

LA Wildfires: Impacts on Altadena's Black Community

Rapid Response Data Brief

Paul Ong, Chhandara Pech, Lorrie Frasure, Samyu Comandur,
Eric Lee, and Silvia R. González

January 28, 2025

Acknowledgments

This data brief was made possible through the generous support of the California State Legislature and the California Black Legislative Caucus to develop timely research that informs domestic policy challenges impacting Black and other communities of color. The authors are grateful for the editorial support from Jonathan Ong and Dr. Michael Stoll, Jennifer Thomas and Jacqueline Aguirre for Bunche Center staff support, and Kacey Bonner for design support. The authors also acknowledge the support of the California Department of Real Estate, UCLA Ziman Center Endowment Fund.



Strike teams assisting LA County Fire with Eaton Fire extinguish fire in Altadena on January 10, 2025. (Mayra Beltran / Los Angeles County)

ABOUT OUR CENTERS

The UCLA Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies supports multidisciplinary academic research and community-centered programs that have broad impact for Black communities across California, the United States, and internationally.

The UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge specializes in empirical spatial analysis to inform policy and planning action and explicitly emphasizes the study of immigrant enclaves, low-income neighborhoods, and ethnic minority communities.

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute addresses the most critical domestic policy challenges facing Latinos and other communities of color through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to expand genuine opportunities for all Americans.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The UCLA Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies, the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, and the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute acknowledge the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and So. Channel Islands). As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders), and 'Eyoohiinkem (our relatives/relations) past, present, and emerging.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles, as a whole. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact: Barbra Ramos, bramos@stratcomm.ucla.edu

INTRODUCTION

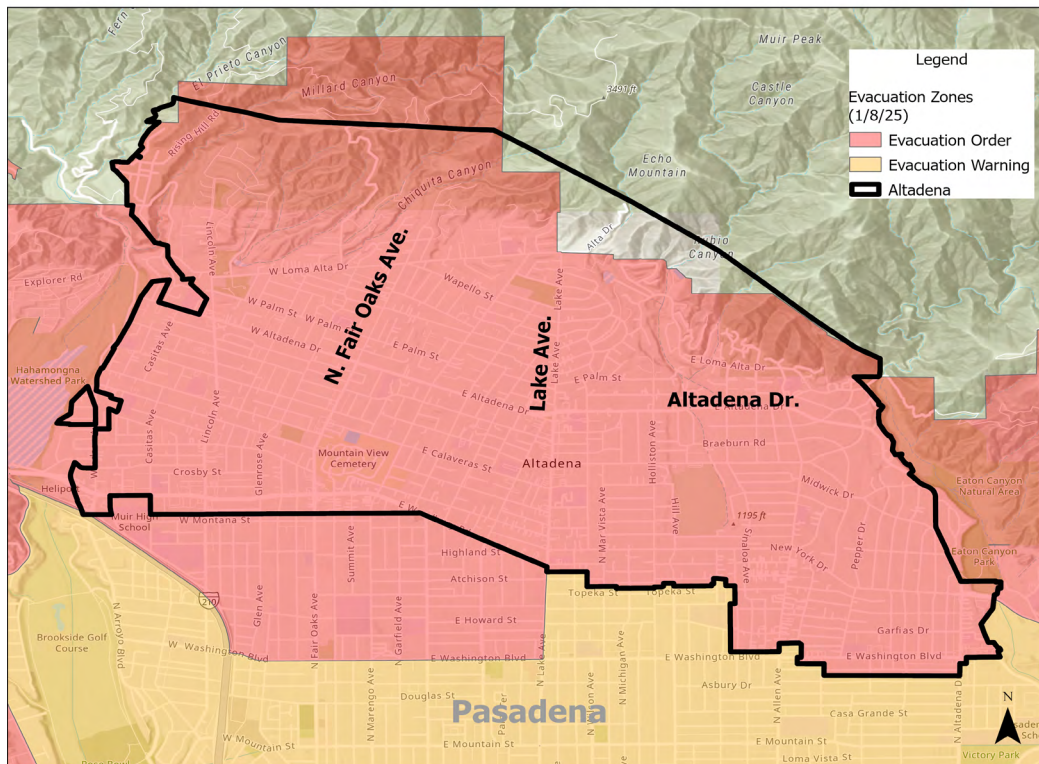
Altadena, a historically Black, middle-class, and culturally vibrant community, has been devastated by the January 2025 Eaton fire. This Data Brief provides new information on the historical trajectory of Altadena's Black community and the impacts from the wildfires, using multiple data sources. Existing trends in the Altadena housing market and Black settlement patterns, combined with damage and destruction created by the Eaton fire, demonstrate the disproportionate impact of the fires on Black households in Altadena. Data in this report underscores the urgent need for disaster response and long-term recovery efforts tailored to the unique needs of Altadena's Black community.

Key Findings

1. At Least 2,800 Black Households Were Forced to Evacuate Within a Day of the Eaton Fire's Outbreak

On January 8th, 2025, all of Altadena was subject to a mandatory evacuation order due to the rapidly growing Eaton Fire, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Eaton Evacuation Order & Warning Zones in Altadena



Source: Map created by authors using GIS shapefiles from Cal Fire representing evacuation zones as of January 8, 2025, and Census TIGER/Line shapefiles.



Aerial view of the Mountains and Altadena area. (Kit Leong, 2019)

Table 1 provides a breakdown of households in Altadena impacted by the fire, categorized by race and ethnicity. Black households account for nearly one-fifth of the total households in Altadena. Within the first day of the Eaton Fire’s outbreak, at least 2,800 Black households were forced to evacuate. According to the 2020 Decennial Census, nearly 75% of Black Altadena residents owned their homes. Table 2 shows that of those Black homeowners, 81% held a mortgage or home loan, while only 19% were ‘free and clear.’

Table 1: Altadena’s Households by Race/Ethnicity and Housing Tenure

Race	Total HH	% of Total HH	Own	Rent
Black	2,805	18%	74%	26%
Latino	3,094	20%	61%	39%
Asian	1,147	7%	77%	23%
Non-Latino White	7,548	49%	75%	25%
Overall	15,291		72%	28%

Source: Author’s tabulations based on 2020 Decennial Census data. Created with Datawrapper

Table 2: Mortgage Status Among Homeowners by Race of Householder in Altadena

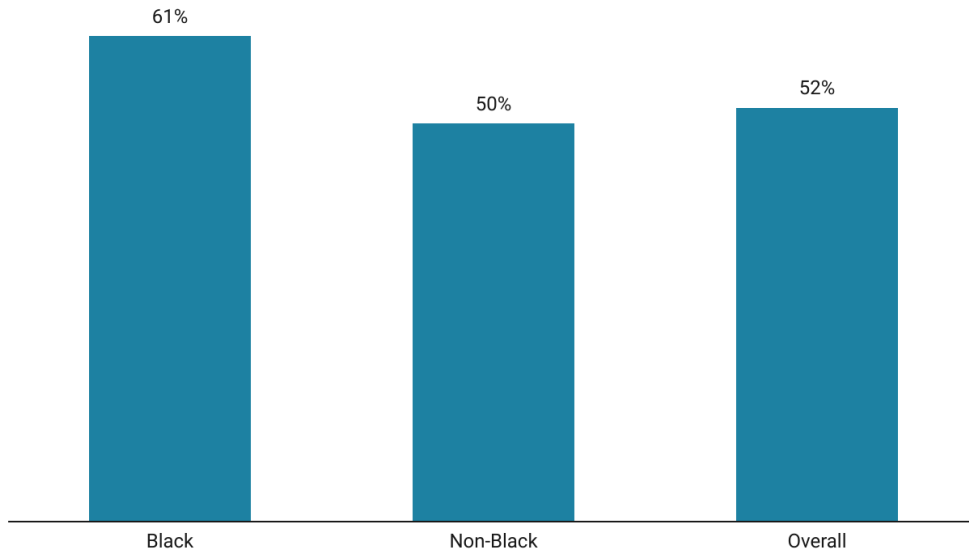
	Black	Non-Black	Overall
Homeowners	2,085	8,984	11,069
With a mortgage or a loan	81%	79%	79%
Free and clear	19%	21%	21%

Source: Author’s tabulations based on 2020 Decennial Census data. Created with Datawrapper

2. Black Altadena Households Disproportionately More Likely to be Victims of Eaton Fire Damage or Destruction

Black households in Altadena were disproportionately more likely to experience damage or destruction due to the Eaton Fire. As shown in Figure 2, 61% of Black households in Altadena are located within the Eaton Fire perimeter, compared to 50% of non-Black households. Additionally, nearly half (48%) of Black households/units were destroyed or majorly damaged, compared to 37% for non-Black households (see Figure 3). Black households are 1.30 times more likely to experience destruction or major damage than non-Black households.

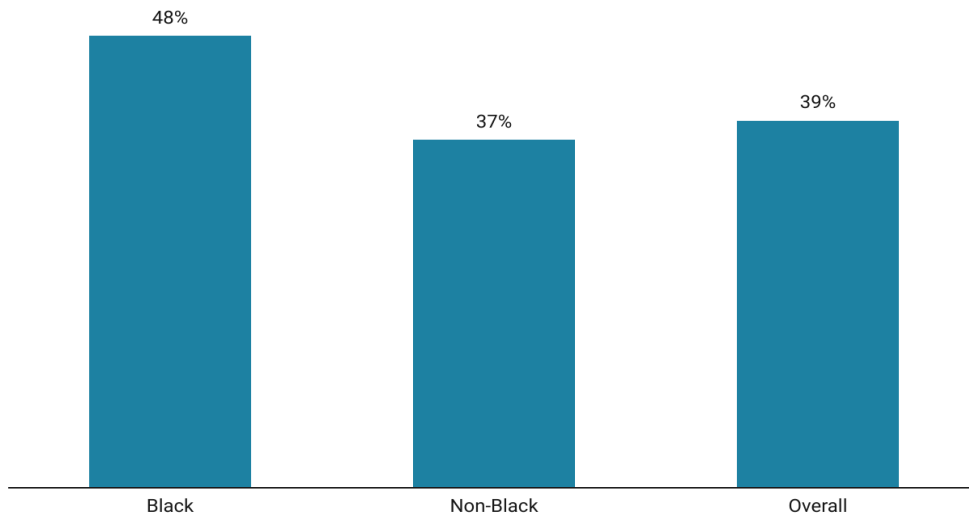
Figure 2: Household Share by Race in Altadena's Eaton Fire Perimeter



Note: The percentages show each group's households in the fire perimeter as a share of their total households in Altadena and do not sum to 100% because they use separate denominators.

Source: Author's tabulations based on 2020 Decennial Census data and Cal Fire Fire Perimeter as of January 11, 2025. Created with Datawrapper.

Figure 3: Estimated Share of Housing Damage by Race from the Eaton Fire in Altadena



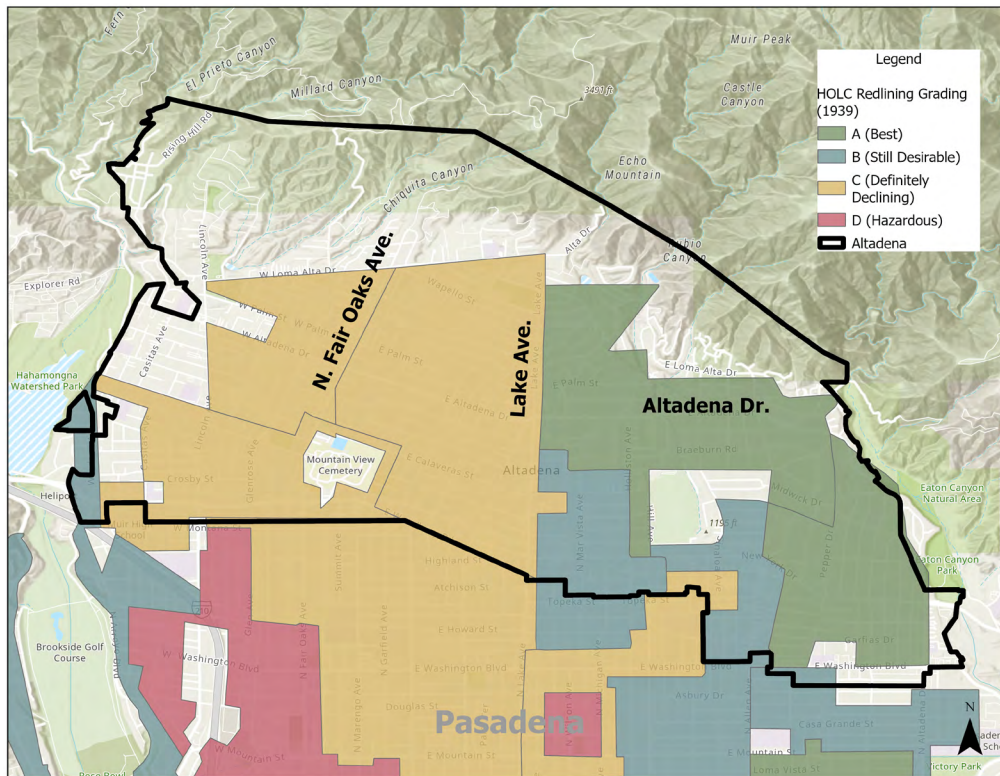
Note: The percentages represent each group's estimated destroyed or significantly damaged households as a share of their total households in Altadena. These figures are based on preliminary assessments of damaged structures conducted by Cal Fire as of January 21, 2025, and they are subject to ongoing updates.

Source: Author's tabulations based on 2020 Decennial Census data and Cal Fire Damage Inspection data as of January 21, 2025. Created with Datawrapper.

3. Legacies of Segregation and Redlining Practices Contributed to the Black Community's Vulnerability to the Eaton Fire

The wildfire's differential impacts can be at least partially attributed to the legacies of historical segregation and redlining in Altadena. Figure 4 maps the historical redlining designations in Altadena, based on the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) 1939 Residential Security Maps, which ranked neighborhoods by the relative risk to lenders. Areas west of Lake Avenue were predominantly zoned as "Definitely Declining" (yellow), the second lowest ranking. The area east of Lake Ave. were ranked either as "best" (green) or "still desirable" (blue).

Figure 4: HOLC 1939 Residential Security Maps of Altadena



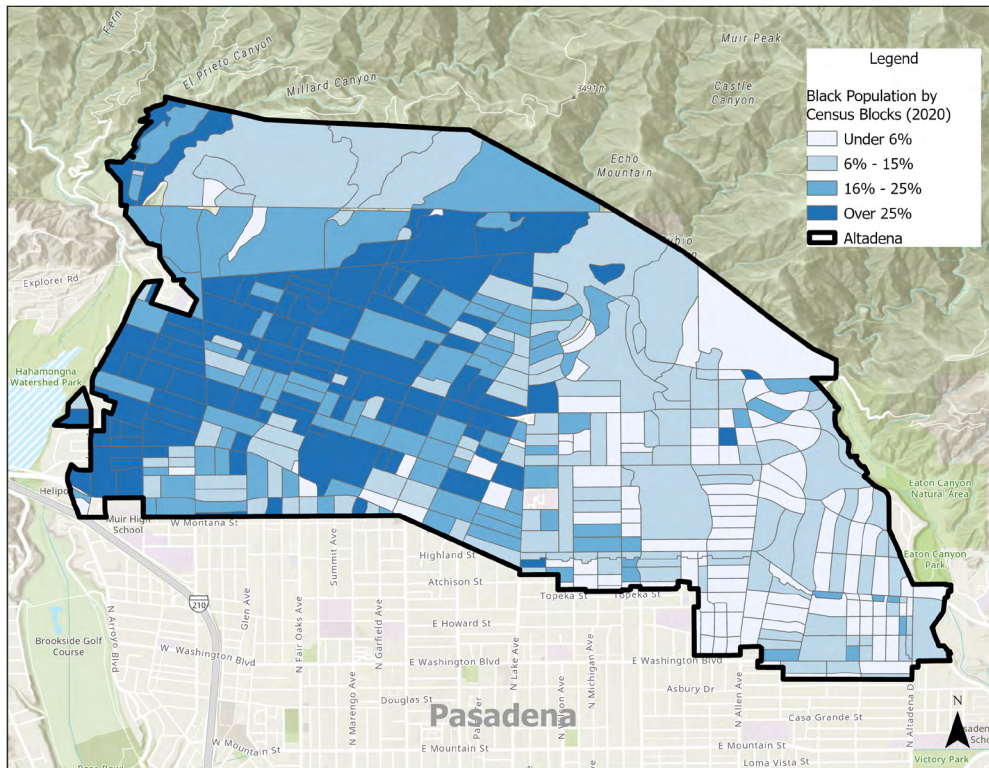
Source: Map created by authors using GIS shapefiles derived from [Mapping Inequality](#) and Census TIGER/Line shapefiles.

The HOLC rankings significantly influenced Altadena's home prices, and these effects persisted into the post-WWII period. The availability of homes considered less desirable in the western section, partly due to its low HOLC designation, created opportunities for Black families to purchase homes, despite the systemic barriers of the time. These purchases enabled the possibility of a generational transfer of homeownership, rare for both the time and the place. In 1970, 70% of Black households in Altadena were homeowners, nearly double the rate in Los Angeles County overall (38%). However, the legacy of redlining also resulted in the long term concentration of Black residents to those parts of Altadena that were closest to Eaton fire zone areas and therefore contributed to the vulnerability of a larger number of Black households impacted by the fires.

Figure 5 highlights the Black population distribution in Altadena by Census blocks using data from 2020. The blocks are categorized into ranges based on the percentage of Black residents, with darker blue shades representing higher concentrations. The Black population in Altadena is predominantly concentrated in West Altadena, particularly in census blocks near the southwestern and western portions of the community, which show the highest percentages of Black residents.

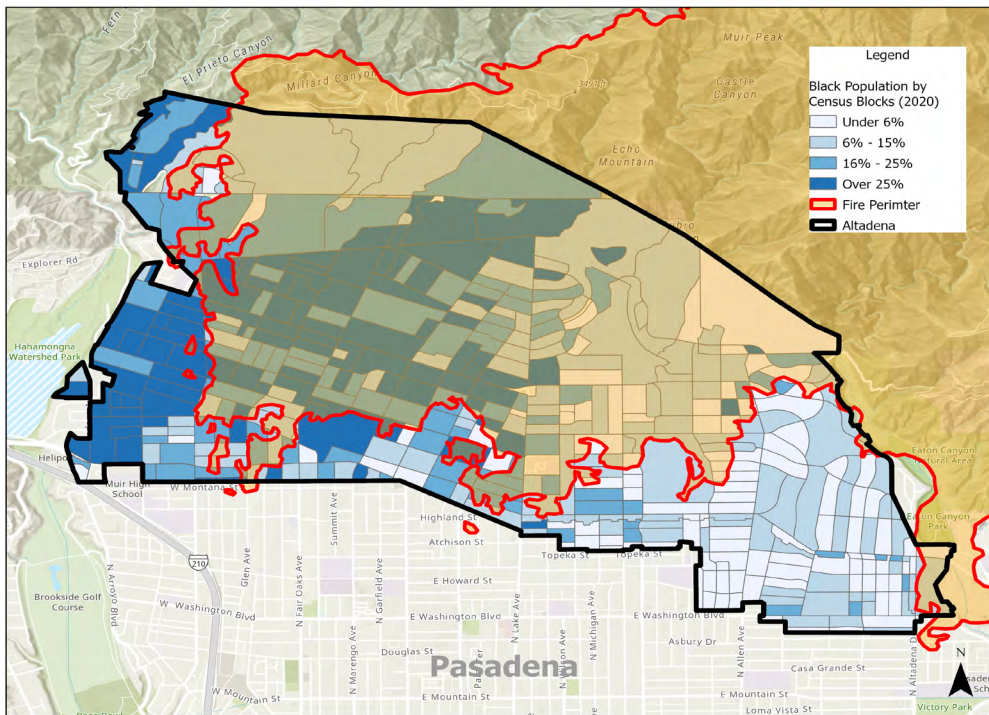
Figure 6 overlays the Eaton fire perimeter, outlined in red. While much of the fire perimeter overlaps with less densely populated or unpopulated areas, such as the northern mountainous region, it also intersects blocks in West Altadena, which include significant concentrations of Black residents.

Figure 5: Black Population Distribution in Altadena by Census Blocks, 2020



Source: Map created by authors using 2020 Decennial Census data and GIS shapefiles derived from Census TIGER/Line.

Figure 6: 2020 Black Population Distribution by Census Blocks with Fire Perimeter

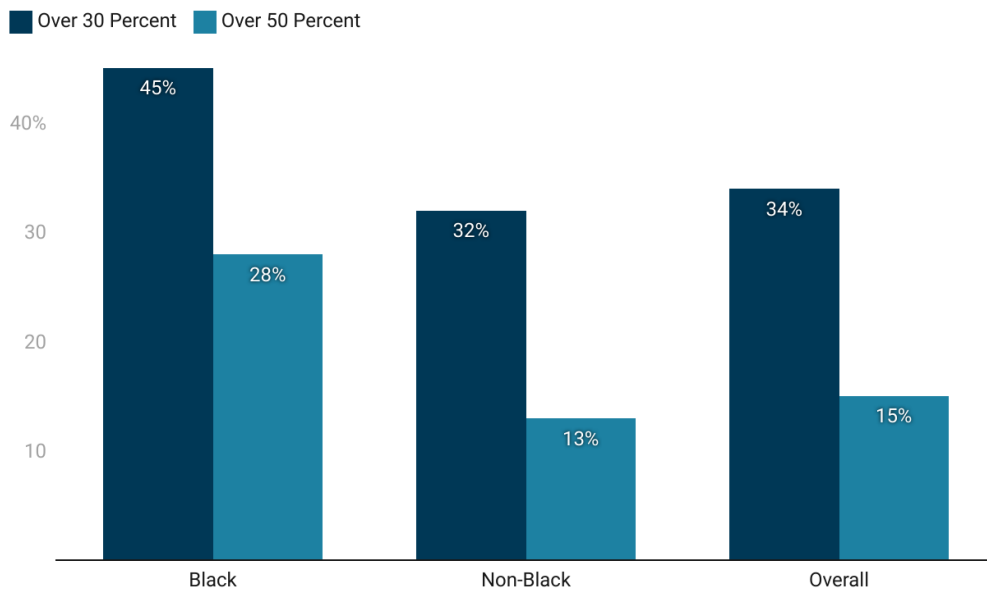


Source: Map created by authors using 2020 Decennial Census data and GIS shapefiles derived from Cal Fire (as of January 11, 2025) and Census TIGER/Line shapefiles.

4. Black Homeowners are Overburdened Financially, Putting Them at Higher Risk of Losing Their Home Due to Unexpected Shocks

Figure 7 reports the financial burden on Black homeowners in Altadena compared to their non-Black counterparts. Among Black homeowners, 45% are cost-burdened (spending over 30% of their household income on housing costs), and 28% are severely cost-burdened (spending more than 50% of their household income on housing). In comparison, only 32% of non-Black homeowners are cost-burdened, and 13% are severely cost-burdened. These disparities highlight the disproportionate financial challenges faced by Black homeowners in the area.

Figure 7: Housing Costs as a Percentage of Household Income for Homeowners by Race in Altadena



Source: Author's tabulations based on 2019-2023 5-year American Community Survey. Created with Datawrapper

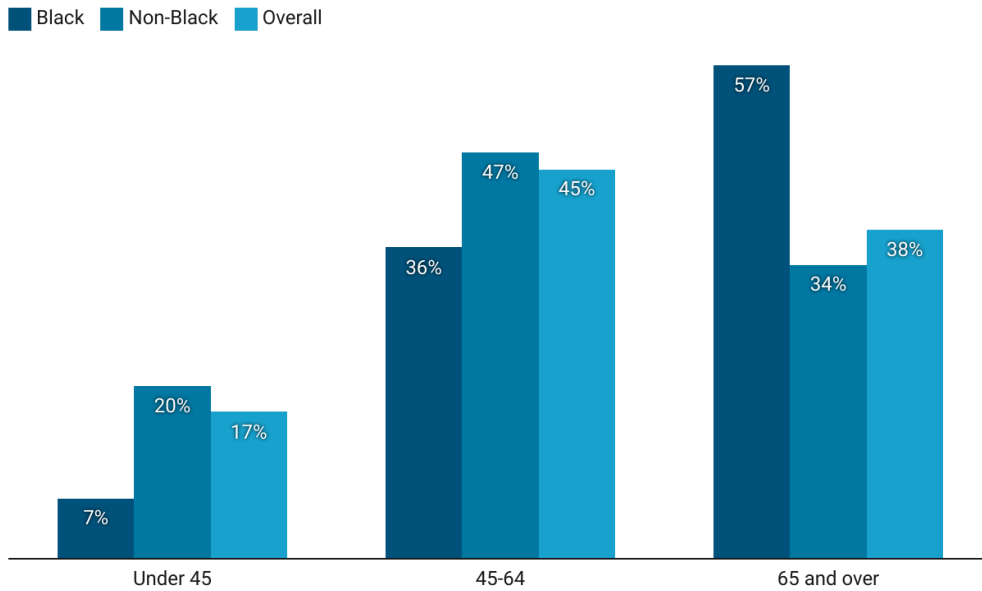
5. Black Homeowners in Altadena are an Aging and Highly Vulnerable Subgroup

Figure 8 demonstrates that a majority of Black homeowners (57%) in Altadena are aged 65 and over, compared to the overall population, where 38% of homeowners are aged 65 and over. Moreover, there are also relatively fewer younger Black homeowners (under age 45). As fire recovery efforts begin, the existing aging population may be especially vulnerable to incomplete or insufficient insurance coverage or predatory financial scams as they navigate the process of rebuilding or restoring their homes.



Local Assistance Centers & Disaster Recovery Center open to the public at the Community Education Center Pasadena City College on Tuesday, January 14, 2025. (Mayra Beltran / Los Angeles County)

Figure 8: Distribution of Homeowners by Age and Race in Altadena



Source: Author's tabulations based on 2020 Decennial Census data. Created with Datawrapper

6. The Eaton Fire, Combined With Pre-Existing Barriers to Black Homeownership, Threatens to Accelerate the Decline of Altadena's Black Community

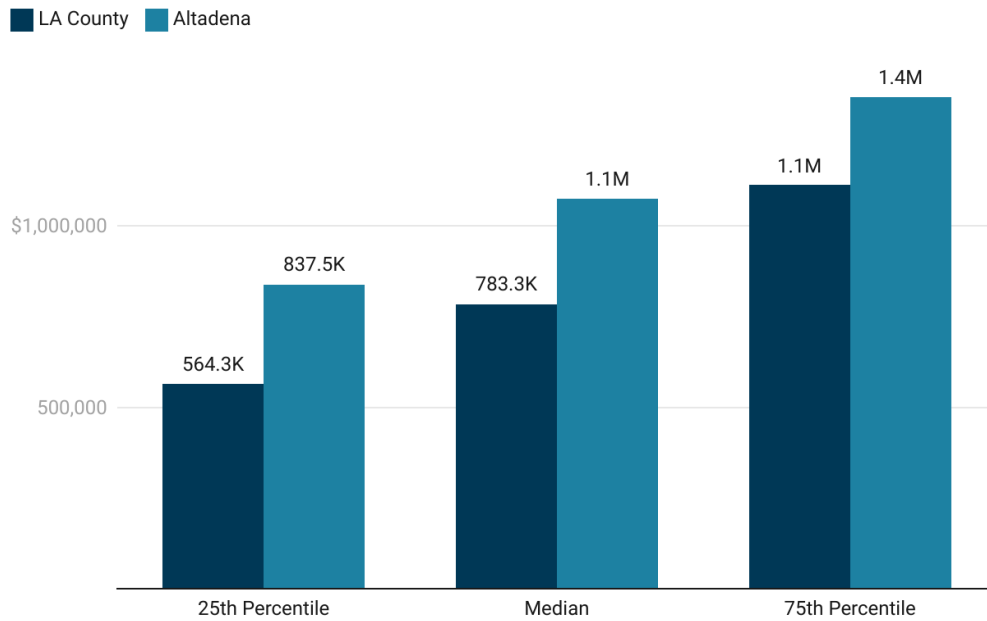
Rising home prices in Altadena serve as a barrier to home ownership. The median home value in Altadena from 2019 to 2023 was over \$1,000,000, over a third higher than that of the county. The relative values are even higher in the bottom half of the housing market, averaging \$837,500 in Altadena, which is 48% higher than of the rest of the county (see Figure 9). The prices of the single-family homes purchased in 2023 is even higher: a median of \$1.2 million, and an average of \$972k for the bottom half. than non-Black households.

Because of the high home prices, there was a decline in new Black homeownership prior to the Eaton fire. In 2023, Blacks made up only 4% of all applicants to purchase a home in Altadena (9 out of 219, HMDA). Two-thirds of African American applicants had their application approved, lower than for non-Black applicants (three-quarters).

Moreover, the younger Black community, already struggling to purchase homes in Altadena prior to the fires, will likely face additional barriers to homeownership as rebuilding efforts continue. Any intergenerational transfer of wealth (via home assets) that younger community members may have received otherwise has been disrupted by the fire. Both of these factors together indicate challenges ahead as the Black community in Altadena attempts to rebuild, and these factors will likely contribute to a further decline in the Black community in Altadena.

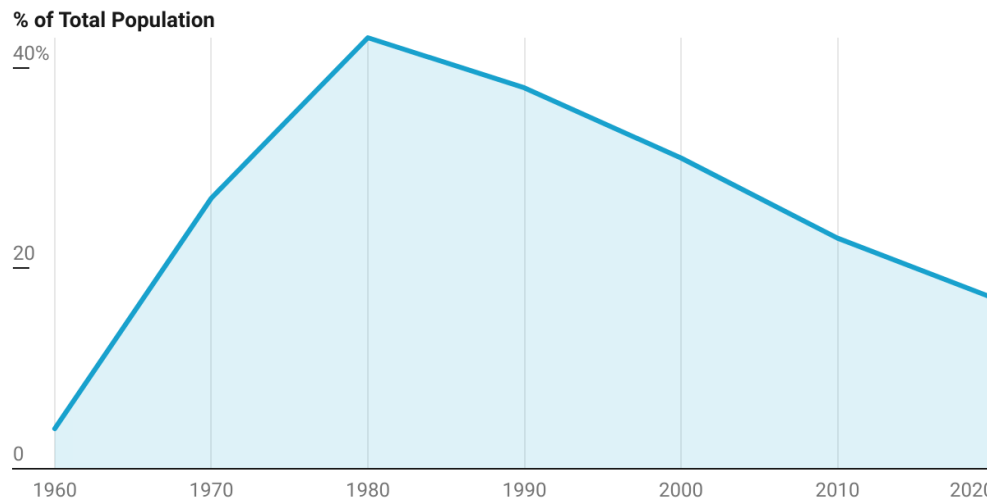
Figure 10 displays the total Black population in Altadena from 1960 – 2020. Even without taking any additional shocks created by the Eaton fire into account, if the rate of decline over the previous decades continues, by 2040, the size of the Black population will drop to its 1960 level, erasing Altadena's Black community.

Figure 9: Home Values in Altadena and Los Angeles County, 2019-2023



Source: Author's tabulations based on data from the 2019-2023 5-year American Community Survey. Created with Datawrapper

Figure 10: Percent Black Population in Altadena, 1960 to 2020



Source: Author's tabulations based on data from Decennial Census publications and Social Explorer, 1960-2020. Created with Datawrapper

Conclusion

The 2025 Eaton Fire has damaged hundreds of homes and displaced thousands of people. Since the 1960s, Altadena provided a historic opportunity for Black people to become homeowners. Due to increasing home prices and disproportionate financial burdens after the 1990s, Black people faced barriers to entry into the area, and existing Black homeowners faced challenges in maintaining home ownership. Moreover, an aging Black population found it difficult to transfer their wealth to the next generation. Future recovery efforts must take into account the unique challenges that Altadena's Black community will face while allocating emergency resources and relief to wildfire-affected areas.

Appendix: Data and Methods

This report utilizes multiple data sources and methodologies to analyze the impacts of the Eaton wildfire on African Americans in Altadena and their housing characteristics.

COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS

To examine the historical trajectory of Altadena, we used data from the decennial enumeration conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. This once-every-ten-year count provides population and housing statistics at multiple geographic levels, including Los Angeles County, Altadena (a census-designated unincorporated place), and the census tracts and blocks within Altadena. While some of this data have been digitized and is accessible through platforms like Data.Census.gov, Social Explorer and the National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS), other data—particularly from earlier decades—are only available in published reports archived by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Archives. A notable challenge with using the decennial census is that definitions and geographic boundaries often change from decade to decade.

For more recent years, we rely on the American Community Survey (ACS), as the U.S. Census Bureau stopped collecting detailed non-basic information in 2010. The ACS is a continuous sampling and collection program that provides annual demographic, housing, and economic statistics). Tabulated statistics are available for various geographic levels, including counties, places, tracts, and block-groups. However, statistics for smaller geographies are only accessible through pooled five-year samples.

To analyze home values and lending patterns, we used two additional data sources. The first is the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) dataset, a micro-level (individual level) resource containing records of loan applications and mortgages reported by financial institutions under the 1975 HMDA. This dataset includes details about loan applicants, such as their race, and for this study, we use the 2023 records. The second source is parcel records from the Los Angeles County Assessor, which provide detailed information on individual properties. For this analysis, we used records from 2023. Unfortunately, these parcel records do not include data on race.

METHODOLOGY FOR ESTIMATING HOUSEHOLDS IN EVACUATION ZONES

Defining Impacted Communities

Impacted communities are defined as those located within the mandatory evacuation zones and evacuation warning zones established by CalFire on January 8, 2025, at 2 p.m. PST. According to CalFire:

- Evacuation Order Zones: Areas facing an immediate threat to life where residents are legally required to leave immediately, and the area is closed to public access.
- Evacuation Warning Zones: Areas facing a potential threat to life and/or property where individuals requiring additional time to evacuate, as well as those with pets and livestock, are advised to leave immediately.

To estimate the number and proportion of different racial/ethnic groups by households in these evacuation zones, we used 2020 Decennial Census Block data and overlaid it with the evacuation zones using GIS. Given that all of Altadena was under a mandatory evacuation order, this analysis examined all census blocks within Altadena. We compared the place-level information for Altadena to our estimates based on census blocks within all of Altadena to verify our data.

METHODOLOGY FOR ESTIMATING HOUSEHOLDS WITHIN FIRE PERIMETER

To estimate the number and proportion of black households and non-Black households within the Eaton Fire perimeter, we used 2020 Decennial Census Block data and a GIS shapefile of the Eaton Fire Perimeter derived from Cal Fire (as of January 11, 2025). Using GIS, we overlaid the fire perimeter onto the census blocks. Areal weighting was applied to account for the proportion of each census block that falls within the fire perimeter. This approach enabled us to calculate household estimates by race within the fire perimeter. The calculated households were then summed. Using the total counts of all households, as well as Black and non-Black households in Altadena, we estimated the share of those households within the fire perimeter relative to the counts for all of Altadena.

METHODOLOGY FOR ESTIMATING DESTROYED OR MAJORLY DAMAGED HOUSING UNITS BY RACE IN THE EATON FIRE PERIMETER IN ALTADENA

This analysis utilizes two primary data sources. The first is the Cal Fire Damage Inspection (DINS) database, which provides field damage inspection data, including geolocated points for destroyed structures within the Eaton fire perimeter. As of January 21, 2025, the dataset includes preliminary assessments of damages to structures, with ongoing updates that may result in changes to the reported figures. A total of 15,129 structures were assessed in the Eaton fire perimeter in Altadena.

The second data source is the 2020 Decennial Census, which offers block-level data for Altadena. This dataset includes information on total households and households categorized by race and ethnicity (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Non-Latino White, and other groups).

To estimate the number of destroyed housing units and households by race, we applied a multi-step process combining spatial and statistical analysis.

First, each destroyed home identified in the Cal Fire dataset was assigned to a specific census block through a spatial join. This process utilized the latitude and longitude of each destroyed structure to match it to the corresponding block polygon derived from Census TIGER/Line shapefiles. The Cal Fire database includes structure types (e.g., single-family residence, multi-family residence, commercial) and categorizes damages by percentage into the following categories:

- Destroyed (>50%)
- Major (26-50%)
- Minor (10-25%)
- Affected (1-9%)
- Inaccessible
- No Damage

For this analysis, we focused exclusively on residential structures (both single-family and multi-family residences) that were either destroyed (>50%) or classified as majorly damaged (26-50%). The total number of such residential structures was aggregated at the block level, providing a count of destroyed and majorly damaged homes for each block.

Next, the aggregated block-level data on destroyed homes was merged with 2020 Census data, which includes total households, Black households, and non-Black households. For each block, the percentage of Black households and non-Black households was calculated. These percentages were then used to estimate the number of destroyed homes by multiplying the respective percentages by the total number of destroyed residential structures in each block.

The estimated numbers of destroyed homes were subsequently summed across all blocks within the Eaton fire perimeter in Altadena. These totals were then merged with data for all of Altadena, which includes information on total, Black, and non-Black households. This enabled a broader comparison of destroyed homes to the total number of homes in Altadena. To assess the overall impact on Altadena, we estimated the proportion of destroyed and damaged homes for total, Black, and non-Black households by assuming that the impacted homes are proportionate to the racial distribution in the decennial census.

Notes on Interpretation

These estimates represent a preliminary assessment based on the probabilistic assignment described above. This is a first-order approximation and does not adjust for the number of housing units in multi-family structures. These calculations assume a uniform distribution of racial/ethnic composition within each block, which may not capture intra-block variations. As field inspections continue, the reported data on destroyed structures may be updated, potentially impacting the results. Future research is needed to refine these methods and produce more precise statistics.

UCLA **Ralph J. Bunche Center**
for African American Studies

UCLA **Center for Neighborhood Knowledge**

UCLA **Latino Policy & Politics Institute**