

# A “Double Whammy” of Disasters: Flood recovery during COVID-19 in rural West Virginia

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Ohio University

# June 23, 2016 Flood in West Virginia

- 10 inches of rain in 18 hours
- 23 people killed
- 1,500 homes destroyed
- 125 businesses destroyed
- 4,000 homes damaged
- Federal disaster in 12 counties



[Drone Footage of Flood in Rainelle, WV](#)

# Research on the 2016 Flood

**“If it Wasn’t for the Faith-Based Groups, We  
Wouldn’t Be Where We Are Today”: Flooding  
Response and Recovery in Greenbrier County, WV**

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*West Virginia University*

MARTINA ANGELA CARETTA

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- In 2016, flooding events added another layer of hardship to already vulnerable communities in Southern WV
- Social capital is the ability of a community to act collectively to respond to disaster
- Communities can be both vulnerable and resilient, as a result of social capital
- Faith-based organizations (FBOs) can deepen social capital and increase hope for community revitalization
- Integrated disaster responses that include FBOs can increase community resilience, even with insufficient state services

## **Flooding Hazard and Vulnerability. An Interdisciplinary Experimental Approach for the Study of the 2016 West Virginia Floods**

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Available from [Southeastern Geographer](#)

Available from [Frontiers in Water](#)



# Resilience in Greenbrier County

- High levels of social Capital - ability of the community to draw on connections to act collectively
- Complex response included Faith Based Organizations (FBOs)
- Hope for revitalization
- Co-existence of resilience and vulnerability



A home being repaired by an FBO in May 2017 in Rainelle, WV

# Resilience in Greenbrier County

“And then you get these people from out of state coming in and saying how beautiful it is. And then you open your eyes up, you look around and say, I don’t know, man. It is a pretty nice place...”

– *local authority*

“The past is good, and it’s okay to look at your history. But we can’t revive the town on its past.... We got to look at what we have now and that’s our surrounding beauty, that’s our ecosystem. That’s the streams and the trees. And so people finally got on board. And it... unfortunately took outside people coming in...”

– *local authority*



Dedication for a rebuilt home in White Sulphur Springs in Aug 2017

# The Appalachian Service Project: Rebuilding Hope in Rainelle



# Photovoice Project: Life during COVID-19

- Participatory research method
- Three main goals:
  - Empower people
  - Promote dialogue
  - Reach policymakers
- 9 participants in Fall 2020
- Phone interviews throughout
- Focus group in Summer 2021
- 850 photos!



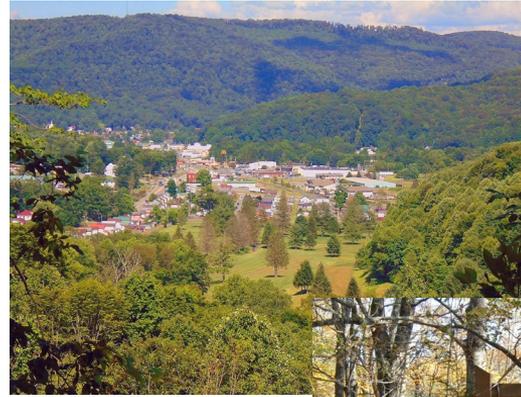
Participants take photos of each other at an event



Songs and stories during June 2021 focus group

# Small Town Life During a Global Pandemic

*When I go to Kroger I know every face I see. I know every single person I see. I've known them and have known them my entire life. So if somebody dies in this town, all of us know them. We know their family. We know their mama. You know what I mean? It means something. All of us grieve. ... if you hear your neighbor died of COVID... it's more impactful in a town where there's just not that many of us.*



# Pandemic Politics

*I saw her on the Saturday before she got sick in Walmart... and she had her mask on down below her nose. We joked about it and I said "You better keep it over your nose..." She said, "I hate these masks." She kept telling me that on the election, this would all go away. Well, she got it on election day. And she spent a month on a ventilator and you know, she just couldn't make it... She was special. I don't think there's any way to replace her to tell you the truth.*



# Economic Hardship

*We didn't have an economy here to start with, except the extractive resources, you know, the timber and the coal...*

*Coal mining is a thing of the past here, when I was growing up, my dad could walk to work to the mines. But there aren't any mines around here now. The only place there is for people to work is Kroger, Dollar General, convenience stores, you know, McDonald's and stuff like that.*



# Flood Anxieties

*I know for a fact that the town was literally devastated with the flood to the point, say we have another one, heaven forbid, that would do the town in. They would have to bulldoze everything and turn it into a big pasture or something.*

*Anytime they talk about the possibility of flooding, flash flooding, or a bad storm system or anything like that, everybody that owns business in that town or that lives in that town, absolutely, their nerves go on end. I can't eat, I can't sleep... everybody that I know of is in the same shape.*



# The “Double Whammy” of Disaster

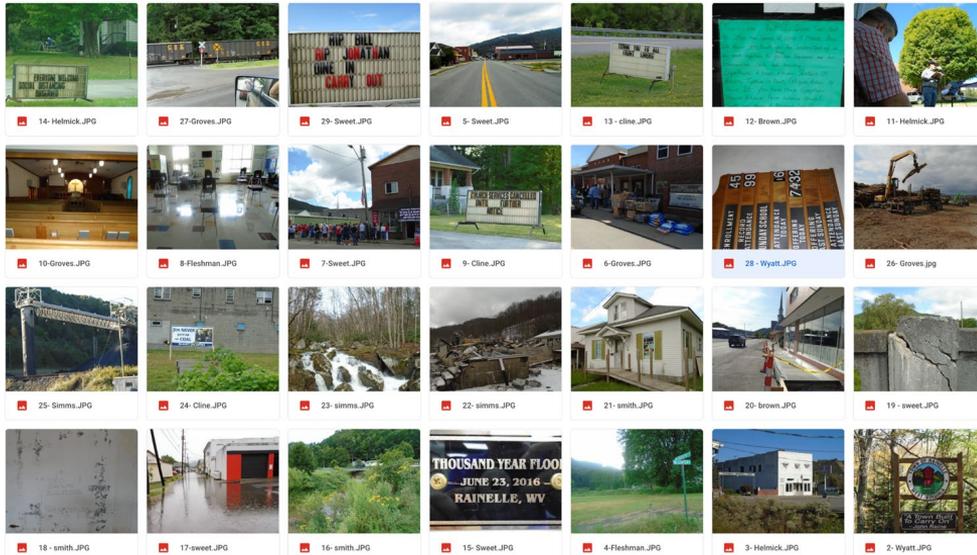
*Everyone still is devastated about the flood and COVID just planted on top of it. Double whammy. We're intermingling these two catastrophes in our lives and minds.*

*The whole story about... dealing with COVID is we've been hit almost back to back. Yeah. It's a tough thing. It's a wonder there's any business left in town.*

*We lost almost every restaurant in town... From the flood, of course, and then since the flood, the COVID.*



# Next steps: Photo exhibits in Rainelle and WVU



30 photos selected

## A “Double Whammy” of Disasters: Flooding and COVID-19 in rural West Virginia

Health Sciences Center Pylons  
August - December, 2022

This exhibit is the result of a photovoice project that was designed to capture life in rural West Virginia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project centered on the town of Rainelle, located in Greenbrier County in Southeastern West Virginia, which has experienced decades of socio-economic hardship from the decline of regional timber and coal industries and a devastating flood in 2016 that damaged hundreds of homes and businesses. With funding from the WVU Humanities Center, this project brought together faculty member Jamie Shinn and her key informant from previous research in Rainelle, John Wyatt. Together, they identified a group of nine residents to participate in the project, including local business owners, city council members, parents, and retirees.



Together with excerpts from interviews and a focus group with participants, the photos tell the story of one small town during the global pandemic and the ways it impacted life there. It is as much a story about a tight knit community surrounded by natural beauty as it is one of isolation, small town politics, and the economic toll of the pandemic in a place that was already suffering. Most strikingly, the photos tell the story of how the pandemic intersected with ongoing flood recovery efforts, or what one participant called “the double whammy” of disasters. The result is a visual representation of people’s experiences with COVID-19 in ways both familiar and unique, as told through their own voices and lenses.

Jamie Shinn is an Assistant Professor of Geography in the Department of Geography & Geography at WVU. Her research investigates issues of environmental governance and adaptation to climate change, especially in relation to water and flooding.

John Wyatt is a project participant, musician, storyteller, minister and resident of Rainelle, WV. He will discuss his role in the project and the impacts of COVID-19 in Rainelle through story and song.



[WVU exhibit in Fall 2022](#)

# National inequity in flood vulnerability

Sept 12 2021, National Public Radio- [The Federal Government Sells Flood-Prone Homes To Often Unsuspecting Buyers](#)

Aug 26 2021, New York Times - [How Government Decisions Left Tennessee Exposed to Deadly Flooding](#)

June 7, 2021, New York Times- [FEMA Disaster Aid Often Widens Racial Disparities](#)

Feb 22 2021, National Public Radio - [Looming Disaster: New Data Reveal Where Flood Damage Is An Existential Threat](#)

Oct 17, 2021, New York Times- [As Manchin Blocks Climate Plan, His State Can't Hold Back Floods](#)



# Rainelle as “bellwether for the future”

When large numbers of people don't have insurance or savings after a disaster, the effects can ripple through the community. Towns like Rainelle are a bellwether for that future. Here, flood insurance is already unaffordable for many residents, and climate-driven flood damage has already exceeded local resources. About a third of Rainelle residents live below the poverty line, and the cost of repairing the 2016 flood damage was insurmountable for many families.

Trigg's displaced congregants would call him, hopeless, in the months after the flood. "A lot of people in Rainelle were poor, and they didn't have any insurance. They didn't have any way to have any backup plan," he says.



Rainelle, W. Va., flooded in June 2016. Year

Source: [NY Times article](#)

# What's next?

A proposal in development with civic partners in Greenbrier County on lessons learned from the 2016 flood and next steps to increase community knowledge and response coordination, with plans to scale outcomes to high risk communities across WV

# Thank you!

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