

**WESTERN STATES SEISMIC POLICY COUNCIL
POLICY RECOMMENDATION 17-4**

Identification and Mitigation of Unreinforced Masonry Structures

Policy Recommendation 17-4

Unreinforced masonry bearing-wall structures represent one of the greatest life-safety threats and economic burdens to the public during damaging earthquakes. WSSPC recommends that each state, province or territory adopt a program to identify the extent of risk that unreinforced masonry structures represent in their communities and develop recommendations that will effectively address the reduction of this risk.

Executive Summary

Unreinforced masonry is recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as one of the structural building types most prone to failure during an earthquake. A review of the U.S. Geological Survey Hazards Program website listing earthquakes that generated 1,000 or more deaths since 1900 shows that unreinforced walls are a significant contributing factor in losses in both the financial sector and human lives.

WSSPC strongly believes that jurisdictions must be proactive to address this threat to their citizens. Legislatively mandated programs and/or local municipally adopted ordinances have proved effective at addressing this risk.

Background

During earthquakes, unreinforced masonry (URM) structures are vulnerable to catastrophic collapse and represent a significant life safety threat, as occurred in the 2008 Wells, Nevada earthquake. Unreinforced masonry structures are made from brick, hollow clay tile, stone, concrete block, or adobe materials that are not strengthened by the addition of steel or other reinforcement. Common building examples include older industrial complexes, schools, mercantile establishments, and private residences.

Also of concern are components of these structures such as walls, unsupported parapets, and fireplace chimneys, which can fall on sidewalk pedestrians or people trying to exit a building. The masonry usually is held together with weak mortar and is unable to resist lateral forces. Wall and roof anchorage tends to be inadequate, allowing floors and roofs to separate from the walls and collapse. Historically, this type of building damage has been a major contributing factor to loss of life in earthquakes throughout the world.

WSSPC recognizes that there is a societal cost to the inventory and retrofit or replacement of unreinforced masonry buildings, but in areas of high seismicity, failure to address this issue will have expensive and lethal consequences. In order to minimize the cost and make programs more politically acceptable, the three-stage approach of identifying the population of hazardous buildings, analyzing the risk presented by these buildings, and prioritizing the retrofitting of those buildings deemed to be a hazard is recommended.

It is recognized that resistance by owners and users of URM structures is to be expected when dealing with retroactive building ordinances. However, as can be seen by those jurisdictions that have adopted fire sprinklers retroactively, versus those that have not, even minimal remediation can yield discernible life-saving results. The International Existing Building Code Appendix Chapter 1, the American Society of Civil Engineers National Standard ASCE 41-13 “Seismic Evaluation and Retrofit of Existing Buildings” and retrofit concepts described in FEMA publications for unreinforced masonry structures are available; however, this in no way negates the need for local engineering analysis and design.