Describing disaster survivor visitation trends at FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers

Exploring trends in the number, purpose, and timing of disaster survivor visits to FEMA DRCs

Summary

This evaluation aimed to understand the operations and visitor experiences of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) to improve their operational efficiency. We analyzed 549,000 visits to 408 DRCs between 2022 and 2024 to describe trends and variations in DRC life cycles, visit volume, and visit purpose, across different contextual factors (e.g., disaster type, geographic location). The findings can help FEMA enhance DRC operations by better anticipating fluctuations in visitor volumes and the needs of survivors during disaster recovery.

Agency priority

Federally-recognized natural disasters include all types of severe weather (e.g., wildfire, flood, tornado), and can pose a significant threat to human health and safety. Survivors may face many challenges in the aftermath of a disaster, including damage to their homes, unemployment, and financial instability. DRCs are set up by FEMA after federally declared disasters to support survivors as they navigate different supports they can apply for and receive. While DRCs are crucial to disaster survivors in order to recover and rebuild, to date there has been no systematic analysis of the volume, timing, and purpose of visits to DRCs. In collaboration with FEMA, this study sought to provide insights on trends in DRC visitation in the aftermath of declared disasters.

Program description

DRCs are facilities and mobile offices temporarily set up in disaster-affected areas to provide support to disaster survivors. They are staffed to assist survivors with a range of services such as checking on the status of benefits or applications, support with FEMA individual financial assistance, or learning about Small Business Administration (SBA) programs.

Descriptive analysis

We examined and described the lifecycles of DRCs, the number of visits to DRCs, and the services/activities sought out by survivors when visiting DRCs. The analyses summarize cross-tabulations of counts and averages of DRC operational dates, visits, and services/activities sought by visitors. We used DRC daily visit and service/activity count data and publicly-available data from OpenFEMA and the USDA. The main unit of analysis was each day between DRC opening and closing dates (i.e., a DRC day). We observed DRC days for DRCs that opened between January 19, 2022 and April 29, 2024, associated with disasters declared between January 5, 2022 and December 13, 2023, which yields a total of 12,167 DRC-day observations.[1]

Analysis of existing data

Each DRC records the number of people who visit each day, the reason for their visit, and whether visits are first-time or return. Records of DRC dates of operation, visit counts, and service/activity counts were collected in FEMA's Disaster Operation Tool and were provided by FEMA. We combined these data with publicly-available data describing declared disasters to analyze how DRC operation, visit counts, and service activity popularity varies by contextual factors.[2]

We computed (at the DRC level) and analyzed the following outcomes:[3]

1. *Disaster start date to disaster declaration date:* The number of days between disaster incidents start date and the disaster declaration date.

[1] This is a deviation from the Analysis Plan, which stated that the time period for the DRC dataset would be for DRCs that opened between January 1, 2022 - December 31, 2023.

[2] Contextual factors included disaster type, disaster incident length, FEMA region in which DRCs were located, and urban vs. rural categorization.

[3] Unless noted otherwise, all of the analysis reported in this abstract was pre-specified in an analysis plan, which can be found at https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/2412-fema-drc-visitation-trends.

2. *Disaster declaration to DRC open date:* The number of days between a disaster declaration and the DRC opening.
3. *Number of days open:* The total number of days each DRC was open.
4. *Daily number of visits*: Sum of the number of return and first-time visits at the DRC-day level.
5. *Daily service/activity percentage:* The number of services/activities divided by the total number of all services/activities undertaken in a DRC-day for a particular service/activity.

Results

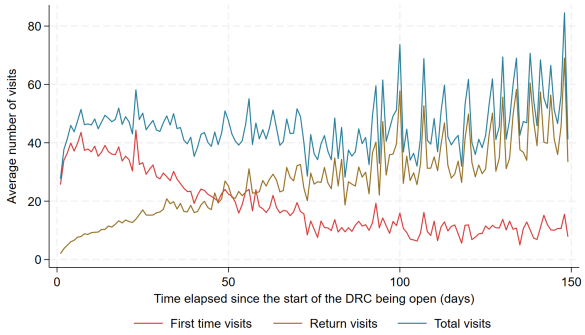
What does the life cycle of a DRC look like during a disaster response?

The first DRC was opened on average 10 days after a disaster declaration was made. The average time until opening among all DRCs was 30 days after a disaster declaration was made, with variation across DRC types[4] and disaster types. DRCs were operational for 30 days on average. DRC operational time varied by disaster type. For example, DRCs associated with fire disasters were open for 41 days on average, whereas DRCs associated with severe storms were open for 22 days on average. The number of DRCs opened for individual disasters also varied by disaster type, with hurricane disasters having an average of 24 DRCs per incident, and all other disaster types (severe storm, flood, fire, tornado, and winter storm) having 10 or fewer DRCs open per incident.

What does DRC visitation look like during a disaster response?

Aggregating across visit types, the maximum number of visits occurred on average 9.9 days after a DRC opened. The maximum number of daily *first-time* visits took place on average 7 days after opening, and the highest number of *return* visits occurred on average 20.9 days after opening. Visit volume varied by disaster type. For example, the highest visit count occurred earliest for DRCs associated with tornado disasters, on average 2.3 days after opening, whereas for winter storms the maximum visit count occurred the latest, 14 days after opening.

Figure 1. Average daily visit counts varied over the course of the DRC lifecycle



What do the different services/activities that DRC visitors seek help for look like during a disaster response?

The most common service/activity type was "Status Check" (i.e., visitors requesting a status update regarding application to a FEMA program), which accounted for 29.6% of services/activities occurring at DRCs.[5] The remaining top five services/activities included "Hazard Mitigation" (10.1%),[6] "Documentation" (7.3%), "Registration" (7.1%), and "Federal Program" (6.2%).[7,8] "Status Check" was the most common service/activity for 331 of the 408 DRCs.

The most commonly sought out services/activities changed over the course of a DRC lifecycle. For example, "Registration" was sought out most frequently on average 10.1 days after DRC opening, "Status Check" was most frequent 19.4 days after opening, and "Appeal" was most common 33.7 days after opening. The most common services/activities and the timing of when they are most prevalent varies across different disaster

[4] There are four DRC types: standard DRCs, mobile DRCs, community recovery centers, and document drop-off centers.

[5] DRC visitation data include "exit interview" as a service/activity that can be associated with a DRC visit. Per FEMA's recommendation we have excluded exit interviews from service/activity tabulations as it is never the sole purpose of a survivor's visit.

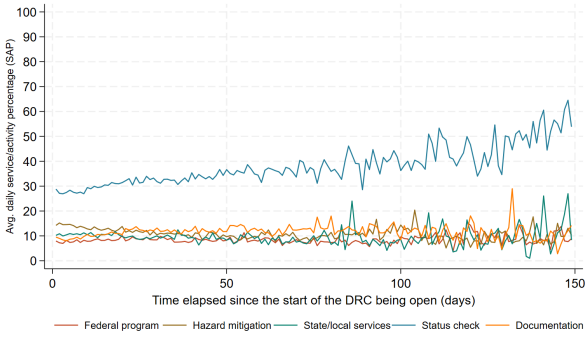
[6] Defined as FEMA's hazard mitigation assistance grants.

[7] Federal programs include some FEMA specific programs, such as Critical Needs Assistance, Disaster Unemployment Assistance, and Permanent Housing Construction. FEMA also provides referrals to and includes other federally run programs run by other federal agencies (e.g.,such as USDA, VA, and IRS) when they can't assist with a particular need.

[8] More than 70 forms of assistance are available from 17 federal agencies.

types. For example, “Appeal” was most common at day 22 on average for tornados, day 33.5 for floods, and day 50.7 for hurricanes, whereas “Status Check” was most common at day 22 for tornadoes, day 17 for floods, and day 24 for hurricanes.

Figure 2. Status checks were the most popular service activities across DRCs



Note: Selection of the top five services/activities excluding exit interviews (defined as highest average daily service/activity percentage. Only the first 150 days of a DRC are presented.

Applying the findings

The results demonstrate fluctuations in DRC lifecycles, visit volumes over time, and the types of services and activities visitors sought. These insights can assist FEMA in optimizing the setup of DRCs to better support survivors. For instance, FEMA could more effectively tailor disaster response support by adjusting staffing levels and providing relevant information during periods when specific services are in high demand.

Integrating unique identifiers for each visit into DRC data collection tools could provide FEMA with a better understanding of barriers survivors encounter in accessing critical services. This would enable the development of targeted interventions to help overcome those obstacles. For instance, the ability to link the number and types of services and activities sought by individual visitors over time could reveal common visitor profiles and identify services or activities frequently sought together.