

Recovery, Resilience, and Healing: Exploring Grief Experiences of Black Families Impacted by the Eaton Fire in the Altadena and Pasadena Area

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ABSTRACT: Natural disasters such as wildfires leave lasting emotional, psychological, and social impacts. However, the experiences of historically marginalized populations particularly Black families are often overlooked in disaster research. Systemic inequities exacerbate trauma and create barriers to equitable recovery. The 2025 Eaton Fire, which devastated parts of Altadena and Pasadena in California, disproportionately affected Black residents, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and disrupting long-standing community ties. Objective: This study explores the grief, recovery, and resilience experiences of Black families impacted by the Eaton Fire. Method: A rapid research qualitative study design was used in addition to snowball and convenience sampling to recruit 37 Black or African American participants directly affected by the Eaton Fire. Participants (35 women, 2 men) completed open-ended surveys via Qualtrics. Majority (n = 29) had lived in the community for over 21 years, indicating deep roots. A thematic analysis, using iterative coding to identify emergent themes within systemic and sociocultural contexts was used. Results: Six themes emerged: (1) layered grief due to loss, displacement, and disrupted daily life, shaped by historical inequities; (2) intensified trauma from housing instability and community fragmentation; (3) spiritual and cultural practices (e.g., prayer, ritual, ancestral connection) as core coping tools; (4) reliance on mutual aid and collective care in the absence of institutional support; (5) barriers to culturally responsive services and difficulty navigating systems; and (6) community-generated recommendations emphasizing sustained, culturally affirming support rooted in racial equity and healing. Conclusion: Findings emphasize the need for disaster recovery efforts that center racial justice, cultural responsiveness, and community leadership. The results reflect both the grief and strength expressed by participants, shaped by systemic neglect yet sustained through cultural identity and collective care. Social workers and disaster responders must adopt trauma-informed, antiracist frameworks and co-create interventions with impacted communities. Long-term investment in equitable mental health care, housing access, and culturally grounded recovery is essential to promote healing and justice in historically excluded communities.

KEYWORDS: Grief, Disaster Recovery, Black Families, Resilience, Altadena Fire.

INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters such as floods, wildfires, and earthquakes are catastrophic events that have increased in frequency and severity in recent years (Heanoy & Brown, 2024); the effects have led to profound environmental, psychological, and financial impacts. In early January of 2025, the Eaton Fire ravaged Altadena, California, and inflicted catastrophic damage to the area. Over 9,400 structures were damaged or destroyed, with nearly half of the residents and business owners identifying as Black (Ong et al., 2025). Disaster-related grief encompasses not only the loss of life but also the destruction of homes, community ties, cultural landmarks, family heirlooms, as well as one's sense of safety and belonging (Eyetsemitan, 2016). Events such as Hurricane Katrina and the 2017 Northern California wildfires resulted in survivors experiencing prolonged and compounded grief reactions due to displacement, bureaucratic recovery processes, and systemic and environmental inequities (Forbes et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Furthermore, disasters often magnify structural inequities, with Black families reporting barriers to recovery services, exclusion from decision-making processes, and experiences of systemic neglect, as documented in post-hurricane and climate-related disaster research (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019). While there is some literature that discusses the impact of environmental changes and natural disasters in communities of color, there

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remains a dearth in literature examining how natural disasters disproportionately impact Black communities, particularly in the context of wildfires. Yet, the disaster-related grief experiences of Black communities remain underexplored in the literature of natural disasters, despite their heightened vulnerability to both environmental hazards and recovery inequities (Bullard & Wright, 2009; Sze, 2018). To address this gap, this study employs a critical grounded theory approach to center the voices of Black residents affected by the Eaton Fire. By situating grief within its broader sociohistorical context, this method seeks to develop a theory that not only captures individual and collective loss, but also interrogates the structural inequities that shape recovery, resilience, and healing.

Altadena, historically home to a thriving Black middle-class community, has long been shaped by racialized housing patterns, including redlining and restricted parameters that concentrated Black families in specific neighborhoods while limiting access to resources and wealth accumulation (Freund, 2007; Ong et al., 2025; Sides, 2006). Although these communities fostered resilience, cultural pride, and strong social networks, they have also faced persistent socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The Eaton Fire brought these inequities to the forefront and disproportionately affected Black residents who already contended with structural barriers such as limited access to insurance coverage, inadequate disaster recovery assistance, and systemic disinvestment in their neighborhoods (Ong et al., 2025). Understanding the impact of this disaster requires not only attention to physical and material loss but also to the historical and structural forces that shape how grief is experienced and expressed in racially marginalized communities.

The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Natural Disaster

Wildfires and natural disasters are known to result in wide-ranging psychological and emotional consequences that can persist long after the immediate crisis. Survivors of natural disasters commonly experience heightened rates of depression, posttraumatic stress, and complicated grief (Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Tang et al., 2014). Grief responses are also complex, extending beyond the loss of loved ones to include the destruction of homes, communities, family heirlooms, and a sense of security (Kristensen et al., 2012). Walsh (2007) emphasizes the collective impact of traumatic loss, noting that disasters can rupture family and community systems of resilience. The role of intersectionality, particularly the inter-relationships between gender, race, and class status, can also shape recovery and outcomes (McKinzie, 2017). Recent research on wildfires demonstrates that survivors frequently report persistent posttraumatic stress, depression, sleep disruption, and anxiety, with symptoms exacerbated by smoke exposure and the loss of place identity tied to community and home (Marshall et al., 2022; Stanke et al., 2022). Demographic analyses also reveal that population shifts into fire-prone zones disproportionately affect families with limited housing options, raising equity concerns for historically marginalized groups (Collins, 2022). These findings demonstrate that disasters amplify existing vulnerabilities and require mental health responses that recognize both individual and collective loss. However, few studies explore how these psychological impacts manifest specifically for Black families after natural disasters (e.g., wildfires), leaving a gap that this study addresses in the context of the Eaton Fire.

Systemic Inequities and Disparities in Disaster Impact

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a necessary lens through which to view the grief experiences of Black residents because it is not often centered on their experiences to natural disasters in their own voices. Colorblind approaches to disaster response, those that disregard race in the name of neutrality, are not only inadequate but actively harmful, as they obscure the mechanisms that perpetuate inequity and delay meaningful rebuilding. Given that race is a consistent and compounding factor in exposure to environmental hazards, denial of recovery assistance, and prolonged displacement (Clark et al., 2022), by naming race and addressing racism directly, CRT equips scholars and practitioners to uncover and challenge the policies and practices that disproportionately harm Black communities before, during, and after environmental crises. This

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Policy-Driven Disparities

Natural disasters, while often framed as equalizing forces, have disproportionate and racialized impacts rooted in structural inequities. One key policy-driven cause is the legacy of residential segregation and redlining, which has systematically concentrated risk in Black communities. Tedesco et al. (2022) note that race is the most consistent predictor of flood risk, with Black populations more likely to reside in high-risk areas while White populations occupy safer zones. These policy decisions laid the groundwork for the ongoing racialized disparities in disaster impact. The Eaton Fire in Altadena, California, provides a clear example of this inequity. Once home to one of the largest concentrations of Black middle-class families in Southern California, Altadena has a long history shaped by restrictive housing covenants and structural barriers to mobility. Today, Black residents still comprise a significant portion of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), and nearly half of those affected by the Eaton Fire were Black families and business owners (Ong et al., 2025). Reporting also emphasizes how the fire disproportionately disrupted a historically thriving Black community, erasing generational wealth and destabilizing long-standing cultural anchors (The Los Angeles Times, 2025). These outcomes demonstrate how historic inequities translate into contemporary vulnerability, situating the Altadena case within broader patterns of racialized disaster exposure and recovery.

Infrastructure-Based Vulnerability

From an infrastructure perspective, unequal investment has deepened risk for communities of color. Priest and Elliott (2023) show that Black and Latinx residents were not only more likely to experience flooding during Hurricane Harvey, but also a wider range of cascading social impacts, such as displacement and damage to personal networks. More recent evidence reinforces this pattern, with studies finding that climate-related disasters consistently intersect with legacies of disinvestment in communities of color. For example, systematic underfunding of drainage, roadways, and utilities amplifies exposure to extreme weather, while recovery assistance is often distributed inequitably, further widening racial disparities in housing stability and health outcomes. Importantly, this inequity is not limited to flooding: Research on wildfire exposure in California similarly shows that Black and Latinx communities face disproportionate risks and inequitable recovery pathways following fire disasters (Springer, 2025). These examples highlight how structural neglect, and discriminatory policies do not simply shape the immediate disaster impact but also prolong recovery trajectories for Black families and other marginalized groups. The Eaton Fire illustrates this pattern, as Altadena's Black community—already shaped by a history of redlining and disinvestment—was disproportionately impacted, with recovery barriers compounding losses of homes, businesses, and generational wealth (Ong et al., 2025).

Barriers to Services and Systemic Neglect

Due to its magnitude, natural disasters often reveal environmental vulnerabilities and the deep-seated inequities embedded within social service and recovery systems. Literature on disaster recovery consistently shows that Black communities face significant barriers to accessing services, including bureaucratic hurdles, distrust in formal institutions, and inadequate cultural responsiveness (Rhodes & Tran, 2012; Priest & Elliott, 2023). These are not isolated incidents but symptoms of systemic and historical inequities that shape access to resources before, during, and after crises. Black communities are often excluded from federal mitigation programs, with FEMA aid denial rates disproportionately impacting low-income and racialized populations (Flores et al., 2022). Research on wildfires in California further reveals that rural and under-resourced communities also struggle to access recovery aid, facing challenges such as limited-service infrastructure, longer recovery timelines, and greater dependence on informal networks of support (Springer, 2025).

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Similarly, FEMA aid analyses show that disaster assistance is distributed inequitably, with populations who are both economically marginalized and racially minoritized receiving less aid even when damage levels are comparable (Kalafatis et al., 2024). Additionally, nearly two-thirds of rural federally designated Community Disaster Resilience Zones include disproportionately high populations of people of color, indicating overlapping vulnerabilities tied to geography, race, and resource scarcity (Urban Institute, 2024). However, while rural communities experience these barriers due to geographic isolation and resource scarcity, Black communities experience them in compounded ways, shaped not only by underinvestment but also by systemic racism and structural exclusion.

Additionally, the lack of Black-centered recovery models has led to ineffective or even retraumatizing interventions. Rhodes and Tran (2012) reported that Black Hurricane Katrina survivors experienced significantly higher PTSD symptoms than White Hurricane survivors, perceiving governmental responses as inadequate. This highlighted how distrust and exclusion from decision-making processes directly impact recovery outcomes.

Together, these studies reveal that systemic neglect has historical roots in racial bias. Effective disaster recovery requires prioritizing culturally relevant, community-informed approaches that promote equity and respond to the specific needs of Black communities. Although disaster mismanagement may have an impact on individuals across racial lines, the pattern, scale, and root causes of that mismanagement reflect long-standing systems of racial inequity. Systemic racism does not mean only people of color suffer. It means that when disaster hits, Black communities are more likely to live in high-risk zones, receive slower and less effective aid, and face greater long-term barriers to recovery (Bullard & Wright, 2009; Wong et al., 2025). These outcomes are not coincidental; they are the result of cumulative policies such as redlining, underinvestment, housing segregation, and racially biased decision-making in emergency management (Baker et al., 2024; Winker et al., 2024). Altadena illustrates this pattern, as its historically Black middle-class community—already shaped by decades of residential segregation—was disproportionately impacted by the Eaton Fire, with nearly half of Black residents and business owners suffering damage or displacement (Ong et al., 2025; Los Angeles Times, 2025). Race remains a consistent and compounding factor that shapes vulnerability and recovery. Some colorblind frameworks argue that focusing on race distracts from solutions. As numerous studies show, neutrality in disaster policy often results in racially unequal outcomes, not because of intent, but because of existing inequalities that colorblind policies fail to correct (Priest & Elliott, 2023).

The Grief Experiences of Black Families in the Context of Disasters

While systemic inequities expose the structural failures of disaster recovery systems, marginalized communities' responses reveal powerful forms of resilience. Despite the growing body of disaster research, the grief experiences of Black families remain understudied. Research on Hurricane Katrina, for example, illustrates how systemic inequities increase bereavement in communities of color. Eisenman et al. (2007) observed that disaster planning agencies and organizations didn't effectively communicate risks to marginalized populations, leaving Black families disproportionately affected. Bryant-Davis et al. (2017) further notes that structural racism and trauma exposures compound the grief and recovery challenges for racial minorities. Similarly, Breen (2022) argues that "disaster racism" is embedded in U.S. history and that racialized disparities in disaster impact cannot be separated from systemic racism and longstanding neglect. Studies of Hurricane Harvey expand this picture: Rammah et al. (2022) documented how residents perceived both short- and long-term disruptions to their homes, health, and community cohesion, while Jayaraman et al. (2025) found that prior flood experiences heightened risks for posttraumatic stress and depression in minority populations, underscoring how repeated disasters intensify cumulative trauma. These findings align with evidence from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2024), which shows that Black, Latinx, and low-income communities experience deeper material losses and longer

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recovery trajectories after major hurricanes, reflecting inequities that magnify grief. Simultaneously, Lykes and Hershberg (2016) highlight the importance of participatory approaches in capturing the voices of marginalized groups, which are too often excluded from disaster research. Studies suggest that bereavement in Black families cannot be disentangled from broader histories of racial violence, displacement, and systemic neglect. Jamison-Petr and Williams (2024) note that understanding grief among Black communities also requires recognition of how diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM-5-TR shape cultural interpretations of prolonged grief disorder. Despite evidence from events like Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey, little is known about how Black families grieve wildfire-related displacement and loss.

Toward Culturally Responsive Interventions

The literature emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive disaster interventions that directly address the realities of Black families. Harms et al (2020) found that post-disaster social work is most effective when grounded in cultural humility and responsive to local strengths. Alexander et al. (2017) documented racial differences in posttraumatic stress following Hurricane Katrina, underscoring the need for race-conscious disaster interventions. Spates (2012) critiques the historical exclusion of Black women from psychological research, pointing to the consequences for both practice and policy. Together, these studies argue for disaster responses that are equity-centered and culturally grounded. Still, there is limited empirical research on culturally responsive disaster interventions for Black wildfire survivors, making the Eaton Fire study a significant contribution to both research and clinical practice.

METHODS

Study Design and Recruitment

This study employed a qualitative rapid-response research design to document the experiences of Black families affected by the Eaton Fire in the Altadena and Pasadena communities. Rapid qualitative approaches are commonly used in disaster research to capture community experiences while events and their immediate impacts are still unfolding. Recruitment used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to reach individuals directly affected by the fire.

Recruitment flyers describing the study were disseminated through social media platforms widely used within the local community. These included neighborhood-based Facebook community group pages (e.g., Altadena community groups) as well as Instagram and LinkedIn networks. Posts encouraged individuals who had been affected by the Eaton Fire to participate and share the study invitation with other community members who met eligibility criteria. Data was collected between January and February 2025.

Participants and Eligibility

Participants were eligible if they (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) self-identified as Black or African American, and (c) were directly affected by the Eaton Fire in the Altadena or Pasadena area. A total of 52 individuals accessed the survey; however, only those who completed the qualitative questions were included in the final analytic sample. The final sample consisted of 37 participants. Among participants, 35 identified as women and 2 identified as men. Most participants (n = 29) reported living in the Altadena/Pasadena area for more than 21 years, indicating long-standing community residency and deep ties to the neighborhood. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

Data Collection

Data was collected using an online survey via Qualtrics. The survey consisted entirely of open-ended qualitative questions designed to allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The questions focused on emotional responses to the fire, impacts on family life, cultural and community values related to coping and resilience, and recommendations for mental health and community-based support. The use of a survey-based qualitative approach was

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intentionally selected for this study due to the sensitive and potentially traumatic nature of the Eaton Fire experiences among Black families. This method provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on and articulate their experiences in a manner that felt safe, flexible, and self-paced. Unlike structured quantitative measures, open-ended qualitative responses allowed participants to center the aspects of their experiences most meaningful to them, including emotional, cultural, relational, and community-based dimensions that may not emerge through closed-ended questioning.

Additionally, utilizing an online qualitative survey increased accessibility for participants who may have experienced displacement, transportation barriers, disrupted schedules, caregiving responsibilities, or emotional exhaustion following the disaster. The asynchronous nature of the survey reduced participation burden while also creating space for participants to engage privately and thoughtfully with the questions without the pressure of a face-to-face interview setting. This approach was particularly important given historical and contemporary mistrust of research and mental health systems within Black communities, as participants could maintain a greater sense of control, anonymity, and emotional safety while sharing their narratives.

Survey-based qualitative data collection also aligned with the study's culturally responsive and trauma-informed framework. By allowing participants to use their own language, meanings, and interpretations, the methodology supported the elevation of lived experiences and community voice rather than imposing predetermined categories or assumptions. Furthermore, the online survey format enabled the researchers to gather a broader range of perspectives from individuals across affected communities while still preserving the depth and richness necessary for qualitative thematic analysis.

Example survey questions included:

"How would you describe your emotional response to the losses you experienced due to the Eaton Fire?"

"In what ways has the Eaton Fire affected your family's daily life and routines?"

"What recommendations would you offer to mental health providers or community organizations to better support Black families impacted by disasters?"

A complete list of survey questions is included in Appendix A.

Participants reviewed an online information sheet at the beginning of the survey describing the study purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. Consent was implied through voluntary continuation and submission of responses to the survey questions.

Ethical Considerations

This study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption from the California State University, Northridge Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (Protocol #IRB-FY25-210). The study was deemed exempt under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104(d), Category 2, which applies to research involving survey procedures where participant responses are recorded anonymously and pose minimal risk.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. The analytic approach followed widely used procedures for thematic analysis, including familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of themes, and iterative refinement of thematic categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

All responses were exported from Qualtrics and compiled into Microsoft Excel for data organization and coding. Members of the research team first read through the complete dataset multiple times to become familiar with participants' narratives and to gain an overall sense of common experiences and patterns.

An initial round of open coding was conducted in which segments of text assigned

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descriptive codes were capturing key ideas, emotions, or experiences expressed by participants. Codes were developed inductively from the data rather than from predetermined categories. After the first coding cycle, the research team met to review and discuss the emerging codes, reconcile differences, and develop a shared coding framework.

In subsequent rounds of analysis, related codes were grouped into broader categories and candidate themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' accounts. These themes were then reviewed and refined through an iterative process of comparison across the dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' experiences and reflected the complexity of disaster-related grief within the context of community, cultural values, and systemic inequities.

The principal investigator (PI), a tenured full professor faculty member with extensive experience in qualitative research and community-engaged scholarship, provided analytic oversight throughout the process. The PI reviewed coding decisions, facilitated team discussions, and helped resolve discrepancies among coders. Regular team meetings were held to refine the coding framework, ensure consistency across analysts, and strengthen interpretive rigor.

Rigor of Analysis

Several strategies were used to strengthen the rigor of the analysis. Credibility was supported through independent coding by multiple members of the research team followed by consensus discussions to refine codes and themes. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytic decisions, coding revisions, and theme development throughout the analytic process. These procedures helped ensure that the final themes reflected a systematic and transparent interpretation of participants' narratives while centering the lived experiences of Black community members impacted by the Eaton Fire.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity was an integral component of the research and analytic process throughout this study. The research team included individuals with professional expertise in grief therapy and community-based social work, as well as members with lived experience connected to the communities affected by the Eaton Fire. These perspectives informed the interpretation of participants' narratives while also requiring intentional reflection on how researchers' identities, relationships to place, and professional commitments shaped the research process.

The principal investigator (PI) holds a longstanding personal and multigenerational connection to the Pasadena–Altadena community. As a fifth-generation Pasadena homeowner (as of 2022), the PI maintains deep familial and cultural ties to the region. Both of the PI's children were born at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, and the PI's daughter currently attends John Muir High School. The PI's family lineage also extends to Altadena, where both his great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother are buried. These intergenerational connections situate the PI within the historical and cultural fabric of the community impacted by the Eaton Fire. The PI is also a member of the Tournament of Roses and identifies professionally and personally as a Black male clinician, professor, father, son, and spouse.

These positionalities informed the PI's commitment to centering culturally responsive and community-engaged approaches to the study while remaining attentive to potential biases that could arise from proximity to the research context. Throughout the research process, reflexive practices including memo writing, analytic discussions among the research team, and ongoing critical self-reflection were used to examine assumptions, interpretive decisions, and power dynamics in relation to participants' narratives. This reflexive stance supported efforts to ensure that the findings remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while acknowledging the researchers' embeddedness within the broader community context.

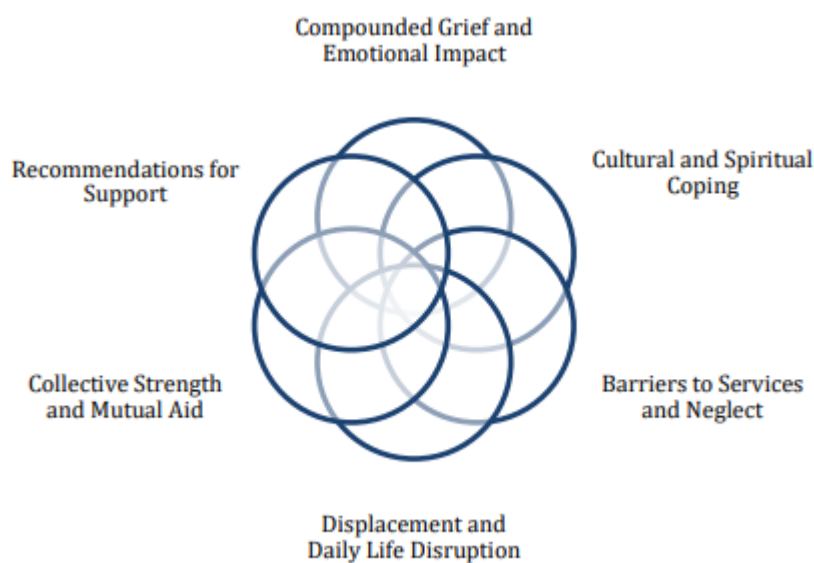
RESULTS

The analysis of 37 participant narratives revealed six central themes that reflect the layered

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grief, systemic barriers, and sources of resilience experienced by Black community members affected by the Eaton Fire. These themes include: (a) Compounded Grief and Evolving Emotional Impact, (b) Displacement, Housing Instability, and Daily Life Disruption, (c) Cultural and Spiritual Coping as a Source of Grounding, (d) Collective Strength, Grassroots Support, and Mutual Aid, (e) Barriers to Services and Systemic Neglect, and (f) Recommendations for Culturally Responsive, Sustained Support. Together, these themes illustrate how participants' grief extended beyond individual loss to encompass historical inequities, disrupted community ties, and systemic failures. To highlight these experiences, direct participant quotes are interwoven throughout the results, capturing both the emotional depth of loss and the resilience expressed in community responses. Figure 1 provides an overview of these six themes alongside the survey questions that guided analysis, illustrating the connection between participant narratives and thematic development.

Figure 1. 6 Emergent Themes on Grief and Recovery Compounded Grief and Evolving Emotional Impact



Compounded Grief and Evolving Emotional Impact

Participants described profound emotional distress resulting from the loss of loved ones, forced displacement, and the rupture of daily life. Grief reactions were not static and did not solely present as sadness; rather, they evolved over time and were compounded by systemic inequities and limited access to culturally responsive mental health resources. Many described how the fire reactivated long-standing wounds tied to racial injustice and generational loss, deepening the psychological toll of the disaster. Research shows that disasters amplify preexisting vulnerabilities, leading to long-term mental health effects such as prolonged grief and posttraumatic stress (Thomas et al., 2020; Heanoy & Brown, 2024).

As one participant explained, "Devastating, grief...I was devastated and now I am depressed." Another echoed this sentiment, sharing, "I feel devastated at the loss of my childhood home." Others highlighted the ongoing nature of distress, with one participant noting, "I have been in a constant state of panic, stress, and survival mode since January 7th. I am not doing well; my anxiety is very high." Another community member reflected on the uneven trajectory of healing, stating, "I have good days and bad days. I am still not back to complete normalcy." Several also articulated survivor's guilt, with one participant admitting, "I still feel extreme survivor's guilt and it comes in waves."

These accounts illustrate that grief after the Eaton Fire was not a singular emotional event but an evolving process that reflected both personal and collective histories of loss. The

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compounding of grief over time underscores the need for long-term, culturally responsive supports that address not only the immediate aftermath of disaster but also the layered, ongoing struggles of recovery.

Displacement, Housing Instability, and Daily Life Disruption

The fire displaced numerous families, producing acute housing instability and rupturing daily routines essential to wellbeing. Black families experienced these disruptions through the compounded lens of existing housing inequities, which intensified the stress of relocation and recovery. Participants emphasized the precarity of their living situations and the destabilizing impact on family life. These findings mirror broader evidence that displacement following disasters disproportionately burdens marginalized communities and compounds preexisting housing inequities (Ong et al., 2025; Priest & Elliott, 2023).

One participant recalled, “We had to leave with just the clothes on our backs.” Another described the rupture in community belonging, noting, “We are separated from our city we were born n raised. Another mention, “Having to regroup n find a new place n community...” Families also noted changes in daily routines, such as, “I have to change the route I take when I go to work and take my kids to school.” Another highlighted instability, explaining, “We used to live close to my daughter’s school and my son’s preschool. For a month we split up, staying with family and moving through hotels and Airbnb’s. Hotel life was difficult living in one room, not being able to cook, and constantly taking dogs out.” For some, the displacement created a persistent sense of disconnection from their neighborhood, traditions, and extended networks of support.

These narratives reveal how housing instability functioned not only as a logistical challenge but also as a source of grief, eroding daily rhythms and ties to place. The Eaton Fire thus magnified preexisting inequities in housing security, underscoring the ways disasters accelerate cycles of displacement in marginalized communities.

Cultural and Spiritual Coping as a Source of Grounding

Amid profound loss, cultural and spiritual practices emerged as central coping strategies. Families relied on ancestral traditions, faith-based practices, and rituals of connection to sustain themselves emotionally and spiritually.

One participant described the significance of cultural identity in recovery: “We are Black, Oklahoma Choctaw, and Nisei, so we believe in connection to earth and to nature. Until our property is cleared, our home is a gravesite waiting for a complete cleanse. I will burn white sage... I will likely ask a Shinto priest to bless the land, and we will treat it with gentleness as we thank the land for sustaining us and ask ancestors for strength to move forward.” Another emphasized the grounding role of prayer and faith: “Prayer has been the main thing keeping me going.” Others described drawing strength from communal rituals, with one participant explaining, “I leaned on church gatherings because it was the only thing that felt normal.”

These reflections highlight that resilience was not only individual but also cultural, rooted in traditions linking healing to land, ancestry, and community. Such practices framed recovery in ways often overlooked by formal systems of care.

Collective Strength, Grassroots Support, and Mutual Aid

In response to institutional shortcomings, participants described how Black communities mobilized grassroots networks to provide mutual aid and emotional support. Churches, community groups, and informal neighbor-to-neighbor assistance became critical lifelines for meeting basic needs. Mutual aid has also been documented as a longstanding resilience practice within marginalized communities, filling institutional gaps during crises (Landau, 2022).

One participant shared, “Many organizations and individuals have come together to support with donations and positive words.” Another expressed appreciation for widespread solidarity, stating, “The love and support from Los Angeles County has been tremendous... I see that God has

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his people doing his work to provide, support, and give hugs.” Others emphasized mutual reliance within neighborhoods, with one reflecting, “We are only surviving because our neighbors and church stepped in when the county didn’t.”

These accounts underscore how grassroots resilience filled the gaps left by formal disaster response. Mutual aid provided immediate relief while reinforcing long-standing practices of collective care and solidarity in Black communities.

Barriers to Services and Systemic Neglect

Participants identified numerous barriers to accessing recovery services, including long wait times, culturally irrelevant support programs, and the absence of Black-led organizations in disaster response efforts. These challenges reflected a broader context of systemic racism and institutional neglect, with many families expressing frustration over being overlooked or inadequately supported in their recovery journey. Multiple participants described their challenges with navigating FEMA and stated,

“FEMA, the Red Cross, and all LA County programs have all denied our applications because our home did not burn down”.

Simultaneously, another participant stated,

“It’s like every other thing we do in life. It’s always there, and we recognize it. We go around until we find the person who will help. So, yes, now that the administration has changed, we are even more vigilant about ensuring we get equitable access to resources for us and for our neighbors/community [community]. It helps to have Black churches and the Altadena NAACP (as well as Pasadena and the national org) pivot to help community members who need services to come to them whether it’s fear, mistrust, mobility, lack of smart phone/internet, etc.) I would like to add that economics plays a great role in this both the actual event and recovery efforts, as well. There should have never been an assumption that everyone has or can afford a smart phone or the internet, which was down; btw), that we all have landlines, or that everyone has a car/transportation [transportation]. My neighbors died, because they called for evacuation (both were disabled), and no one ever came. My Choctaw grandfather was right. We can only rely on our community to help us”.

“Concerned about the leasing process if we decide to rent long term. Although we have good credit, we realized the process can be discriminatory”.

These accounts demonstrate that systemic neglect is not only about service denial but also about structural inequities embedded in disaster planning and response. The resulting exclusion compounded grief and limited pathways to recovery.

Recommendations for Culturally Responsive, Sustained Support

Across interviews, there was a clear call for the development of culturally affirming and support systems. Participants advocated for mental health care rooted in cultural understanding, long-term housing solutions, and community-based healing initiatives. These recommendations emphasized the importance of shifting from reactive, short-term aid to holistic, equity-centered recovery efforts that honor cultural context and community voice. For instance, one participant summed the needs perfectly by thoroughly expressing what they would like to see for the future of their community by mentioning that,

“Systems need to be put in place with trusted orgs and churches in the community to be the conduit for community to know help is there, and it needs to come to them. Don’t expect people, especially Black men, to leave their street to come to get help. They’re holding up their homes, their families, their jobs, and they are under a lot of stress plus the trauma. None of the Black men in my family think they need therapy, so I’m trying to model for my sons that it’s okay to get professional help. There are people who look like us and can help you. I went to a luncheon last weekend that was held for Black elders, particularly women, and the pastor announced there was a group at the resource table in the back that could help find therapists at no cost. I’m hoping some people took up this

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offer, but I know there's pride and a concern about judgment or being perceived as weak when we get help. My hope is more CBO's and churches will partner with long-term and trusted community members, maybe those perceived as leaders in their neighborhood, to get onto the block and to individually talk to people. It's gonna be a long time before we can find our new normal. Also, please don't send people who don't look like they are from our community. No clipboards or iPads. No shirts and ties. No one driving a Tesla. West Altadena has become gentrified in many ways, and one of the issues now with all this rebuild planning is there are no really established long-term residents (born and raised) on these committees. We don't need more people like that coming in with offers to "help."

Together, these recommendations highlight the urgent need for disaster recovery systems that are culturally affirming and equity centered. They reflect survivors' vision for healing rooted in trust, accessibility, and long-term investment in community wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

The six emergent themes from this study—compounded grief, housing displacement, barriers to culturally responsive services, culturally grounded coping, grassroots mutual aid, and community-driven recommendations—illuminate how the Eaton Fire shaped the grief experiences of Black families in Altadena. Consistent with prior research, participants described disaster-related grief as multifaceted, encompassing not only bereavement for lost lives but also for homes, neighborhoods, and ways of life (Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Kristensen et al., 2012). This aligns with Walsh's (2007) framework of collective grief and resilience, underscoring that disasters fracture both family and community systems.

At the same time, the data highlight the disproportionate vulnerabilities faced by Black residents. Participants frequently tied their grief to histories of structural and environmental racism in housing, access to services, and governmental neglect, reflecting findings by Eisenman et al. (2007) and Bryant-Davis et al. (2017). In this way, grief in the wake of the Eaton Fire is not only personal but also political, shaped by systemic inequities and long-standing displacement pressures. As a result, participants also noted that the rebuilding process has been profoundly strenuous, citing systemic inefficiencies in how business is conducted in the United States. They described the high cost of domestically manufactured materials, coupled with the logistical challenges of importing supplies, which often involve complex import regulations, tariffs, and prolonged port delays. These compounding barriers intensified participants' frustration, leaving many feeling dehumanized, like they are merely numbers in a bureaucratic system rather than valued members of the community. Moreover, participants also underscored the sustaining role of cultural coping mechanisms and community solidarity. Spiritual practices, kinship networks, and grassroots organizing emerged as vital sources of resilience, echoing findings from Salinas (2021) and Laurie and Neimeyer (2008). These strategies not only supported emotional recovery but also reaffirmed cultural identity, offering pathways of meaning-making in the aftermath of profound disruption. Community-led mutual aid efforts went beyond meeting physical needs by restoring trust, validating cultural practices, and addressing the deep sense of displacement. These findings emphasize that no outside agency can fully replicate the cultural and emotional restoration that grassroots networks provide.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens for understanding how structural racism shapes disaster experiences for Black families. The findings illustrate how the Eaton Fire exacerbated racialized housing patterns and inequitable access to recovery resources, reinforcing CRT's assertion that racism is embedded within systems, institutions, and policies. Participants' accounts of bureaucratic neglect, delayed responses, and perceived racial favoritism in relief efforts further demonstrate the centrality of race in shaping disaster vulnerability and recovery outcomes.

Proposed Framework for Culturally Grounded Resilience

A proposed framework emerging from this study is what the authors refer to as Culturally Grounded Resilience Theory (CGRT). Whereas CRT serves to explain the structural and systemic inequities shaping disaster experiences, CGRT extends the analysis by centering the culturally specific strengths, practices, and forms of collective healing utilized by Black families during recovery. The Eaton Fire data demonstrate that resilience among Black families was not defined by abstract or individualized notions of “bouncing back,” but rather through culturally embedded practices such as spiritual rituals, home-going traditions, mutual aid, storytelling, and collective caregiving.

CGRT conceptualizes resilience as relational, communal, and culturally situated rather than solely individualistic. These findings suggest that Black families draw upon intergenerational knowledge, spirituality, kinship networks, and community-based care practices to navigate grief, displacement, and recovery following disasters. Thus, resilience is understood not merely as adaptation to adversity, but as a culturally grounded process of meaning-making, resistance, restoration, and collective survival.

At the same time, participants’ narratives revealed that systemic inequities and institutional neglect continued to compound trauma and hinder recovery efforts. This reinforces the importance of equity-centered and community-led disaster response models that recognize and build upon existing cultural strengths within Black communities rather than relying exclusively on deficit-based frameworks. Taken together, CRT and CGRT offer complementary lenses: CRT illuminates the structural conditions that produce racialized disaster inequities, while CGRT highlights the culturally grounded mechanisms through which Black families foster healing and resilience despite those inequities.

Further research is recommended to refine and validate CGRT as a broader conceptual framework for understanding disaster recovery and resilience among communities of color across varying sociocultural contexts.

Grief Justice

Grief justice refers to the recognition, validation, and support of individuals’ and communities’ experiences of loss particularly in marginalized or oppressed groups while addressing the structural and systemic injustices that contribute to or exacerbate that grief. It emphasizes the right to mourn, heal, and seek accountability in ways that honor cultural, historical, and social contexts.

After the Eaton Fire displaced several Black families in Altadena and Pasadena, local organizers created a community-led memorial and healing circle that not only honored the losses suffered but also highlighted the historical disinvestment in Black neighborhoods that worsened the fire’s impact. This approach combined emotional support with advocacy for equitable recovery resources—an act of grief justice. The Eaton Fire demonstrated that participants’ grief was compounded by housing displacement, barriers to services, and systemic neglect, all of which reveal how grief is socially and politically mediated. By centering Black families’ grief, this study contributes to a justice-oriented understanding of disaster recovery, insisting that grief responses be validated and resourced in ways that account for racial and structural inequities.

CRT, CGRT, and grief justice work together because they address different but interconnected dimensions of disaster recovery, structural inequality, cultural resilience, and justice-centered healing. Using all three frameworks allows researchers and practitioners to understand not only why disparities occur, but also how communities survive them and what equitable recovery should look like.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study included a relatively small, self-selected sample (n = 37) recruited through convenience

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and snowball sampling methods. Participants chose to participate voluntarily, which may reflect individuals who were more motivated or able to share their experiences at that time. As a result, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all individuals or families impacted by the Eaton Fire.

Second, the sample was predominantly composed of women (approximately 95%), which likely influenced how grief and loss were articulated in the narratives collected. While these perspectives provide important insight into the emotional and relational dimensions of disaster-related grief, the experiences of men and other gender identities may be underrepresented.

Third, most participants identified as long-term residents of the Altadena and Pasadena communities. While this offers valuable insight into place-based grief and multigenerational community attachment, it may not fully capture the experiences of newer residents or those with different forms of connection to the community.

Finally, data was collected within weeks of the Eaton Fire, capturing participants' grief experiences during the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. As such, the study reflects a snapshot of grief in that particular moment rather than long-term recovery trajectories. The design does not allow for conclusions about how grief may evolve over time, nor does it allow for causal interpretations regarding the relationship between the disaster and participants' emotional responses.

Despite these limitations, the study provides timely and contextually grounded insight into the early grief experiences of Black families following a community-level disaster. By documenting these narratives during the immediate aftermath, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how race, place, and community shape grief and coping in the context of disaster recovery.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest a call for disaster responses that are culturally responsive and equity centered. Social workers and disaster planners would benefit from recognizing the role of structural and environmental racism in shaping grief and recovery and design interventions that actively counter these inequities. This includes ensuring equitable housing support, expanding access to culturally responsive mental health services, and partnering with grassroots organizations that already play a critical role in community resilience.

Trauma-informed and equity-centered models of care are essential. For example, disaster recovery must not only address immediate housing needs but also provide long-term, community-based mental health care that is culturally affirming. Minority-serving institutions and Black-led organizations are uniquely positioned to bridge gaps in trust and accessibility. Practices such as Psychological First Aid, community-based storytelling, and faith-based healing initiatives demonstrate culturally responsive strategies that align with CGRT and Grief Justice Principles.

Future Directions

Future research should examine the long-term trajectories of grief among Black families after wildfire disasters, as well as compare experiences across different racial and ethnic groups to better understand the intersection of culture, race, and disaster recovery. Mixed-method and participatory approaches, such as those advocated by Lykes and Hershberg (2016), would allow for deeper exploration of community voices and greater collaboration in shaping research agendas. There is also a need to further operationalize frameworks such as Grief Justice and CGRT in disaster contexts (i.e., with additional research), developing practical tools for culturally responsive interventions.

CONCLUSION

The Eaton Fire profoundly shaped the grief experiences of Black families in Altadena, revealing how disasters intersect with systemic inequities to compound loss. Participants described grief that extended beyond personal bereavement to include the destruction of homes,

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