

Is California Ready for the Big One?

Frightening pictures of disaster in other parts of the world should act as a wake-up call

By PODER Staff



AP

In this April 18, 1906 photo, people walk through the rubble following an earthquake in San Francisco.

In the wake of the massive earthquakes in Haiti and Chile this year, disaster preparedness is taking on new meaning, especially in places sitting on major fault lines such as California.

Although California is considered to be one of the most prepared places in the world for a large earthquake, a new study by the UCLA School of Public Health finds that many residents are not ready enough.

The survey was released only days before Californians were jolted in their beds March 17 by a 4.4 magnitude temblor centered about 10 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. It buckled a 10-foot stretch of concrete in a center lane of a major interstate only five miles south of downtown.

Earthquakes with a magnitude of 4 are quite common in Southern California, occurring every month or two.

While a majority of Californians have taken initial steps toward earthquake preparedness, more than 60 percent have not done enough to make their homes safer and guard their personal finances in preparation for an inevitable, large-scale earthquake, according to the California Earthquake Preparedness Survey. Hispanic respondents were the least likely among all ethnic groups to prepare.

Although state and local public safety and emergency management agencies are better prepared than ever before, the survey found that most have focused mostly on easy preparedness activities such as collecting supplies and making back-up copies of important documents. They have ignored more difficult and expensive activities such as securing the contents of their home or purchasing earthquake insurance, according to the survey.

The survey found that:

- Fewer than 20 percent of households have structurally reinforced their homes or had their homes inspected for earthquake resistance.
- Only 40 percent keep the recommended minimum of three gallons of water stored per person.
- Fewer than 20 percent of California households have purchased earthquake insurance.
- While more than 80 percent of households have first aid kits, flashlights and batteries in their house, only 40 percent of Californians have made family disaster plans.

The survey was conducted by the UCLA School of Public Health for the State of California on behalf of California Emergency Management Agency, California Seismic Safety Commission and California Volunteers to learn how prepared California households are for earthquakes and where they get their information about preparedness and mitigation.

“The recent earthquakes in Chile and Haiti are unwelcome reminders of the devastating impact earthquakes can have on people and communities,” says Matthew Bettenhausen of the California Emergency Management Agency. “It calls attention to the need for Californians to do even more to prepare for the big one. This study confirms that Californians need constant reminders and a steady stream of earthquake preparedness information to motivate people to act. We continue to urge Californians to prepare now.”

The survey also found that less than 20 percent have participated in neighborhood disaster planning. More than 65 percent of Californians reported being trained in first aid, but less than 50 percent had participated in disaster trainings at work, and less than 20 percent have received specific disaster trainings.

Observations from the earthquakes in Chile and Haiti reinforce the importance of being self-sufficient immediately following a disaster by stockpiling food, water and supplies; training and practicing skills that are critical during disasters; and protecting the structures of buildings.

“It is important for Californians to prepare for all types of disasters by having a plan and being ready to take care of ourselves, our families and our communities,” says Karen Baker, Secretary of Service and Volunteering. “Personal preparedness allows disaster workers to focus on critical areas to protect our state. Everyone can take steps to prepare.”

California’s Quake History

California has experienced strong earthquakes since at least 1769, when the first recorded shake occurred near the San Andreas Fault, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Forty persons attending church at San Juan Capistrano on December 8, 1812, were killed by a strong earthquake that destroyed the church. Many mission buildings were severely damaged. The shock probably centered on a submarine fault offshore.

A violent shock in January 1857 toppled buildings and large trees in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento. In October 1868 about 30 people were killed in the San Francisco era from another big quake. There was another that killed 27 people in 1872.

Some 700 people died on April 18, 1906, in one of the greatest earthquakes ever to hit California. Damage was extensive in San Francisco, and was increased perhaps tenfold by raging fires. Total damage was estimated at over \$500 million.

Two destructive shocks nearly one hour apart caused about \$1 million property damage in southern Imperial Valley on June 22, 1915.

The Long Beach earthquake of March 1933 eliminated all doubts regarding the need for earthquake resistant design for structures in California. Forty million dollars property damage resulted; 115 lives were lost.

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