

Tangible and Intangible Impacts of Flooding in Miami-Dade County: An Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract

Flooding in Miami-Dade is not merely a natural hazard but a historically produced condition in which hydrologic exposure is braided with infrastructural neglect and social inequality. Conventional flood assessments emphasize material losses through cost-benefit and asset-centered frameworks, overlooking the lived and intangible dimensions of risk. This article examines the tangible and intangible repercussions of flooding in low-income, historically marginalized neighborhoods, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024 in Miami-Dade's flood-prone areas. Conducting semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and collaboration with community organizations, the study reveals how new building codes, elevation and fill practices, and speculative redevelopment redistribute both flooding risk and public attention, producing resilience for some while normalizing abandonment for others. These material vulnerabilities are compounded by health risks such as mold proliferation, wastewater exposure, and unsafe housing conditions, which disproportionately affect already vulnerable households. The result is uneven recovery, syndemic health risks, psychological exhaustion, and cultural displacement in neighborhoods long excluded from infrastructural protection. The analysis highlights that experiences of flooding are inextricably linked to broader processes of dispossession, inequality, and environmental change. It calls for reimagining flood assessment frameworks to integrate historical and cumulative harms, prioritize community knowledge, and account for cascading and nonmarket losses. Such an approach is essential to ensure that future assessments remain equitable and do not generate adaptations or policies that exacerbate flooding risks in already vulnerable communities.

Keywords

Flooding impacts, Flooding assessments, Environmental inequality, Climate-driven displacement, Miami-Dade County.