Reconsidering the New Normal: Vulnerability and Resilience in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Reconsidering the New Normal: Recovery and Resilience in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Introduction

In recent years, researchers have used the phrase "new normal" to describe the shift from dysfunction or distress to stability and security following a major disaster. Post-trauma functioning may not be the qualitative equivalent of pre-trauma functioning when there is a need to adapt to an altered environment. For ecologists and social scientists, "new normal" characterizes the period following disasters as a phase of relative stability and routine that replaces confusion, chaos, and turbulence. Ecological and social services exhibit a pattern of (1) relative stability, (2) sudden trauma, (3) complex and chaotic tumult, and (4) relative stabilization, with the last of these stages usually settling at levels deviating from pre-trauma conditions. For human communities, the phrase "new normal" reflects the perception that while many aspects of residents' lives differ substantially from pre-trauma circumstances, their day-to-day endeavors have generally stabilized and suffer less of the perceived and actual uncertainty, disruption, threat, and unpredictability that prevailed during the initial emergency phase. While socio-economic and cultural services (ranging from population return rates, adequate housing, governmental and commercial operations, employment and finances, environmental health concerns, and cultural functions) may indeed have stabilized, they rarely if ever replicate pre-trauma conditions. In other words, circumstances have evolved into a "new normal"!

Our research project investigates the processes and patterns of post-trauma urban response and development since the Hurricane Katrina disaster of August 2005. The last five years

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of neighborhood rebuilding and identify current vulnerabilities and problems affecting the pace and trajectory of recovery. We first provide a short description of our methods and data sources followed by a presentation of findings. We then analyze population and demographic trends in the three neighborhoods. The perspectives and findings of our analyses are based on a recently funded National Science Foundation (NSF) Urban Long-Term Research Area (ULTRA) Project in New Orleans. As one of 16 awards, the New Orleans ULTRA project investigates the impact of the trauma of Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing levee breaches and flooding (August-September 2005) on the urban ecological and social systems of Greater New Orleans. The research project uses ecological and social measures to track and characterize the transition from trauma to stabilization. For this paper, we use three fine-grained studies in the neighborhoods to identify variation in the timing, pace, and trajectory of post-disaster neighborhood redevelopment.

Methods and Data Sources

In this study, we will use a mixed methods research design involving (1) an analysis of census data to examine post-Katrina repopulation rates within the city of New Orleans; (2) ethnographic field observations in the Lower Ninth Ward, Hollygrove, and Pontchartrain Park neighborhoods (see Map 1). All three neighborhoods exhibit similar (but not identical) ecological and social conditions, and all three suffered serious (although unequal) levels of trauma during Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing deluge. Each of these neighborhoods is majority African American but they differ systematically in their levels of diversity pertaining to housing type, socio-economic status, land use, urban design, developmental era, topography, and hurricane and flood damage. We select these neighborhoods for study because (1) they have rich cultural and historical importance in New Orleans; (2) we have accessible data, local contacts, and networks of researchers already involved in the areas under study; (3) they reflect our theoretical considerations in identifying and explaining neighborhood differences in the pace and trajectory of recovery. Thus, we rely on theoretical sampling (i.e., cases are chosen for theoretical, not statistical reasons).5


New Orleans neighborhoods are well known for their rich history, long-standing cultural authenticity, and strong family and network connections. Pontchartrain Park is often referred to as the first middle-class African-American housing subdivision in New Orleans. Located in the Gentilly area of the city, Pontchartrain Park was established during the 1950s for a small but growing post-World War II Black middle class that faced a rigid system of Jim Crow segregation. The Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood is a historically working class area that has witnessed much demographic transition over the decades. The fight over school integration in the early 1960s triggered a massodus of whites to neighboring St. Bernard Parish. Hurricane Betsy flooded 80% of the neighborhood in 1965, leading to further out-migration by whites and wealthier African-Americans. By 2000, the neighborhood was nearly 95 percent African-American, with poverty rates reaching nearly a third of the total population of around 20,000. Like Pontchartrain Park and the Lower Ninth Ward, the major residential development of Hollygrove took place during the Post-World War II period. Over time, Hollygrove became a predominantly African-American neighborhood. By 2000, the neighborhood was 95 percent African-American with almost 28 percent of its 7222 residents living in poverty.
Since Fall 2009, faculty and graduate students from three universities in New Orleans have been involved in long-term field observations of daily life in the three neighborhoods. Our basic task has been to acquire an appreciation for the nature of life in each neighborhood and examine ways in which residents manage post-Katrina life both experientially and cognitively. Field researchers have spent time with residents in varied settings (at their home, at neighborhood coalition meetings, in surrounding neighborhood stores) and listened and recorded resident opinions about the status of the recovery and rebuilding process. One reason for collecting ethnographic data is to provide a degree of nuance and specificity to uncover how associations observed in the demographic (census) data manifest themselves in residents’ daily lives. A second reason is to provide additional, in-depth information to triangulate methods and data sources to enhance validity and reliability. A final reason is to grasp and understand local residents’ experiences with post-trauma redevelopment, individually and collectively, and identify the mechanisms that influence different rates of neighborhood recovery.

**Results**

Our results section aims to describe relevant patterns of recovery and repopulation and explain variation in the timing, pace, and trajectory of post-disaster neighborhood redevelopment. Table 1 provides an overview of population recovery estimates and related demographic data for our study neighborhoods. We include census 2000 data on median household income, population, ethnic and racial population, and percent nonwhite. We also include post-Katrina recovery data from 2008-2010 showing households receiving mail in various months. The table also lists numbers and percentages of households returning based on mail and information from the Road Home program which provides compensation to Louisiana homeowners affected by Hurricanes Katrina or Rita for the damage to their homes. The Road Home program distributes rebuilding grants to three types of homeowners: Homeowners who want to stay in their homes (referred to as “Option 1: Stay”); homeowners who want to sell the home they occupied as of the date of the storms to the state, but remain homeowners in Louisiana (referred to as “Option 2: Relocate”); and homeowners who want to sell the home they occupied as of the date of the storms to the state, and either move out of the state or remain in the state but as a renter (referred to as “Option 3: Sell”).

**Pontchartrain Park**

At the time of Hurricane Katrina, there was a stark contrast between the neighborhood characteristics of Pontchartrain Park and many of the city’s majority black neighborhoods. For example, many of the majority black neighborhoods were part of extreme poverty tracts, or tracts where at least 40% of the population lived below the poverty line. Over the years, the poverty rate in the neighborhood remained fairly low (the poverty rate never exceeded 12%). Various amenities such as tennis courts, a small baseball stadium and a golf course also set the neighborhood apart from other black neighborhoods in the city. The neighborhood also had a reputation for its civically engaged residents and a high percentage of homeowners; as of the 2000 Census, 92% of the residents in Pontchartrain Park owned their homes.

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Five years after Katrina, Pontchartrain Park suffers from an uneven recovery characterized by blocks of blight among restored homes and limited access to grocery stores and shopping malls. As of June 2009, only 62 percent of the residents in the neighborhood known for its high rate of homeownership had returned (see table #1). Our ethnographic field observations suggest that the slow return and uneven recovery can be linked to the enduring legacy of residential segregation. The first generation of Pontchartrain Park residents were part of a small Black middle class during the 1950s and 1960s that were able to purchase homes, though in an explicitly segregated neighborhood. Because of rampant discrimination, the chance for economic prosperity and upward mobility for the black middle class during the 1950s and 1960s was limited. By 2005, this group was even more vulnerable because of their age. In 1960, shortly after the neighborhood opened, only 2.1 percent of the neighborhood was sixty-five years and older. Before Katrina, thirty percent of the adults in the neighborhood were 65 or older.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the legacy of residential segregation has come with a heavy financial cost for those who applied for assistance from the Louisiana Road Home Program. Through the Road Home program, eligible homeowners qualified for up to 150,000 dollars in compensation. The final award amount was based on the pre-storm value of the house times the percent of damage, less any insurance payments and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grants. Majority black neighborhoods like Pontchartrain Park received lower Road Home grant amounts because the agency used pre-storm values to determine grant amounts. A home located in a primarily black neighborhood is generally worth less than one of the same age, with the same living space and yard space, and with the same type of construction but located in a mostly white neighborhood. As a result, residents in majority black neighborhoods like Pontchartrain Park have received less financial assistance to rebuild their homes. By 2008, most of the Road Home grants awarded to Pontchartrain Park homeowners were between $40,000 and $65,000, whereas white middle-class neighborhoods like Lakeview received a higher concentration of grants ranging between $115,000 and $150,000. This disparity in grant amounts between Pontchartrain Park, a black middle-class neighborhood, and Lakeview, a white middle-class neighborhood,

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6 Ibid
neighbhoods (see table 1). Areas north of St. Claude Avenue had a lower return rate (24%) than the higher and slightly more affluent Holy Cross neighborhood (55%). Extensive demolitions north of St. Claude Avenue have cleared hundreds of lots, while other homes remain empty and neglected since the flood.

Like Pontchartrain Park, the scale-crossing networks built by neighborhood associations and non-profits have been integral to the recovery process. Hundreds of non-profit organizations have been active in the neighborhood since 2005. Neighborhood-based groups include A Community Voice (formerly ACORN), Lower Ninth Ward NENA, All Congregations Together, Common Ground, Lowermine.org and the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (HCNA), to name only a few. University groups, churches, formal non-profits, and others have mobilized thousands of volunteers from across the country to gut and/or renovate damaged homes. HCNA represents one of the only formal neighborhood associations in all of Lower Nine.

The work of the HCNA demonstrates the importance of social networks that not only bond communities together, but networks that cross the boundaries of race, class, and geography. These relationships help connect residents and local groups with funding opportunities and other forms of social capital. Dozens of environmental non-profits and sustainability advocates have partnered with HCNA, most notably Global Green USA and the Make it Right Foundation. The Make It Right Foundation’s project in the neighborhood was initiated in 2007, with the actor Brad Pitt as the organization’s founder and spokesperson. The most ambitious non-governmental residential housing project in the city, Make it Right hopes to complete 150 new homes and provide preferential financing to former residents. Make It Right’s director has specifically cited the work of HCNA and its partner organizations as the local anchor of their project.  

Hollygrove

The collapse of the Army Corps of Engineers’ levee system during Hurricane Katrina resulted in complete flooding of Hollygrove – by only a few feet in some places and more than 10 feet in other places. The catastrophe effectively ended the previously active
and external organizations. Significant ongoing projects include the AARP Hollygrove Livable Community Project and the Tulane Hollygrove Greenline Project. The Livable Community Project promotes safe growth and aims to help places build their own capacities, such as building a community garden, forming a neighborhood watch association, or establishing a walking club. The project ensures that residents are the principal stakeholders and empowers residents to work together on projects that benefit their neighborhood. AARP is also working with residents to create crime watch teams and crime awareness programs. Tulane’s Greenline Project complements AARP’s project through planning efforts, use of student volunteers, and grassroots organizing to improve Hollygrove’s physical landscape.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright}

Carrollton-Hollygrove CDC and HGN are two formal neighborhood organizations actively involved with residents in rebuilding their neighborhood. Carrollton-Hollygrove CDC, like other CDCs, is involved in developing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income households, and promotes neighborhood revitalization and recovery. HGN is involved in community organizing, information sharing among residents and various community organizations, and developing opportunities for residents to connect with each other around recovery and rebuilding issues. Hollygrove is one of the poorer neighborhoods in the city and received less publicity after Hurricane Katrina. Nevertheless, its population return rate is greater than the Lower Ninth Ward and Pontchartrain Park return rates. Table 1 shows a 73 percent return rate for Hollygrove – the highest of the three urban neighborhoods we have studied. Our research suggests that one reason for this high return rate is the intensity of neighborhood activism and collaborative efforts by community organizations. Neighborhood organizations and associations are vehicles for distributing resources, creating links with local and extra-local institutions, and forging collective identity.

Conclusion

Post-Katrina New Orleans confronts us as a city of irony, paradox, and contradiction. On the one hand, New Orleans is one of the most “place-intensive” cities in the United States given


region’s rich cultural heritage, deep family and ethnic connections, longstanding and well-organized neighborhood coalitions, and diversity of ties with extra-local organizations (historic preservation societies, nonprofit organizations, and so on). On the other hand, the city and region have experienced major long-term social problems and challenges in the form of deindustrialization, persistent racial animosity and conflict, weak and corrupt local governments, and eroding economic fortunes due to the decline of the oil and port industries and the increased reliance on low-wage tourism jobs. At the same time, local residents and neighborhoods have become aware of the problems of the post-disaster policies and are working to develop new networks and institutions to promote resilience to present-day hazards and buffer against future risks, such as those associated with coastal erosion and climate change. As New Orleans continues to rebuild post-Katrina developmental patterns will feed forward to affect the future resilience and vulnerability of different urban neighborhoods and the larger metropolitan area.

Our research also suggests that rates of post-disaster recovery derive from the formulation and implementation of public policies. Social policies such as the Road Home program have constrained and limited the pace and trajectory of post-disturbance resilience by reinforcing and perpetuating segregationist housing patterns and socio-spatial inequalities. At the same time, public policies and private actions have the potential to undo past forms of inequality and encourage the development of resilient neighborhoods. In addition, government actions, socio-legal regulations, and policy interventions can modify exposure to hazards through land-use changes. The important point is that resilience is not a static property or feature that happens by accident; nor is resilience an inherent “property” of an urban ecosystem. Rather, social policies play a major determinant role in generating the capacity of social-ecological systems to cope with, adapt to, and shape change. Policies pertaining to urban and suburban development, poverty and homelessness, irrigation and water resources control, ecosystem management, and so on are crucial to determining the resilience and vulnerability of cities and regions. The challenge for New Orleans and other metropolitan regions is to develop and implement policies to enhance resilience to deal with disaster and to build preparedness for living with uncertainty and surprise.

References


Sarah R. Lowe and Jean E. Rhodes

Natural Mentors in the Lives of Hurricane Katrina Survivors

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Introduction

Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster in recent United States history, leading to nearly 2,000 deaths and the displacement of over 650,000 people. The hurricane was associated with elevated levels of psychological distress among survivors, with low-income communities, African Americans, and single mothers at particularly high risk. In this study, we focused on the protective role of natural mentors in a sample of primarily African American single mothers who survived the storm.

Background

Low-income, single African American parents are particularly vulnerable to post-disaster difficulties. Even before Hurricane Katrina, there was evidence that African American parents were more likely to experience stress and mental health problems in response to disasters. This study aimed to identify the role of natural mentors in mitigating these effects.