

Earthquake Hazard in the Heart of the Homeland

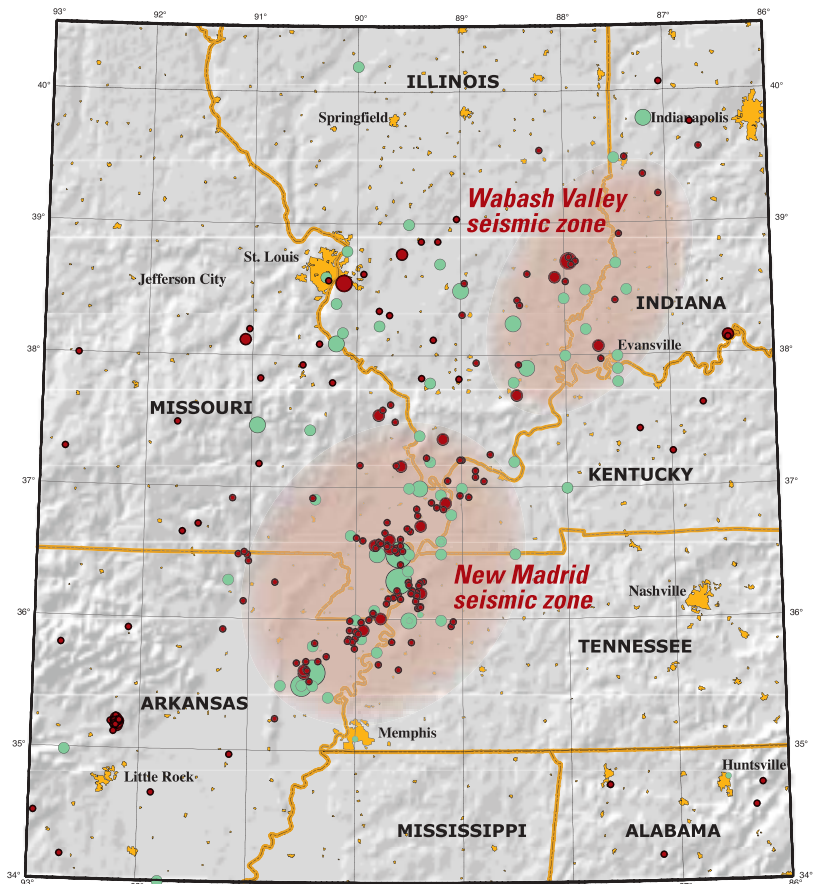
Evidence that earthquakes threaten the Mississippi, Ohio, and Wabash River valleys of the Central United States abounds. In fact, one of the largest historical earthquakes to strike the continental United States occurred in the winter of 1811–1812 along the New Madrid seismic zone, which stretches from just west of Memphis, Tennessee, into southern Illinois. Several times in the past century, moderate earthquakes have been widely felt in southern

Illinois and southwestern Indiana. Geologic evidence for prehistoric earthquakes throughout the region has been mounting since the late 1970s. But how significant is the threat? How likely are large earthquakes and, more importantly, what is the chance that the shaking they cause will be damaging?

Like many natural phenomena, how an earthquake affects people depends on many factors. Studying earthquakes is especially challenging because they happen infrequently and without

any advanced warning. Also, the processes that cause earthquakes work over many thousands of years and deep beneath the Earth's surface. Nonetheless, research during the last 15 years has led to new understanding, particularly with respect to earthquakes in the New Madrid seismic zone. Not surprisingly, as the understanding of earthquakes evolves, so do the estimates of the hazard that they pose.

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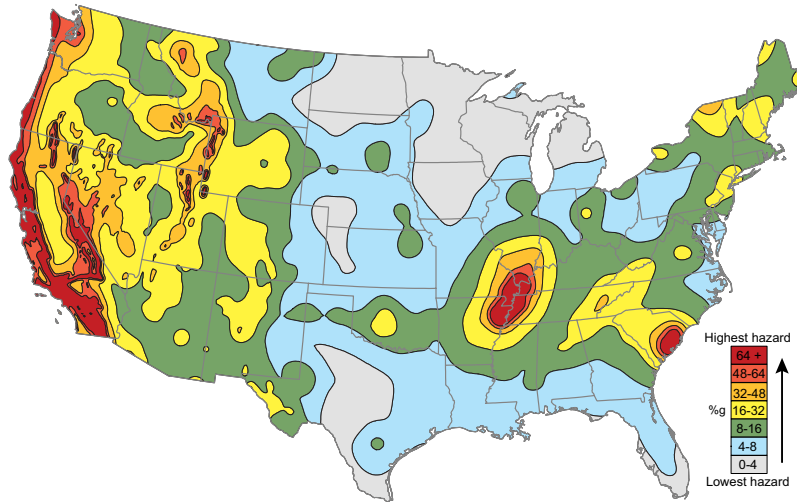
This map of the New Madrid and Wabash Valley seismic zones shows earthquakes as circles. Red circles indicate earthquakes that occurred from 1974 to 2002 with magnitudes larger than 2.5 located using modern instruments (University of Memphis). Green circles denote earthquakes that occurred prior to 1974 (USGS Professional Paper 1527). Larger earthquakes are represented by larger circles.

Estimating earthquake hazards

Earthquake hazard refers to the consequences of an earthquake that may disrupt the normal activities of people or cause them loss. Most hazard arises from ground shaking caused by waves that emanate from the abrupt fault movement during an earthquake. Seismic hazard maps depict the ground shaking that is expected to be exceeded at a selected probability (or chance) over a specific time period. Estimates of this “probabilistic” ground shaking, or hazard, at any given location must account for many factors including the possible shaking from all likely earthquakes and the types of rocks and soil in the region.

The USGS produces earthquake (seismic) hazard maps on a national scale. Hazard maps are also now produced in select urban areas. At either scale there are a

The U.S. Geological Survey shaking-hazard maps for the United States are based on current information about the rate at which earthquakes occur in different areas and on how far strong shaking extends from earthquake sources. Colors on this particular map show the levels of horizontal shaking that have a 1-in-50 chance of being exceeded in a 50-year period. Shaking is expressed as a percentage of g (g is the acceleration of a falling object due to gravity).



suite of maps for different probabilities and time periods; the choice of which to use depends upon the needs of the user. Builders of a dam, for instance, might want to consider longer periods of time and lower likelihood that shaking will be exceeded than a home builder. This is because a dam is built to have a longer life, and damage to it would have a greater impact on society. The bridge designer would thus use a hazard map with, say, a 2-percent chance of a given

level of shaking being exceeded in 50 years, while a home builder is more likely to use a map with a 10-percent chance of being exceeded in 50 years.

Earthquake hazards in the Central United States

One of the most prominent features on the national seismic hazard maps is a zone of high hazard surrounding the New Madrid region in the Central United States. The hazard in this region is as high as for places in California, despite a lower level of modern-day earthquake activity. Scientists have designated this as a high hazard region based on studies of buried sand blow deposits within the Mississippi River Valley. Sand blow deposits are believed to be the byproduct of strong ground shaking associated with large earthquakes (see box “Digging up the past”). These deposits have been

dated at about A.D. 900 and A.D. 1450 and suggest that major earthquakes (magnitude 7 or greater) reoccur in the region approximately every 500 years, with the last sequence being in 1811-1812.

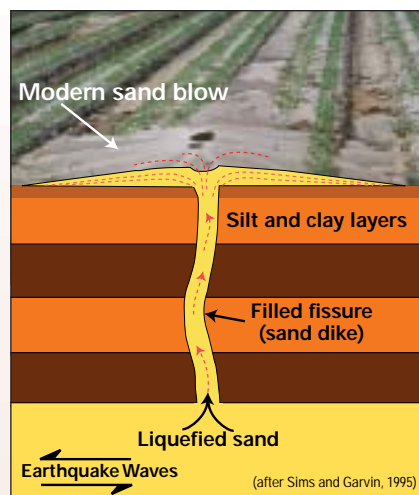
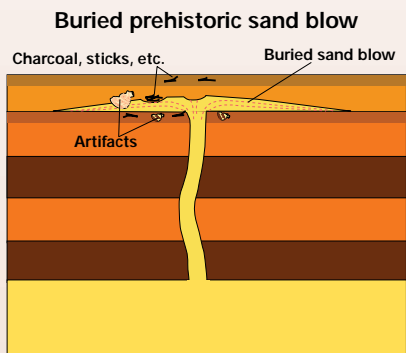
A five hundred-year interval between magnitude 7 or greater

earthquakes is much more frequent than expected, given the current level of earthquake activity in the New Madrid region. Elsewhere scientists use the frequency of small and moderate earthquakes to estimate the likelihood of larger events, but in the New Madrid region, this rule of thumb does not appear to apply. As anyone who lives in the New Madrid region would testify, earthquakes are felt in the New Madrid region much less frequently than in California, despite the similar

Digging up the past

To figure out the earthquake hazard of an area, scientists need to know how often the largest earthquakes occur. Unfortunately (from a scientific perspective), the time between major earthquakes is much longer than the time period for which we have modern instrumental measurements or even historical accounts of earthquakes. Fortunately, scientists have found a sufficiently long record of past earthquakes that is preserved in the rock and soil beneath our feet. The unraveling of this record is the realm of a field called “paleoseismology.” In the Central United States, abundant sand blows are studied by paleoseismologists. These patches of sand erupt onto the ground when waves from a large earthquake pass through wet, loose sand. The water pressure increases, forcing the sand grains

apart until the sand starts to behave like a liquid (“liquefies”), and a slurry of sand and water is forced to the ground surface. If the age of material buried by the erupted sand can be determined (such as Native American artifacts or plant remains), then we know the earthquake must have occurred after this date. If the sand blow is itself buried by something that can be dated, then we know the earthquake happened before this date. We now know that series of large earthquakes, similar in size and location to those in 1811–1812, have occurred twice in the past 1,200 years, once between A.D. 800 and 1000, and again between A.D. 1300 and 1600, or about one every 500 years.



level of hazard. Additionally, the large earthquakes in the New Madrid region seem to happen much more frequently than predicted from extremely accurate satellite-based measurements of ground deformation. These measurements show that the Earth’s crust is being deformed, or strained, extremely slowly, if at all. This is in contrast to California, where the rate of major earthquakes is predictable based on measured deformation.

Far from a plate boundary

Why does the Central United States have more large earthquakes than expected? Why is it so different from California? The answers to these questions are still unknown, but scientists now question whether there might be fundamental differences between the geologic processes at, and away from, plate boundaries. The New Madrid region is far away from any

tectonic plate boundary, and thus applying what has been learned from studies of places like the San Andreas system in California to the New Madrid region may not be appropriate.



On this shaded topographic relief map, the New Madrid seismic zone is shown by a star, and the boundaries of the North American and surrounding plates are indicated by red lines. Mountainous regions tend to occur near plate boundaries, resulting from the motions between plates. The nearest plate boundary to the New Madrid seismic zone is many thousands of kilometers away.

How likely is a New Madrid earthquake?

In much the same way as meteorologists forecast rain, earth scientists present forecasts of earthquakes as the chance or “probability” of an earthquake occurring in a specific time interval. Although we are still learning why the New Madrid region experiences large earthquakes, research during the last 15 years in the Central United States has led to new discoveries that, not surprisingly, have led to new estimates of the likelihood of damaging earthquakes. It is generally accepted that earthquakes can be expected in the future as frequently as in the recent past. We determine how often earthquakes reoccur from historical and geological studies (see box “Digging up the past”). Using these data, which were also used to produce the National Seismic Hazard Maps, the USGS and the Center for Earthquake Research and Information of the University of Memphis now estimate that for a 50-year time period:

Probability of a repeat of the 1811–1812 earthquakes (magnitude 7.5–8.0) = 7–10%

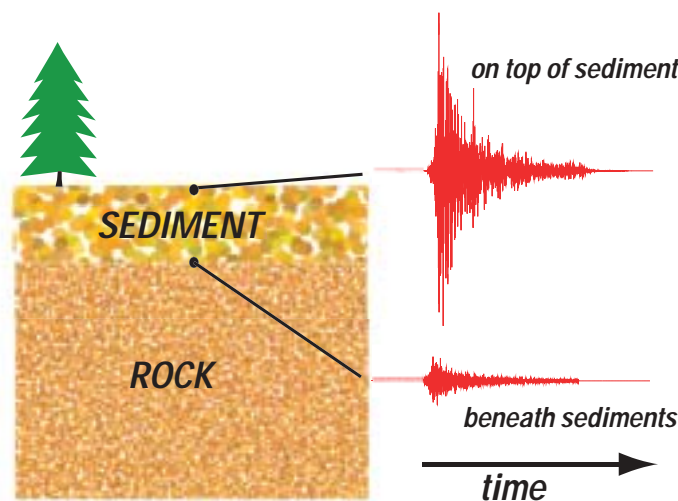
Probability of a magnitude 6.0 or larger = 25–40%

Earthquakes in the approximate range of magnitude 7.5 to 8.0 are capable of causing widespread damage over a large region. Magnitude 6.0 earthquakes can cause serious damage in areas close to the earthquake’s location. It is important to remember that earthquake damage mostly results from the shaking associated with the waves emitted by the earthquake. The probability of damaging shaking, or hazard, depends on much more than earthquake size. These other factors, such as where the earthquakes occur and local soil conditions, must also be considered when assessing the hazard posed by earthquakes.

Factors controlling ground shaking

In addition to earthquake recurrence, hazard also depends on how amplitudes of earthquake waves die out as they move away from the earthquake source to the affected site. It is well known that wave energy decreases much more slowly in the Central and Eastern United States than in the West. For the same size earthquake, this leads to greater shaking over larger areas, or higher hazard, in the Central and Eastern United States. Earthquake shaking also may be significantly amplified or damped by the soils immediately beneath a site. This is particularly true for thick sediments that underlie most of the New Madrid seismic zone. Recent research has highlighted the potential amplification of ground shaking by these thick sediments and has begun to shed light on the physical processes that cause this. Because characterization of this amplification

requires detailed mapping of the soils and their properties, amplification characteristics are not included in the National Seismic Hazard Maps. Efforts are underway, however, to produce complementary maps that do show these amplification characteristics on scales appropriate for use in urban planning, earthquake hazard mitigation, and response planning efforts.



When waves of a small earthquake impinge on the boundary between hard rock and overlying sediments from below (lower seismogram), they become amplified as they travel through the sediments to the surface (upper seismogram). A seismogram records the wave motion over time. The amplifying effects of thick sediments above the New Madrid seismic zone results in motions at the surface that are many times larger than below. (Courtesy of C. Langston, The University of Memphis.)

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