

The horror of Superstorm Sandy affects two-thirds of New Jerseyans

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Two-thirds of New Jersey residents were affected when Superstorm Sandy wreaked havoc on the Garden State three weeks ago, according to a new Rutgers-Eagleton Poll. Only 35 percent report they were not touched by storm, which caused massive damage throughout the state.

Sandy's wrath was impressive. Nearly every resident (94 percent) lost power for at least some time in the storm's aftermath; 65 percent were without electricity for more than five days. One-fifth of affected residents were forced to leave their homes, and of those, 6 percent say they have not yet returned. Almost one-third reported damage to their home or other property.

Across the state, 61 percent of all New Jerseyans reported power losses, with 40 percent of all residents losing it for at least five days. All totaled, 14 percent of the state's residents were forced to leave home.

"We already knew Sandy had a wide impact," said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers. "What we get from these numbers is a clearer sense of its disruptive effects on nearly all New Jerseyans, whether near the shore or much further inland."

In Sandy's aftermath, New Jerseyans give high marks to FEMA and the Red Cross, even though only 10 percent of those affected by the storm report using the services of a disaster-assistance agency. Half of all residents say the Red Cross has handled the storm's challenges "very well," while another quarter say it has done so "somewhat well." FEMA gets slightly lower marks; 37 percent say FEMA has handled things very well, while another 31 percent say somewhat well.

Given the challenges electric companies experienced with power repairs, Garden Staters are surprisingly supportive. Across the state, 41 percent say their electric company handled the crisis very well and 34 percent say it was handled somewhat well.

Results are from a poll of 1,228 New Jersey adults conducted statewide among both landline and cell phone households from Nov 14-17. The sample has a margin of error of +/- 2.8 percentage points.

Impact of Sandy varies by region

While the effects of Superstorm Sandy were felt throughout the Garden State, those living in the south Jersey/Philadelphia area were much less likely to say they were affected by the storm. Three-quarters of residents in shore counties reported personal impact, but only a quarter of those living in counties near Philadelphia said the same.

While the Jersey Shore took the brunt of Sandy's initial fury (79 percent affected), those in the northwestern exurban counties were just as likely to report being affected since falling trees there caused massive damage. Moreover, 69 percent of residents of Essex and Hudson counties also say they felt direct effects, as did 73 percent of those in suburban counties.

"This storm was unprecedented in the extent of its impact on New Jersey," noted Redlawsk. "Learning how many people were directly affected drives home the degree of devastation."

Among affected New Jerseyans, one in five said they were forced out of their homes by Sandy, and 6 percent still have been unable to return permanently. Not surprisingly, residents of shore communities were most likely to report being forced to leave their homes (24 percent), and they are far more likely than other residents to be unable to return (17 percent of those forced out). But 24 percent of urban residents also said they had to leave their homes, although nearly all have since returned.

Because of Sandy's impact on residents of urban New Jersey, 31 percent of blacks and 24 percent of Hispanics were much more likely to have been forced to evacuate compared to whites (19 percent).

Power companies reported that the large majority of their customers were offline at the height of the damage – more than 90 percent lost power, except for those living in the south Jersey/Philadelphia area, where 78 percent were without power. Those who lost power in south Jersey got it back quickly; very few said it took more than five days.

The story was different for residents of exurban and shore communities, where 79 percent and 70 percent, respectively, of those losing power lost it for more than five days. Not surprisingly, exurban and shore region residents were most likely to report suffering: 30 percent of exurban residents and 36 percent of shore residents suffered the most damage to homes. Forty-nine percent of the former and 40 percent of the latter suffered property damage.

Approval for electric utilities varies

Large majorities of residents throughout the state (73 to 88 percent) say their electric companies handled the crisis "somewhat" or "very well," but those in exurban counties were much less likely (61 percent) to agree. While 80 percent of those who did not lose power gave their electric companies good marks, even among those losing power, 70 percent rated their electric company's performance highly. Among residents who lost power for more than five days, there is less good will, but still a majority (60 percent) gives positive reviews. Eighty-six percent of those who did not lose power or went without for a shorter time felt positively about their utility company.

By a 42 to 29 percent margin, PSE&G customers are much more positive than those of JCP&L. One-third of customers from each company rated its performance as somewhat well. However, 22 percent say JCP&L performed very poorly compared to 10 percent of PSE&G customers. Atlantic City Power and Light customers are the most satisfied: 66 percent say the company performed very well and another 28 percent said it did somewhat well. This may be because less than one-third of its customers said they were directly impacted by the storm, and fewer reported losing power.

"Given the severity of the storm, it is not surprising that it took the power companies a long time to return some sense of normalcy," said Redlawsk. "And it seems that most residents, as frustrated as they might be, recognized the difficulty the companies faced. Even so, there is a clear difference with JCP&L getting clearly lower ratings from its customers."

Preparedness

New Jersey residents are split on how prepared the state was for Sandy's arrival: 35 percent say New Jersey was adequately prepared while 46 percent disagree. Another 15 percent said that given the nature of the storm, New Jersey prepared as well as possible, even if the effort was insufficient. Another 3 percent are fatalistic, saying nothing could have been done to be prepared for Sandy.

Residents in the northeastern urban counties were least likely to believe the state was ready for the storm (26 percent). Those in the Philadelphia/south Jersey region were most likely to think the state was well prepared (45 percent).

Those who were personally affected by Superstorm Sandy are less likely to believe the state was fully prepared compared to those not directly affected (32 percent versus 40 percent). A similar pattern is seen with those who were forced to evacuate, those unable to return to their homes, those who lost power for a lengthy period of time, and those with damage to their homes.

Disaster assistance usage depends on region, income

Residents of the hardest hit parts of the state are most likely to report making use of disaster assistance, as would be expected. Yet even in those areas, the large majority of residents have not sought agency assistance so far.

In the shore counties, 15 percent of those affected have sought assistance, while 14 percent of those in Hudson and Essex counties, and 9 percent living in northwestern New Jersey have done so. While the highest income New Jerseyans are more likely to report house and general property damage, affected individuals earning less than \$50,000 are twice as likely as wealthy residents hit by the storm to use a disaster assistance agency, 13 percent to 6 percent.

Twenty percent of those who sustained damage to their homes have sought assistance from agencies like FEMA and the Red Cross, and 10 percent of those with general property damage have done the same.

Approval of FEMA and the Red Cross are high, with interesting variations. While three-quarters of Democrats say FEMA has performed very or somewhat well, only 63 percent of independents and 55 percent of Republicans agree. The Red Cross gets more bipartisan support, though Democrats are still more positive, at 83 percent, versus 71 percent of independents and 73 percent of Republicans.

“FEMA is an arm of the federal government, so it is perhaps unsurprising that Republicans – who generally view the federal government less favorably – are less positive about it,” said Redlawsk. “This perception is probably not driven by specific facts on the ground, since Republicans and Democrats are equally likely to have been victims of the storm.”

Black residents (80 percent) are more likely to think FEMA has been handling the crisis very or somewhat well than whites (65 percent) or Hispanics (67 percent). A similar pattern is seen in race and ethnicity with views on the Red Cross. Exurban counties are less likely to say FEMA or the Red Cross is doing somewhat or very well, though most residents in this region and all other regions are at least somewhat positive.

Those forced to leave their homes are slightly less approving of either organization – particularly the Red Cross (65 percent versus 77 percent not forced to evacuate).

“For many, life is still not back to normal, so it was a difficult decision to start polling again,” said David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and professor of political science at Rutgers University. “But we felt assessing how New Jerseyans feel in the aftermath of this storm and its effects is important, and as it turns out many people were happy to speak with us.”

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Red Cross

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(*Bob Grosch*)
