

ATTACHMENT C

“It feels
like you’re
living in
Revelations.”





From left: Scott Boudreaux, Bridget Boudreaux, Dorothy Conner, and Virginia Coberly stand outside of their home, which was damaged during last year's hurricane season in Westlake, Louisiana. *Callaghan O'Hare for BuzzFeed News*

This Louisiana Town Is A Bleak Forecast Of America's Future Climate Crisis

In one year, people in southwestern Louisiana lived through five major disasters on top of a pandemic. Another bad hurricane season is already here, and thousands still have holes in their roofs.

By Zahra Hirji and Brianna Sacks

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Bridget Boudreaux didn't know she was saying goodbye to her father last August when an ambulance took him away from her sweltering, hurricane-battered home near Lake Charles, Louisiana. The 72-year-old died alone after medics rushed him from a hospital to nursing homes, trying to find a facility that still had power after Hurricane Laura hit. But Boudreaux's grief didn't end there: It took her family another seven months to finally bury her father, as one disaster after another pummeled the riverbank city where she grew up.

With its 150-mile-per-hour sustained winds, Laura was the worst storm to hit the state in a century. Then, in October, Hurricane Delta rammed into Lake Charles as a Category 2 storm. Hurricane Zeta hit later that month. These were followed by a brutal ice storm that froze pipes and wrecked houses in February of this year. In May, historic rains flooded the area with upwards of 19 inches of water in a single day. Now, as the 2021 hurricane season gets underway, Boudreaux's three-bedroom home — still askew on its foundation, with holes in its roof — is one of thousands in Lake Charles still waiting for a recovery that never happened.

"Right when you think you're catching your breath, boom," Boudreaux told BuzzFeed News. "You are constantly getting hit with these natural disasters, and sometimes it feels like you're living in Revelations."



Damage to Boudreaux's home following Hurricane Laura.

Courtesy Bridget Boudreaux

Lake Charles exposes a grim, rarely discussed reality of climate change: Back-to-back or overlapping disasters, also known as compounding disasters, are becoming more frequent. And the US government's largely hands-off approach to disaster recovery means the most vulnerable cities — those already struggling with aging infrastructure, housing shortages, pollution problems, segregation, and poverty — can't cope.

Far from being an outlier, Lake Charles's plight is "actually more of a window into the future," said Jeff Schlegelmilch, director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

Lingering heaps of debris render the city vulnerable to more flooding from future rains and storms.

And the city is close to its breaking point. People are exhausted, stressed, and hurting, and many cannot afford to change their circumstances. The crushing housing crisis has left families like Boudreaux's living in unsafe conditions in their broken, mold-infested homes or in tents. Others have moved away. And lingering heaps of debris render the city vulnerable to more flooding from future rains and storms.

"There is a lot of PTSD in this community from what we have gone through," Lake Charles Mayor Nic Hunter told BuzzFeed News. "In the past 25 years, Lake Charles had been through 11 federally declared disasters; five of those occurred just in the past year. We can debate what is causing it. But something is happening. You don't have to be a scientist or a genius to see that."

As the planet warms and people continue to build homes and businesses in high-risk areas, disasters have become more destructive, more frequent, and more costly. In 2020, the US experienced the most billion-dollar disasters on record. And it's often low-income families and communities of color that are most impacted and get the least amount of support to build back.

Of the more than 56,000 homes statewide that were damaged by Laura, most were in Calcasieu Parish, home to Lake Charles. It's one of the most segregated residential communities in the US, and its Black residents have among the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the country. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many Black communities already clustered near the chemical

plants and refineries spewing toxic emissions along the state's Gulf Coast, the compounding disasters in Lake Charles epitomize how climate change disproportionately impacts those already most at risk.

An aerial view of damage from Hurricane Laura to a neighborhood outside of Lake Charles, Louisiana, on August 27, 2020.

Stringer / AFP via Getty Images

“Lake Charles will be the poster child for climate racism,” said Kathy Egland, a climate rights activist who chairs the NAACP’s Environmental and Climate Justice Committee.

The parish now faces not only digging itself out of billions in damages, but also strengthening local defenses against future disasters. Though it has already received hundreds of millions from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the state’s request for an extra \$3 billion from Congress — an unusual boost reserved for the nation’s worst disasters — remains in limbo.

“Lake Charles will be the poster child for climate racism.”

“What we are trying to do right now is use a water gun to put out a brush fire,” said Hunter, who has been begging leaders in Washington, DC, for help for months. Although President Joe Biden recently visited his city and met with him in person, the mayor is still waiting for the White House and Congress to push through the billions in additional disaster relief.

“We are languishing because of politics,” Hunter said.

The White House and the offices of Louisiana’s two senators have publicly come out in support of extra funding in the past month. But when asked about the holdup, none of them commented.

As the 2021 Atlantic hurricane season gets into full swing, Lake Charles residents worry that another major storm could mean they won’t ever fully recover.

“We are praying that we get a break this year so we can get on our feet and stay standing for a minute,” Boudreaux said. “If we get hit again, we will lose everything.”

Blue tarps line the roofs of homes near the condo building where Monica Washington used to live as southwest Louisiana struggles to recover from last year’s hurricane season in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on Saturday, June 12, 2021.

Callaghan O’Hare for BuzzFeed News

More than nine months after Hurricane Laura’s devastating blow to Lake Charles, many of the city’s streets are still lined with homes covered by blue tarps.

“It’s startling, gut-wrenching to see how many people are living under blue tarps. It’s everywhere you look,” said Gary LeBlanc, cofounder of the nonprofit Mercy Chefs, which has provided food in disaster response situations for more than a decade. The group has visited Lake Charles multiple times over the past year. “We’ve been in places that had [Category 5 hurricane] damage, and we’ve never seen this many blue tarps a year after a storm.”

Chastity Bishop is one of those people. After a freak fire in her attic burned a hole in her roof last July, the 41-year-old, her fiancé, and her 9-year-old daughter moved to a rental on the southeastern side of town. When Hurricane Laura tore through the city, it caused severe wind and water damage in both structures.

The rest of the year came with even more destruction. In October, Hurricane Delta flooded their rental and, a few weeks later, the historic winter storm froze and burst its pipes. The future is bleak for this Louisiana town as a break forecast of America’s future climate crisis.

Charles on May 17, Bishop watched in disbelief as water rose from the sidewalk to her porch to the windows before hitting her waist and submerging the house. Her fiancé helped rescue stranded residents, loading them into boats floating down the street, before they made it to higher ground a few miles away.

“It’s hard to explain the smell of flood — you have to live it to understand it.”

After the floods receded, Bishop’s family did everything they could to dry out the house with fans and dehumidifiers. But two weeks later, she and her daughter got sick from the mold. They had to evacuate so that the landlord could rip out all the flooring and walls.

“It’s hard to explain the smell of flood — you have to live it to understand it,” said Bishop, who grew up in Lake Charles. “And in these situations, you either live in a molded house or you come up with some money or find some family to live with.”

The family was able to shell out \$1,500 to stay in hotels for a week before running out of money and moving back to their original home, where they’re living in their garage while they fix their tattered roof. They’ve set up a porta-potty, a gas grill, a microwave, and a mini fridge and are sharing a mattress. To bathe, they heat water on a burner. It’s tough, but there are much worse situations around them: Many people are still camping out in their yards and on their patios.

“People who didn’t need help for hurricanes need help now after floods, and no one is really helping,” Bishop said. “You are seeing people just quit, give up. People who are just trying to retire, who had all these plans, what do they do?”

It's been hard for officials to tally the number of damaged structures or displaced residents in Lake Charles because the numbers keep shifting with each new disaster. Hunter estimates that Laura impacted 95% of the city's homes and businesses and that 1,000 buildings still remain unoccupied just from that one hurricane. Hurricane Delta and the May floods then battered and rendered another 2,000 houses in the city unlivable.

"What we're seeing is that the recovery cycle is continuing to get interrupted by disasters, so you can never quite get back up to that previous baseline," said Columbia's Schlegelmilch.

The main issue is supply. Building materials are so scarce and expensive that people are driving nearly 150 miles to Houston just to buy lumber. The direst scarcity is housing. Residents in ruined homes, as well as workers who are being hired to fix them, can't find affordable places to live.

The housing situation "is a serious crisis," said Tarek Polite, the director of human services for Calcasieu Parish, who is also in charge of recovery support for housing. "The supply that is left has become extremely expensive. Unfortunately, 50% of our low-income housing was damaged, and many apartment complexes are still fighting with insurance companies for payouts."

"I have over 80 pictures of the damage," Washington said. "You can't tell me I can live there."

Lake Charles was already on the brink of an affordable housing shortage before the August hurricane struck, thanks to an industrial boom and an influx of chemical and energy plant workers, Polite explained. The result, he said, is a "new class of homeless individuals" who are toughing it out until they get money from the federal government.

Since Laura hit Lake Charles, the city has lost an estimated 6.7% of its population, according to Mark Tizano, the city's community development director, though he said the real number is probably much higher. "People are living with relatives, gone out of town, anywhere they can lay their heads," Tizano said.

For a small percentage of those who stayed, FEMA has helped fill the housing gap. As of mid-June, nearly 2,100 people statewide who were displaced after Laura and Delta were living in federally provided temporary housing.

But that's not nearly enough, local officials say, and they don't understand why the city has yet to receive more housing support from the federal government. "This is the first time we've seen this type of displacement after storms," Tizano said. Months after Hurricane Rita slammed into Lake Charles in 2005, he added, "we were already quickly underway with a program to help people with housing."

Monica Washington outside of her trailer, which was provided by FEMA after her home was damaged during last year's hurricane season, in Sulphur, Louisiana, on Saturday, June 12, 2021.

Callaghan O'Hare for BuzzFeed News

Damage to Washington's home following Hurricanes Laura and Delta.

Courtesy Monica Washington

Monica Washington says she's one of the lucky ones. After Laura's intense winds tore open her condo,

Washington, her 32-year-old daughter, and their two dogs and cat spent nearly a year hopping between hotels and sleeping crammed together in their car. She ended up spending about \$21,700 on hotel bills,

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depleting her savings. Finally, they got a break on May 13 when FEMA placed them in one of the coveted temporary housing trailers outside of town.

It took months of back-and-forth with FEMA, and a formal request from Rep. Clay Higgins, to prove her family qualified for temporary housing. “I have over 80 pictures of the damage,” Washington said. “You can’t tell me I can live there. There’s no power.”

There wasn’t much to move into the trailer. Most of what they own has been destroyed, including Washington’s grandmother’s silverware and her daughter’s baby pictures. “Everything we own fits in one drawer,” she said. “Everything I have worked for my entire life, gone.”

To keep supporting her family, Washington, 58, will have to come out of retirement. She’s still fighting with her condo’s rental insurance for a payout and repeatedly emailing and calling FEMA about getting additional aid. “I can feel the anger building up when I think about what that storm did to us,” she said.

A man looks at damage inside the Capitol One Bank Tower, which had its windows blown out as Hurricane Laura passed through on August 27, 2020, in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP via Getty Images

A big reason the country’s disaster response system is dysfunctional, experts say, is because the federal government’s role is limited. While FEMA is the country’s expert on emergency response, officials are adamant that their job is only to advise and support state and local governments as they rebuild, not take the lead. Local governments are usually the ones in charge of disaster response and finances.

But if it weren’t for nonprofit and volunteer organizations, many Americans, especially those with low incomes, would not make it through a disaster. These groups are on the ground first and often stay for

months, filling a crucial void for survivors by providing food, healthcare, and other support, such as helping people navigate the confusing FEMA claims process.

“The issue with how the US approaches recovery is that it is highly reliant on people using their own resources to pay for their own recovery,” said Samantha Montano, an assistant professor in emergency management at Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

Insurance is “usually your best bet” to get enough money to rebuild your home, Montano explained. But, she later added, “there can be all kinds of problems actually getting payouts from insurance.”

Since many residents in Lake Charles were uninsured or renting their homes, they are responsible for trying to rebuild their lives using whatever savings they might have. And for those who did have insurance and have applied for assistance from FEMA, there is often a sizable gap between the reimbursement they receive and what it will cost to actually repair their homes.

FEMA also runs the nation’s flood insurance program, a broken system that has racked up billions in debt. Louisianans submitted more than 3,600 flood insurance claims for the three hurricanes combined, resulting in more than \$120 million in funds paid by early June. More than 3,200 claims have already been filed in the aftermath of the May storms, roughly half of them coming from Calcasieu Parish, according to FEMA.

But most flood insurance policies do not repay people for hotels, food, or other costs incurred because their home was uninhabitable, meaning they have to pay those thousands of dollars on their own.

And it’s often people of color and those with low incomes who “get aid last,” said LeBlanc from Mercy Chefs. This heartbreaking reality has grown more widespread as climate change–fueled weather events have intensified in the last decade.

After 2020’s historic spate of disasters, a federal advisory panel published a scathing report that found FEMA’s disaster relief programs perpetually shortchange low-income communities and people of color while providing “an additional boost to wealthy homeowners.”

FEMA did not respond to questions from BuzzFeed News about Lake Charles’ slow recovery. “The people of Lake Charles, Calcasieu Parish and all of [Southwest] Louisiana have been through a difficult time,” Debra Young, a FEMA spokesperson, told BuzzFeed News in an email. Young added that FEMA has been a constant presence in the area and will “continue to work in Lake Charles to assist survivors by providing grants, loans and housing to those who are eligible.”

While Lake Charles is an extreme example, there are more than 50 towns and cities across the country currently dealing with compounding disasters, according to Mustafa Santiago Ali, vice president of environmental justice, climate, and community revitalization at the National Wildlife Federation.

“People don’t talk about it because they are Black, brown, and Indigenous people,” Ali said. “They are unseen and unheard.” He attributed the problem in part to decades of discriminatory housing policies, such as redlining, that forced people of color into floodplains and other disaster-prone areas.

“Many people ask, ‘Well, why don’t they just leave?’” said Egland, the NAACP climate justice chair. “They can’t. People who are economically challenged don’t have the luxury of choice, they’re bound by their

Egland, who lives in Gulfport, Mississippi, and survived Hurricane Katrina, said the ripples of climate racism are extensive and long-lasting. One event can impact food supply, agriculture, housing, access to healthcare, and education for years afterward, setting struggling communities even further back.

“You can get hit one time and maintain hope,” said LeBlanc. “You can get hit twice and still have hope and a promise for a new day. But getting hit a fourth time, a fifth time...people get to a place emotionally where it’s hard to find a bright spot. They’ve used them all up.”

A billboard promoting rebuilding is seen near downtown Lake Charles.

Callaghan O'Hare for BuzzFeed News

For officials in Lake Charles and at the state level, getting Washington to provide enough financial aid and housing support to lift the community out of the shadow of these disasters feels impossible.

Last November, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards sent a letter to former president Donald Trump asking for support, including asking Congress to approve nearly \$3 billion to help rebuild homes and create more affordable rental housing. Without this funding, he wrote, “many neighborhoods and communities will not be able to recover.”

“The most disaster-stricken city in the most disastrous year in recent memory.”

The Trump administration did not fulfill his request. He then made a fresh appeal to Biden, writing to him in January to ask Congress to approve the money. The Biden administration appeared to take notice

“When someone inevitably writes the book of what it was like to live through the past year, they might want to begin the story in Lake Charles,” said Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen following a roundtable with Hunter after the winter storm in late February. Lake Charles, she said, might have the unfortunate distinction of being “the most disaster-stricken city in the most disastrous year in recent memory.”

President Biden speaks with the Calcasieu River Bridge behind him, on May 6, 2021, in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Alex Brandon / AP

President Biden visited the city on May 6, using the Calcasieu River Bridge as a backdrop to announce his \$2 trillion national infrastructure proposal, which could eventually help Lake Charles and places like it. He also announced \$1 billion in additional funding for FEMA specifically to help communities prepare for future disasters. But weeks after his visit, there’s still no word on whether more recovery funds will be given to Lake Charles and the surrounding region.

For Mayor Hunter, the experience has left him feeling like his city is a “pawn” in a nonsensical political battle.

“Washington, DC, is failing American citizens in southwest Louisiana,” he said. “I have a problem with the narrative that it’s everyone else’s problem.”

As the days continue to tick by, bringing the area deeper into hurricane season, Boudreaux and other residents hope their funds and resilience will stretch until more help arrives. If she had a choice, Boudreaux would leave or buy a home, she doesn’t want to leave her family, her hometown. Her children and grandchildren are here. So she’ll continue to do what she and others in Lake Charles have gotten too good at doing: wait.

“We are good people, we work, we pay our bills, we live in a decent home, we go to church and do right by others,” she said. “Just seems everything is against us.” ●

Wooden boards are used to cover broken windows in the Capitol Bank building as southwest Louisiana struggles to recover from last year’s hurricane season in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on Friday, June 11, 2021.

Callaghan O’Hare for BuzzFeed News

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Correction: Hurricane Zeta hit Lake Charles in late October. The hurricane was misidentified in a previous version of this post.



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