

To protect communities from wildfires, we need to focus on equity

Wildfire management strategies should expand mitigation, improve community engagement, and use novel approaches to enhance equitable preparedness, evacuation, and recovery.

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The Policy Problem

Climate change is increasing the severity and frequency of wildfires, threatening communities across the Western United States. However, marginalized communities, who lack resources and face more inequities due to poverty and other systemic injustices, are at much greater risk. These inequities appear in wildfire planning and management, too. In fire-prone Ventura County, California, roughly 45% of the population is considered vulnerable. During and after the county's two largest fires—Thomas and Woolsey Fires—many of these residents experienced disproportionate impacts. This underscores the need for wildfire managers to support and include marginalized communities in wildfire planning, response, and recovery. So, what are the unique needs of marginalized communities when it comes to wildfire, and how should agencies address those needs?

Key findings and proposed solutions

- Wildfire-related concerns and barriers differ for low-income, Spanish-speaking, and high-wildfire risk demographics compared to the broader community.
- Wildfire planning and management does not prepare non-English speakers, women, communities of color, and newer residents adequately, calling for diversified planning strategies that go beyond to reduce nuanced risks.
- Residents living in the area for more than ten years were most prepared for

evacuation.

What We Found

We find that current wildfire planning and management does not equitably prepare all residents for wildfire. By age, eighteen-to-24-year-olds were the least prepared for wildfire. Women are less likely to report being prepared for evacuation, which may be related to their additional caretaking responsibilities. Non-white residents experience barriers to mitigation, evacuation, and recovery due to hard-to-access agency communications and financial limitations. Worries about evacuation centered around access to alternative housing (28%), desires to defend property (16%), and not knowing when to evacuate (14%). We also found that conducting focus groups of socially vulnerable communities was key to our research efforts as survey results and focus group findings differed, highlighting the differences between socially vulnerable communities and the broader community. Focus groups highlighted that limited vehicle capacity, limited evacuation routes, fear of losing jobs, and a lack of non-digital information in Spanish and Mixteco were major barriers. By and large, residents grasp the severity of wildfire risk and support mitigation techniques, but they need more support. Adjustments to mitigation resources and more meaningful community engagement can help. Incorporating novel approaches like response funds for undocumented individuals, public health frameworks, diversity in emergency response fields, and collaboration across local organizations can make wildfire planning and management more equitable.

What We Did

We surveyed residents' wildfire perspectives (e.g., preparation concerns and barriers) across Ventura County and conducted focus groups via established community organizations of target demographic groups—residents from low-income, Spanish-speaking households, and those living in high-wildfire risk areas. Spatial data about socially vulnerable groups of people and physical wildfire risk informed our selection of focus group locations. The survey had 404 completed responses, and the focus groups had 17 participants. While focused on Ventura County, CA, the findings and methods of this research apply to the regional level, state level, and other communities throughout the U.S.

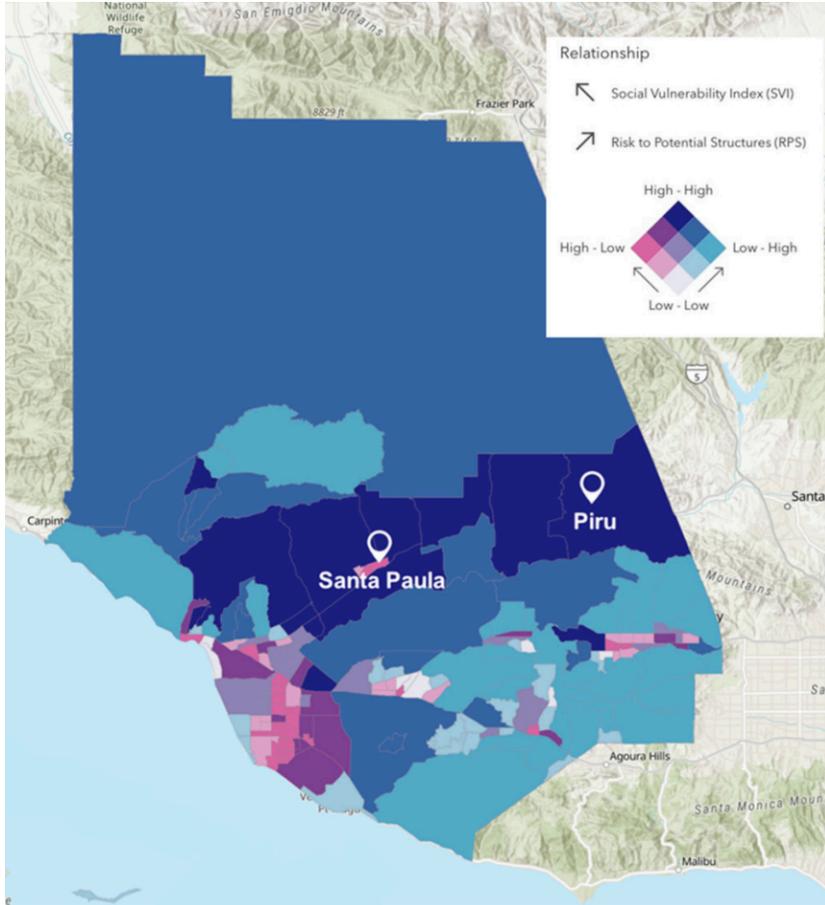


Fig. 1 The map illustrates the research study area, Ventura County, CA, and identifies the two locations where we conducted targeted focus groups: Santa Paula and Piru. The indigo colors represent areas in the county that have both high wildfire risk and high social vulnerability rates.