocumented immigrants resided in California (representing approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of total U.S. undocumented immigrants).¹ Of this population, 15,500 undocumented immigrants resided in Napa County and 38,500 in Sonoma County.² In those two counties combined, undocumented immigrants accounted for 46.4% of the total immigrant population.³ These individuals are our neighbors, coworkers, family members, and friends.

While they continue to be a large part of our community, undocumented individuals also remain markedly vulnerable in natural disasters. Immigrants without legal status in the United States are ineligible FEMA's cash assistance programs and often face barriers (like language or stigma) to accessing shelters and state resources. To address this reality after the Tubbs Fire, a joint effort called UndocuFund (<http://undocufund.org/>) was launched to raise and distribute funds to affected undocumented residents in Sonoma County. In the long-term wake of the fire, the organizations in charge of Undocufund continue to engage in conversations around policy reform and planning action. For the most part, this work has been done by challenging existing policy and legal infrastructures and by commenting on existing plans/frameworks.

Many of these conversations were successful, but the fund's advocacy work has largely been limited to engaging with documents (conveying laws, policy, and future goals) that perpetuate decades of systemic exclusion and inequality. As tools for negotiation and mediation, these documents deserve a close examination. Structurally produced vulnerabilities are codified through policy-making and market decision-making but also, perhaps more deeply, in the modes

¹ Hayes, Joseph and Hill, Laura, "Undocumented Immigrants in California" (Public Policy Institute of California), accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.ppic.org/publication/undocumented-immigrants-in-california/>.

² "Profile of the Unauthorized Population – CA" (Migration Policy Institute, September 1, 2017), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/CA>.

³ Hayes, Joseph and Hill, Laura, "Undocumented Immigrants in California."

of document production supporting these policies and decisions. *Sensemaking* documents, particularly those circulated in the aftermath of disasters, are often taken at face value as the widely accepted narratives that govern post-disaster recovery.^{4,5} Reports, frameworks, and standards have wide-ranging impacts: they are empowered with the capacity to convey specific conclusions as truth. These truths are then used to make legal and policy decisions as well as to write history. They also comprise, like in the case of UndocuFund, the ground on which organizations and communities seeking to contend existing structures must engage.

What can we learn about making better policies and plans by taking a closer look at how these documents are constructed and given power? How do they support or challenge existing inequalities?

Analysis

This memo is a summary of a longer thesis project that can be found on Undocufund's website (www.undocufund.org). In it, three documents and their relationships to one another were analyzed:

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's (CAL FIRE) Tubbs Fire Investigation Report (17CALNU010046)⁶. Beginning in the immediate aftermath of the fire, the search for its source was meticulously and systematically recorded. This document represents a legal and investigative narrative of the fire.

UndocuFund's intake data.⁷ In distributing funds, UndocuFund collected data representing over 2000 households with at least one undocumented individual in Sonoma County. This dataset holds testimony from voices that are rarely included in formal decision-making.

Sonoma County's Office of Recovery and Resiliency's Recovery and Resiliency Framework.⁸ The Recovery and Resiliency Framework is a planning document that generates a roadmap and vision for the future. In its creation, a number of organizations and community members (including those that comprise UndocuFund) were included. As such, UndocuFund has been invested in the document's success and mobilization through policy and concrete action.

⁴ Per Karl Weick, "the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs".

⁵ Karl E. Weick, "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (December 1993): 628, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339>.

⁶ John Martinez, "17LNU010045 Tubbs Fire Investigation Report," Investigation Report (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Sonoma-Lake Napa Unit, January 20, 2019).

⁷ UndocuFund. "UndocuFund Intake Data," March 7, 2019.

⁸ Board of Supervisors, "Recovery & Resiliency Framework" (County of Sonoma, December 4, 2018).

Findings

Several findings emerged out of this analysis. While nuanced, they are summarized here as both observations and calls to action:

- **The ways in which we measure loss are exclusionary and predicated on systems of documentation.** We often measure fire losses through acres destroyed and structures lost. This privileges both land and property ownership. Deaths resulting from disasters are measured by death certificates. This assumes that all deaths are uniformly measurable while also relying on a system that demands that human bodies demonstrate their legal legitimacy. While homeowners can receive recompense through disaster assistance, insurance claims, or lawsuits, undocumented assets are not similarly recognized as losses.
- **The Tubbs Fire worsened pre-existing chronic financial precarity for undocumented individuals.** Over 20% of the households applying for UndocuFund funding cited loss of food due to electrical outages as a financial hardship. This is unsurprising as, within the dataset, 56% of applicant households were single income and the average hourly wage reported was \$14.81, over \$11 less than the average hourly wage reported in the Santa Rosa Metropolitan Area overall.
- **Existing institutions historically thought of as support systems don't necessarily serve everyone the same way.** Only around 2% of the households represented by the UndocuFund dataset reported visiting a shelter. Also, many of the individuals represented in the data stated that they resorted to keeping the majority of their money at home instead of in banks. For those households, emergencies and evacuations made their financial assets vulnerable to loss or theft.
- **To exist within, and make claims through, formal disaster documents one must be documented.** Claims made around disaster (the right to loss, the right to recovery, etc...) are reliant on an individual's right to fully express personhood and citizenship. In essence, to exist and make claims through most formal post-disaster documents, like the CAL FIRE Report and the Recovery and Resiliency Framework, one must be documented.
- Anonymizing feedback homogenizes experiences. The Recovery and Resiliency Framework uses anonymous quotes to support its arguments. While anonymity is often immensely useful as a security measure for people who don't have legal citizenship, it can also be dangerous if it erases the differences in experiences.

- **The truths represented in all of the documents are subjective.** Neither science nor political legitimacy change this. Documents are empowered by both society and the government to hold authority – the decision to use one document over another as an “official narrative” is a choice.

Recommendations

- **We must be careful and thoughtful about how we measure and assign blame for loss and destruction.** Property damage is perhaps the easiest metric to use in evaluating the scale of natural disaster, but forefronting this excludes other forms of loss. Criminalizing the fire, itself, similarly has a significant amount of utility. However, it also allows those not found directly “at fault” to evade responsibility. Fires should be contextualized in both time and space. For example the Tubbs Fire held a similar footprint to that of the 1969 Hanly Fire. The ways in which we’ve developed our communities has had an impact on our disaster vulnerability. For meaningful progress to be made, we must all acknowledge our complicity in creating fire risk.
- **Plans for a more resilient future should tackle the networked nature of disasters and address underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities as central, not peripheral, to resilience.** For many individuals, the Tubbs Fire served to push them further into financial danger. How and why these dangers existed in the first place should be a focal point for planning going forward.
- **It is important, especially with the Office of Recovery and Resiliency, to acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in the truths that post-disaster documents (like the Recovery and Resiliency Framework) create.** Being more explicit about defining who and what is included when using the term “community” is also important. Who is “we” and what is “ours”? When this isn’t interrogated, two violences are enacted: the first is exclusion, the second is the presumption that you can speak for an unrepresented population.
- **Efforts to include the voices of marginalized community members must be coupled with explicit policies and laws.** Acknowledging the existence of marginalized communities is not enough. Their perspectives and needs should be codified further.

Acknowledgement

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