

# Research in Brief



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## Perceptions of Disaster-Borne Inequality by Social Class and Their Implications for Policy<sup>1)</sup>

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If an official disaster response is unaccompanied by policy measures to promote equity between social groups, the social inequalities that arise during the disaster may get worse after it is over. A survey of the perceptions of different social groups about disaster inequality found that people from lower social groups are more vulnerable to disasters and that the government's disaster recovery support does not suffice for mitigating the vulnerabilities individuals have to disasters. The wide variation that emerged across different social groups in perceptions of disaster-borne inequalities may be attributed to how disasters can compound existing structural inequalities. This suggests the need for targeted assistance measures aimed at helping different social groups strengthen their resilience to disasters.

### Introduction

The factors of disaster-borne inequality in Korea intersect, after all, with various socioeconomic conditions, including income, education, and employment, all of which, distributed unequally across different social groups, tend to become more unequal over the course of a disaster. If a disaster response effort does not include policy measures to promote equity between social

1) This brief is an amended version of an extract from *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society* (2022), a policy report authored by Dongjin Kim *et al.*

groups, inequalities may deepen in various risks and disaster outcomes even in the course of recovery from the disaster, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Now that infectious diseases such as COVID-19 and other disasters are occurring simultaneously, it is high time to place a top priority on the protection of vulnerable populations and work hard to prevent socioeconomic polarization.

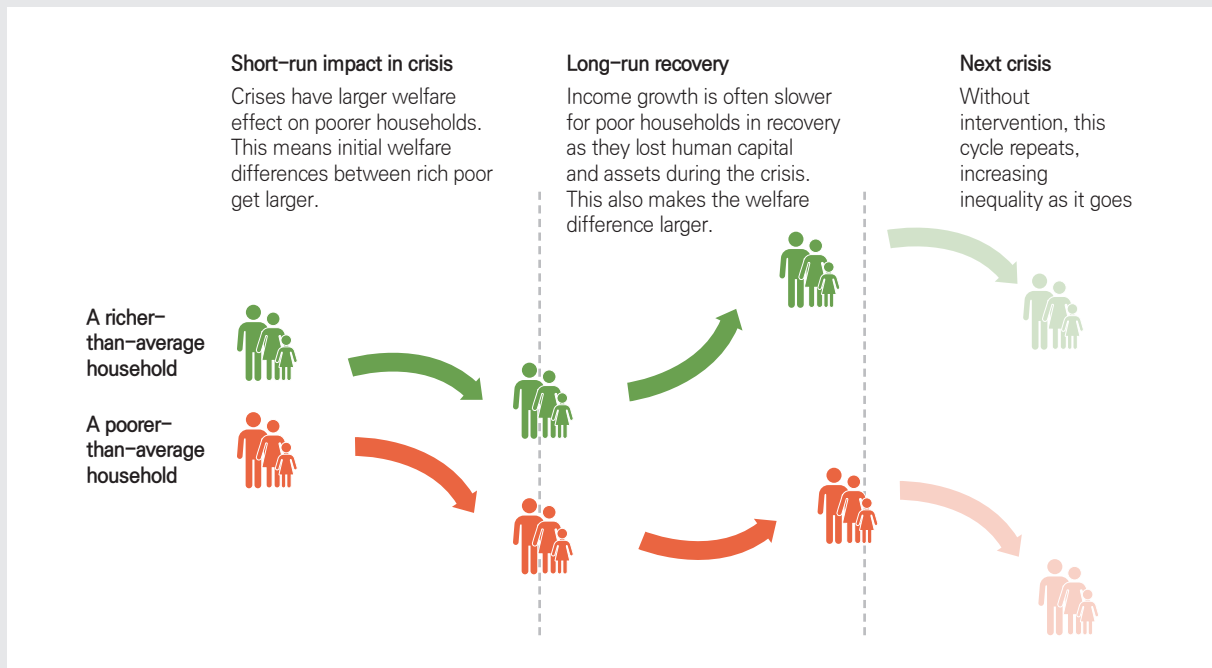
Inequality can be captured in terms of objective data, such as those concerning material factors. However, how inequality is perceived subjectively is just as important a feature of society as inequality as measured in quantitative terms. As disaster-related inequalities can arise not only depending on the number of disasters experienced but also at all stages of a disaster, from response to recovery and post-disaster management, it is necessary to identify how inequalities come about at each such stage and develop appropriate interventions accordingly.

This brief discusses the findings of a survey that asked people of different social classes about their perceptions of disaster inequality<sup>2)</sup> and presents suggestions for policy responses. The present discussion in the main addresses and is guided by the following questions: (1) Do disaster experience and disaster resilience vary across different social classes? (2) Do different social classes have different experiences of inequality with respect to disaster? (3) Do people of different social classes have varying degrees of confidence that they and their families will be protected in the event of a disaster? (4) Do people of different social classes have different perceptions about inequalities in disaster response and disaster recovery? The first two concern respondents' actual experiences. As to the other two, respondents were asked to read a real-world disaster scenario they were given and give responses to the survey items concerned.

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2) John Mutter, in his book *The Disaster Profiteers*, has claimed that the "most important of all is to recognize that disasters are economic and political in nature as much as, perhaps more than, they are natural events," implying that a disaster, upon following a brief span of time during which it unfolds, becomes more of a social phenomenon as inequalities play out across different social classes in the course of recovery.

[Figure 1] Inequality and crises: a vicious cycle



Source: Hill, R. V., & Narayan, A. (2020). Covid-19 and Inequality: A review of the evidence on likely impact and policy options. Centre for Disaster Protection working paper 3

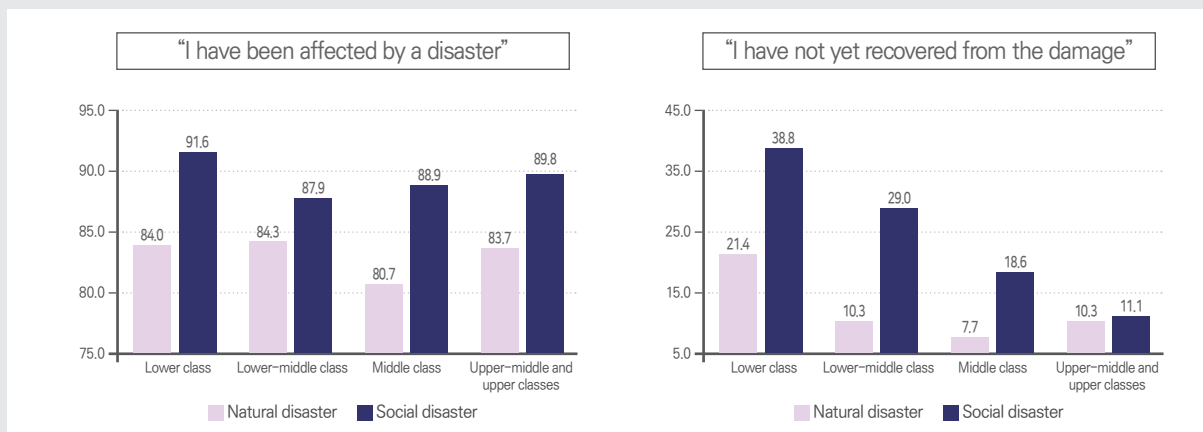
## Experiences and perceptions of disaster-borne inequalities by social class<sup>3)4)</sup>

The risk of exposure to disasters varied across social classes, with those in lower social classes often hit harder and recovering more slowly. Among those who had experienced a disaster, there was little difference between social classes in the proportion of those who reported having suffered damage from the disaster. However, there were differences in the extent to which people recovered from the disaster, with the lower the social class, the slower the recovery. The proportion of those who reported having not yet fully recovered from disaster damage was higher in the lower social class than in the upper-middle and upper social classes, by a factor of 2.1 for natural disasters and 3.5 for social disasters.

3) *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society* (2022), a research report of which the present brief is a part, is based on the "Disaster Inequality Perception Survey", conducted online from May 4 to May 12, 2022, with a total of 1,837 individuals aged 19-74 living across the country. The survey used sampling weights based on the March 2022 Resident Registration Census data to ensure that the respondents are representative of the population in terms of area of residence, sex, and age.

4) Social class, one's relative position in society, can be distinguished in objective terms or based on one's subjective perception of one's class. For this study, respondents were asked to select from four given classes one that they perceived themselves as belonging to. The lower class was picked by 11.2 percent of the respondents, the lower-middle class by 38.9 percent, the middle class by 41.4 percent, and the highest of the given income categories, which lumped the upper-middle and upper classes, by 9.0 percent.

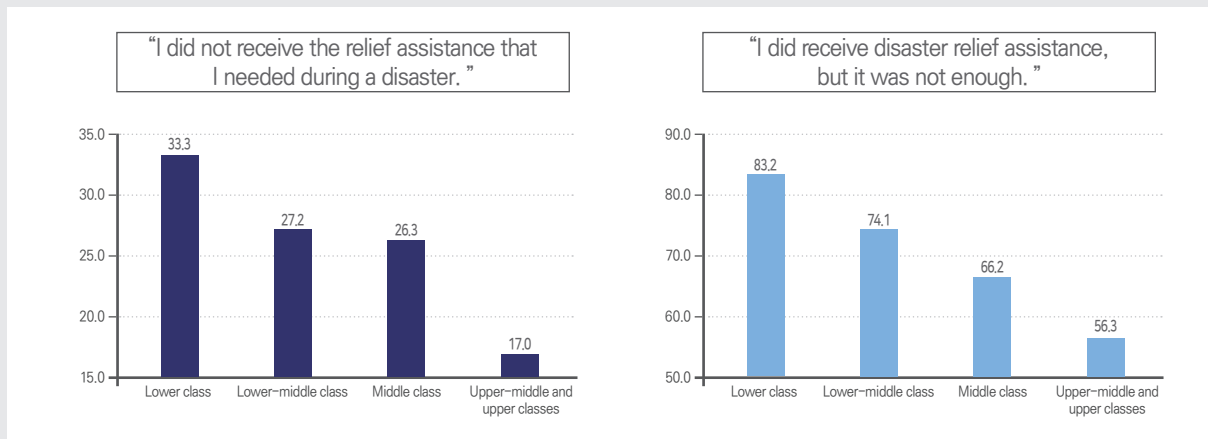
[Figure 2] Differences in disaster experiences and disaster resilience across social classes



Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society*. (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

The survey found that the government’s assistance was not sufficient to enable those disaster-affected to bounce back in time to their pre-disaster living conditions. A large proportion of those from the lower social class said they had not received the financial assistance they needed to recover from the damage inflicted on them by a disaster. People from the lower social class were twice as likely as those from the upper-middle and upper classes to report not receiving the government assistance they needed during a disaster. Also, among those who had received assistance, the proportion of those who reported not receiving enough was 1.5 times higher in the lower social class than in the upper-middle and upper classes. Such a situation creates something of a double whammy for socially disadvantaged groups, aggravating, in turn, disaster-borne inequalities. Currently, support from the government is in place to assist people in their recovery from disaster damage. Such support comes in both direct and indirect forms: disaster assistance grants, livelihood support, disaster relief payments, favorable tax treatment, psychological support, and temporary housing support. However, it can be assumed that, under these support programs, delivered based on near-universal eligibility criteria without considering the specific characteristics and needs of different social classes, some of those vulnerable to disasters might have been left unaided or received not enough support if they fell outside the scope of eligibility.

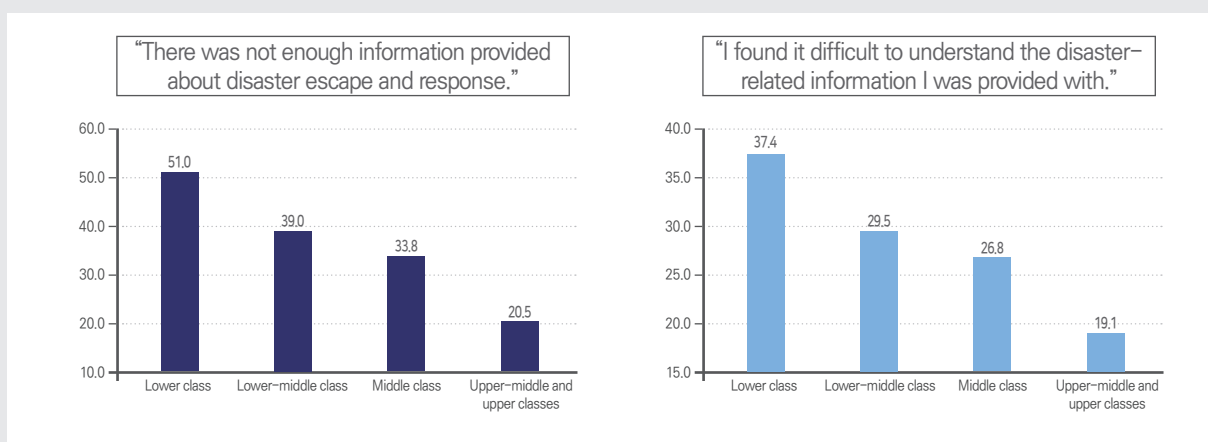
[Figure 3] Perceived level of support given by the government during a disaster



Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society.* (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

Many people from socioeconomically disadvantaged groups reported having insufficient access to and understanding of information about how to prepare for and respond to disasters and how to get relief assistance in case of a disaster—a resource essential to minimizing the impact of a disaster and keeping themselves safe and healthy. Compared to respondents from the upper-middle and upper classes, those from the lower social class were 2.5 times more likely to report not having enough access to disaster-related information and twice as likely to say they did not comprehend enough of the information they were provided with.

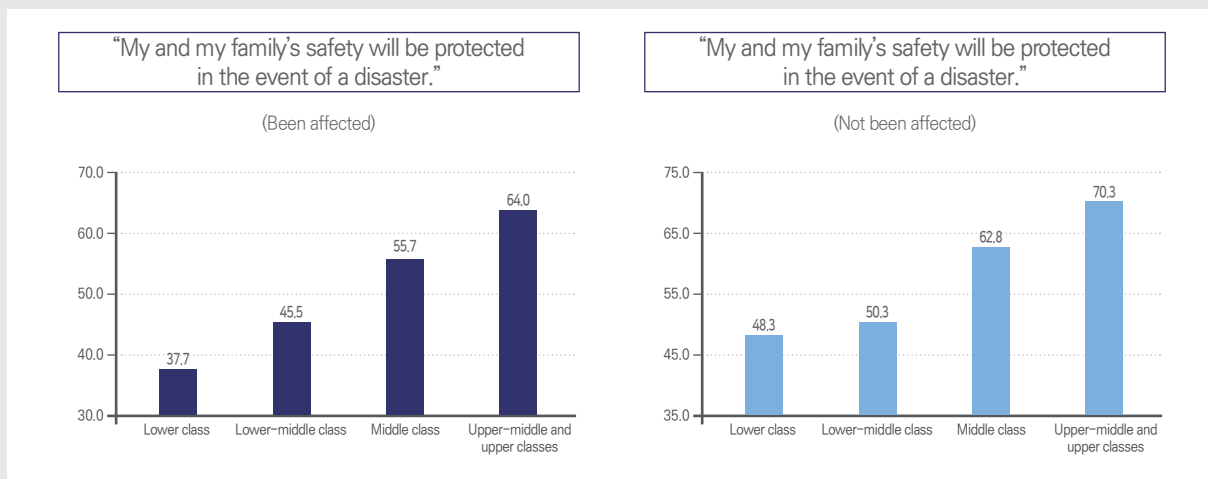
[Figure 4] Perceptions of disaster-related information across social classes



Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society.* (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

The responses given to the statement “My and my family’s safety will be protected in the event of a disaster” exhibited gradational differences between the social classes. These answers also varied depending on whether or not the participants had experienced a disaster. Compared to respondents from the upper-middle and upper classes, those from the lower social class were less likely to agree with the statement, by 26.3 percentage points for those who had experienced a disaster and by 22.0 percentage points for those who had not. Also, the question of how effective current disaster management is should be put into consideration, as the survey found that perceived confidence in safety protection was less prevalent among those who had experienced disasters than among those who had not.

[Figure 5] Confidence in safety protection in case of disaster



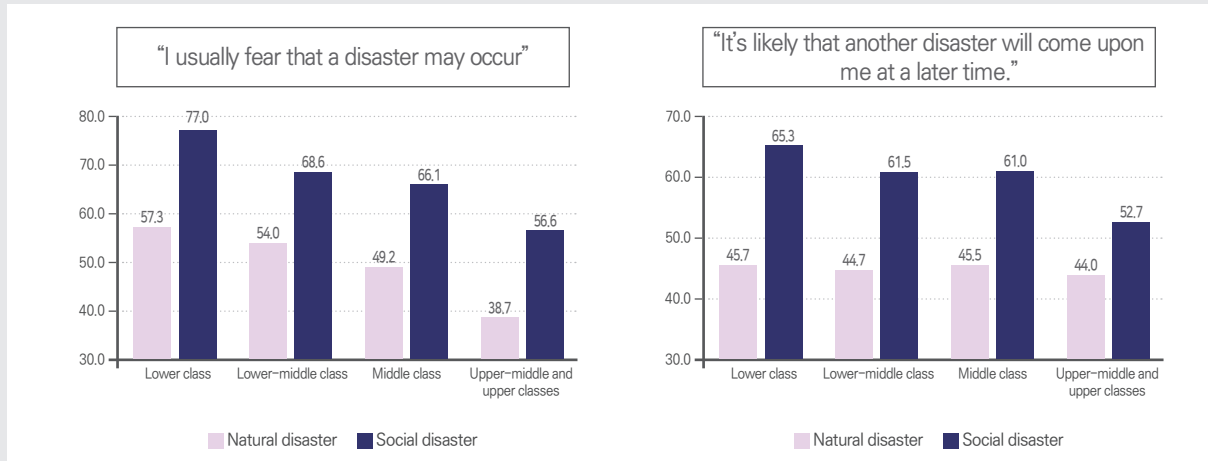
Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society.* (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

The prevalence of fear of disaster varied across social classes, as was the case with perceptions of disaster recovery, the adequacy of government support, and the assurance of safety. The lower the social class of respondents, the more likely they were to have fear of disasters and fear that they would happen to them again, an outcome likely resulting from a lack of personal resources and government support needed for people of lower social classes to respond to and recover from a disaster.

Fear of social disasters was more prevalent than fear of natural disasters. Moreover, the prevalence of fear of social disaster varied more widely across social classes. The result that respondents were more sensitive to social disasters could be interpreted as proceeding in a sense from the tragic incidents that occurred successively in recent years and have become enduring

social issues, such as the sinking of the Sewol Ferry, the disasters in Itaewon, and some major industrial accidents.

[Figure 6] Fear of disaster across social classes



Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society*. (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

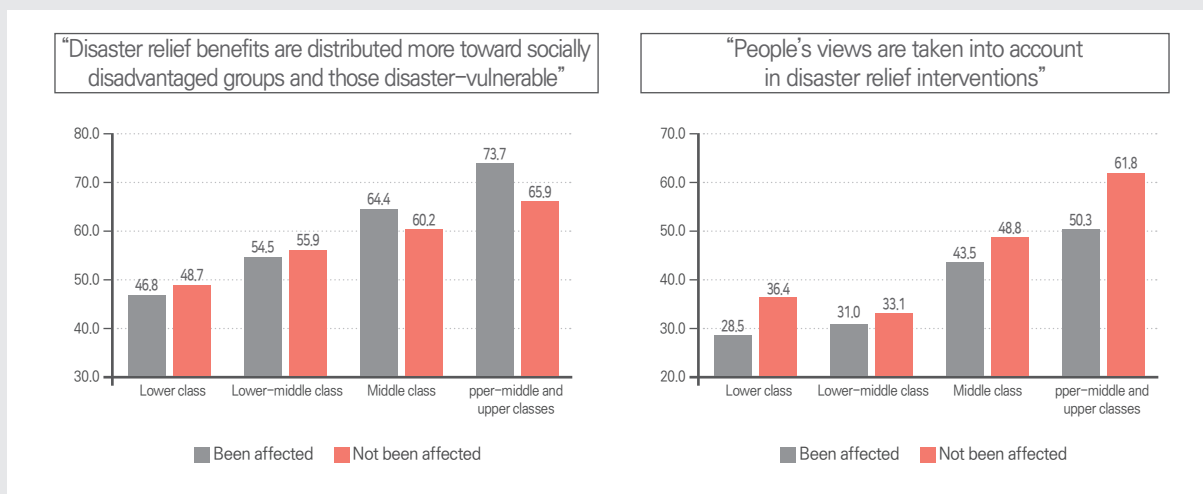
Respondents' perceptions of exclusion and deprivation over the course of recovery from disasters varied across social classes. The expectation that disaster-vulnerable and socially vulnerable groups would receive more resources than the general population varied across social classes. People of higher social classes were more likely to hold that recovery resources would be distributed in proportion to the level of disaster vulnerability.

Perceptions of equity in the distribution of recovery resources varied across social classes. The variation was more pronounced among respondents who had experienced a disaster than among those who had not. People from higher social classes typically held that those from lower social classes would receive more disaster relief assistance, whereas people from lower social classes did not hold this view as much. One of the requirements for raising public acceptance of disaster recovery policies is a precise understanding of how such disparities in perceptions come about across social classes.

In recent years, the notion of civic participation in disaster governance as a social response to disasters has gained increasing traction. The involvement of various stakeholders, including those affected by disasters, is crucial in the process of making decisions about and prioritizing resource distribution and delivery for disaster recovery. However, as the survey found, those highly vulnerable to disasters are less likely to have high hopes for civic engagement in post-disaster

recovery, with those who have experienced a disaster, as compared to those who have not, viewing such engagement as less likely.

[Figure 7] Perceptions of inequality in the distribution of disaster relief resources



Source: Kim, Dongjin; Jung, Youn; Kim, Soo Kyoung; Park, Na Young; Lee, Na-Gyeong; Hyun, Yoorim; Kang, Heewon; Kim, Dong Ha. *Monitoring the Status of Health Inequality in Korea and Policy Development: Health Inequality in Risk Society*. (2022), Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

## Concluding remarks

The findings of the survey suggest that the lower the social class, the higher the prevalence of perceived vulnerability to disaster and the greater the percentage of those for whom government support is felt to be insufficient. People from lower social classes took longer to recover from disasters.

Many of the respondents from the lower social class reported that they did not receive any or enough financial assistance to regain their pre-disaster living conditions. To protect socially disadvantaged groups from disaster-borne inequalities, therefore, the government will need to reinforce its disaster aid in a way that mitigates their vulnerability. To be sure, there are disaster aid programs underway that directly or indirectly benefit the recipients. However, these are mainly ex post interventions that are designed to benefit the general populace without taking into account the needs that are specific to different social groups. This points to the need for disaster aid programs that are tailored to the specific needs of different social classes and aimed at bolstering their disaster resilience by mitigating their vulnerability. Policy attention should also be paid to the finding that people of lower social classes are likely to have limited access to and understanding of information relevant to disaster response.

The survey found that fear of disaster is more prevalent in people from lower social classes. People



from lower social classes were also less likely to believe that their and their families' safety would be protected in the event of a disaster.

While it is commonly assumed when it comes to modern-day disasters that no one is exempt from being subject to uncertainty as to when, where, and whom they might befall and that that uncertainty is shared more or less equally by all members of society, the finding that fear of disaster is particularly prevalent in certain socioeconomic groups suggests that people of different social classes are affected differently by the same disaster and therefore suffer to varying extents.

As public confidence in safety assurance in a disaster situation can affect how acceptable and worthy of support disaster-related policies may seem to people, further communications efforts need to reach out to people of different social classes over the course of disaster management. Also, promoting the effectiveness and fairness of disaster management in a democratic fashion would require active pursuit of a form of disaster governance where the government and civil society work together in a mutually beneficial way.

The fact that perceptions of disaster-borne inequalities varied widely across social classes, as found in this study, is likely in consequence of disasters' being liable to add to existing socio-structural disparities and inequalities<sup>5)</sup>. This suggests the need for targeted support measures to strengthen the disaster resilience of people of varying social classes. Korea's disaster management has been shaped focused on natural disasters. However, the current situation is such that social disasters are occurring with an increasing frequency and in forms unprecedented in Korea. Disaster recovery measures should be designed with a forward-looking approach, taking into consideration the potential for social disasters to cause widespread damage and considering what might work to prevent gaps in support distribution that could otherwise arise and leave certain segments of society unaided.

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5) In his book *Risk Society* (1986), German sociologist Ulrich Beck claims that "the social reproduction of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risks." At a later point in the same book, he goes on to say that as risks are often "distributed in a stratified or class-specific way... there are broad overlapping areas between class and risk society."