

Lessons learned from a disaster that hit close to home for ASU professor

Sociologist Roni Fraser visited Texas Hill Country, near where she grew up, to study emergency response from summer flooding

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News
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[Roni Fraser](#)'s disaster research recently hit close to home.

In mid-August, Fraser, an assistant professor in the Arizona State University [School of Public Affairs](#), evaluated the effects of early July's horrific flooding near the Texas community where she grew up.

Her trip followed one she made to western North Carolina in the wake of destruction wrought by Hurricane Helene last fall.

Fraser is a trained disaster sociologist who is affiliated with the ASU [Center for Emergency Management and Homeland Security](#). She was in the Texas Hill Country's Kerr County to study the mental health and social support available to both affiliated and unaffiliated volunteers and first responders following the devastation that occurred over the Independence Day holiday weekend.

In addition, she observed how dealing with such an immense tragedy affected the people who stepped forward to help victims and survivors.

Fraser said her observations so far show that unaffiliated volunteers, who often arrive unannounced to help during disasters, need as much mental health and social support as organized volunteers and professional emergency workers do.

Torrential rains and flooding caused at least 135 deaths, most of which were in Kerr County, including 27 girls attending Camp Mystic, a summer camp along the Guadalupe River, according to Texas media coverage. Property damage is estimated to be between \$18–\$22 billion.

Fraser said her parents live an hour away from the epicenter of the disaster.

"Kerrville is flash flood alley. I know; I grew up there," Fraser said. "But people who come from distant cities may not be aware of this."

While in Texas, Fraser conducted research similar to studies she and two colleagues from the University of Delaware, Sarah E. DeYoung and Sydney Dyck, engaged in over the Thanksgiving 2024 holiday in hurricane-ravaged western North Carolina.

There, Fraser and her team found examples of overflowing donations of baby supplies like baby formula (sometimes expired), clothes and diapers, but a lack of support and supplies for breastfeeding families who survived Hurricane Helene.

A feeling of being forgotten

Most of the search-and-rescue workers had left Kerr County by the time Fraser arrived in Texas about six weeks after the floods. She visited with residents, volunteers and business owners in the county seat of Kerrville and the nearby communities of Hunt and Ingram.

“A lot of the people there felt forgotten, because they’re more of a rural community,” Fraser said. “So many people I talked to were willing to share their story.”

Many of those who assisted survivors were volunteers who received no pay, performing tasks ranging from managing a food pantry and food distribution to staffing a reception center for people seeking help.

“They ranged from Catholic charities all the way to people who just had a boat and were there to contribute to the greater good during the search-and-rescue efforts,” Fraser said.

While most professionals needing emotional support can rely on networks their employers provide for them, less formal support was available for volunteers.

“That informal social support was what I really wanted to focus on. Broadly, I saw people engaged in compassion work with friends they deployed with,” Fraser said. “There are opportunities to improve access to care for unaffiliated volunteers, particularly if they’re from outside the area.”

Inspiring, heartbreaking accounts

Some of the stories Fraser heard were inspiring, some heartbreaking. One man felt compelled to find the last remaining missing Camp Mystic camper, even though official search operations had concluded.

“I walked the riverbed with one volunteer who’s been there since July 4. He said he’s not leaving until all the girls are found,” Fraser said.

The man, who had a boat, explained the force and depth of the floodwater.

“They found the body of a little girl 40 feet high in a tree,” Fraser said.

She heard about a survivor who was trying to stay alive in the water. The woman was holding on to her dog but had to let go to grab on to a tree to save herself.

There were also stories of resilience.

“One of the biggest things I took away was that everyone was doing the best they can,” Fraser said. “I believe there is a lot of effort, even informally, to plan to come back for the next Fourth of July to commemorate, pay their respects and also to talk about their experiences.”

Fraser said one remaining big question is how support can be provided informally to people who, for whatever reason, don’t seek counseling, some of whom said they are relying on their faith.

“I spoke to a lot of volunteers who are deeply religious. I asked them if what they did was dangerous or concerning to their mental health. They would say, ‘I don’t regret it. It’s to give back. It was God’s plan to set the path I’ve been placed in. I’m grateful to be here to support these families.’”

Photos below were taken either by ASU Assistant Professor Roni Fraser or University of Delaware faculty members Sarah E. DeYoung or Sydney Dyck.

Researching resources provision

Fraser is also researching how resources get to mothers with infants during disasters, among other areas. In North Carolina, she and her colleagues explored maternal-infant health and family well-being, as well as overall health care and housing issues.

While Fraser was in Boone, North Carolina, she found that the local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Office was closed for the Thanksgiving holiday, and information was unclear about where families could go for support until the office reopened.

“People also mentioned the trauma of driving past debris daily,” she said. “Further, affordable housing remains scarce, as many homes were damaged or completely destroyed due to flooding and landslides. These challenges suggest there may be a strenuous road ahead for family and community recovery there.”

While Fraser was in one North Carolina town, she saw a local children’s relief organization’s stockpile of donations that reached to the ceiling of a small storage room. The mountain of goods contained a variety of food, including baby food, and “wall to wall diapers and formula of all kinds.”

But much of it wasn’t getting to the people who needed it. Fraser found donated baby formula that had expired while waiting to be delivered. Powdered milk was useless as water pipes were destroyed, and survivors had to wait to receive often-delayed deliveries of bottled water. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends donations of ready-to-drink formula, but donors don’t always know about such recommendations.

Even so, while the team observed plentiful collections of infant formula — although many quantities were expired — they also found limited supplies and information to assist with breastfeeding.

“This is consistent with the current literature on infant and young child feeding in emergencies,” Fraser said. “(This) highlights the dangers of relying solely on formula or switching to formula rather than breast/chestfeeding during disasters due to a lack of means to sanitize necessary materials, such as bottles.”

Fraser also told of a breastfeeding mother who couldn't get access to health care after she developed mastitis yet continued to breastfeed her baby for 12 days.

"Women in disasters are sometimes forgotten," Fraser said. "We need to improve service delivery and educate that breastfeeding is safest after disasters."

Fraser calls such situations "second disasters."

"There's so much support for people right after an event, but small organizations are overwhelmed. They don't have the capacity to store donations," she said. "Resources are diverted away because they can't use all of it. Sorting clothes takes so much time. And it also depends on the weather. Donations are sometimes placed outside, and they get soiled or damaged."

Some solutions

Fraser said she identified some solutions from her research, including that emergency managers should be prepared for spontaneous appearances by volunteers.

They also should educate the public that donations need to be solicited so they don't overwhelm the community with large amounts of unsolicited goods that may never reach their destinations or spoil before they can be delivered.

"Kerrville made it able for people to volunteer easily," Fraser said. "In a world where we have declining volunteer rates in most states, how can we retain them without pushing them away? The answer is equipping people how to run volunteer centers."

Fraser said she will compile the research from North Carolina and Texas for presentation at a conference in November.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Scores of ribbons, signs, articles of clothing and other messages are affixed to a chain-link fence along the Guadalupe River in the Texas Hill Country visited by ASU Assistant Professor Roni Fraser in August as she researched relief efforts of the devastating July 4 floods that killed dozens and caused billions of dollars in property damage and loss. Photo by Roni Fraser/ASU

Text image(s)



Roni Fraser

Gallery



ASU public affairs Assistant Professor Roni Fraser stands at a railing overlooking the Guadalupe River, which overflowed on July 4, killing dozens of people and causing billions of dollars of property damage. Fraser visited the Texas Hill Country to assess relief efforts, following a similar trip to North Carolina last fall to research the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.



A shrine and cross stand on the banks of the Guadalupe River, which overflowed July 4, killing dozens of people and causing billions of dollars of property damage. Across the river are buildings at Camp Mystic, where 27 girls lost their lives in the deluge.



A tent near Boone, North Carolina, contains bottled water and other supplies intended for survivors of Hurricane Helene, which devastated parts of North Carolina and other Southern states in fall 2024.



An inscription, "River of Angels," adorns makeshift tributes to victims and survivors of July 4 floods that swelled the Guadalupe River in the Texas Hill Country July 4.



Debris is piled in front of a house in an area of North Carolina devastated by Hurricane Helene in fall 2024.