

LOMA PRIETA & THE HOUSING CRISIS

Natural disasters can heighten existing problems, as reflected by Loma Prieta's impact on the housing crisis.

Loma Prieta – the first major earthquake along the San Andreas fault since 1906 – hit on October 17, 1989. Centered 10 miles northeast of Santa Cruz, near Loma Prieta Peak, people felt the 6.9 magnitude quake as far away as San Diego and Nevada. Buildings and highways collapsed, and 63 people lost their lives.

In Santa Cruz County, the quake displaced about 4,500 people. Latinx families disproportionately experienced this homelessness. In the town of Watsonville, families, farm workers, and cannery workers camped out in unofficial shelters in Callaghan and Ramsey Parks. Ramsay Park was converted into an official Red Cross shelter, but Callaghan Park's encampment remained unofficial. Making things more difficult: a lack of Spanish-speaking volunteers, leaving out the area's large Spanish-speaking population.

Residents found it difficult to access relief and temporary housing. Pre-quake, Watsonville's affordable housing availability was at just 1%, so multiple families and unrelated adults often lived together in one household. However, FEMA only provided financial assistance to household members whose names appeared on leases. Those in shared housing rarely had the documentation to prove their residency. Luckily, some received financial assistance six months post-quake after a lawsuit.

Watsonville's housing crisis was amplified by the earthquake. Damaged apartment buildings, once rebuilt, charged almost twice their pre-quake rent. Some displaced families rented motel rooms for a year while waiting for relief appeals to be processed. Others found themselves at the city's overpopulated homeless shelters. Community organizations like Salud Para La Gente continued to provide support for those affected by the quake.

A USGS report, released the same year as Loma Prieta, noted that post-disaster housing crises stemmed from pre-existing societal issues related to housing, inclusiveness, and planning. California's housing crisis has only gotten worse. Have enough changes been made today to provide relief for all people affected?



Stephanie Garcia, 6, eats soup provided by volunteers to families in Callaghan Park because their homes are unsafe after the Loma Prieta earthquake, October 21, 1989. Deanne Fitzmaurice / *The Chronicle*.

“[AFTER THE QUAKE], PEOPLE WERE OUT IN THE PARK ASKING QUESTIONS. I REALIZED, AT THAT POINT, THAT MOST OF THE PEOPLE WHO WERE OUT IN THE PARK WERE SPANISH-SPEAKING, AND I REALIZED THAT MOST OF THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS...WERE NOT.” – Barbara

Garcia, then-Executive Director of Salud Para La Gente, a community clinic. Garcia and her team provided support to survivors post-quake.

SROs in Santa Cruz. Loma Prieta also deeply affected the many low-income, transient, and elderly



A room in St. George Hotel, October 1989. Photo by Alexander Lowry. Courtesy UC Santa Cruz Library.

people who lived in Santa Cruz's affordable Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels. Only one of the city's four SRO buildings survived the quake. While nonprofits helped the elderly find new housing, other SRO residents were left with few options for shelter. Despite protests from local social workers, FEMA and the Red Cross also determined that “pre-quake” homeless populations, like those who inhabited downtown Santa Cruz, did not qualify for disaster aid. Funding for temporary housing was reserved only for those who experienced homelessness post-quake.