

The Well-Being of Families affected by Hurricane Katrina in Alabama's Gulf Coast Counties

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Abstract

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall along the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina left hundreds of thousands of families without food, water, shelter, clothing and medical supplies. The humanitarian effort after the disaster was tremendous and the outpouring of donations and support were great. As a follow up of previous study [1], the purpose of this paper is to examine the lives and experiences of the families affected by the hurricane Twenty years. The study centers around the area's recovery process, as told by residents who remained in the aftermath of the deadly natural disaster. The focus group research includes conversations with community leaders, residents involved in rebuilding efforts, and those who experienced Katrina firsthand in order to reflect on what it took, and still takes, to overcome such devastation. Results indicated that the survivors are experiencing large unmet needs for housing and employment. Majority (94%) were African Americans, and 45% had no education beyond high school. Regarding their job situation, 86% were unemployed. About 66% of the respondents said they are not very optimistic about the way things will turn out in the future while 48.4% said they have no faith in their own abilities to rebuild their lives. Many survivors (89%) have no faith that the government will help them rebuild their lives. Many (71.5%) are still very stressful twenty years later. Many of the survivors still struggle with mental problems 20 years after the hurricane and have never felt more helpless.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina; Survivors; Alabama Gulf Coast Counties; Stressful

Introduction

As an extension of previous research [1], the purpose of this study was to examine the well-being of some families affected by Hurricane Katrina living in Alabama's Gulf Coast and determine how they are faring almost 20 years after one of the deadliest catastrophes in U.S. history unfolded. The storm resulted in over 1,800 fatalities and approximately \$160 billion in damage.

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Previous analyses of this sample [1] showed many of that many of the survivors in Alabama's Gulf Coast were stressful and

do not trust the government to help them rebuild their lives. This brief report is an analysis of a follow-up data collected in 2024 to examine the well-being being and rebuilding efforts of the same sample. Understanding how these survivors are doing years later will help FEMA and other professionals tailor health promotion interventions and rebuilding efforts to the needs of this population. No previous longitudinal research has examined the well-being hurricane survivors in rural Alabama.

Method

Research Setting

The present study is part of a longitudinal research examining the impact of Hurricane Katrina in rural Alabama Counties. The present research is a restudy of resident affected by the hurricane that participated in the 2007-2008 research [1]. The research reported here focuses on all communities in two rural counties in the western part of Alabama that were heavily impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Both were designated disaster areas following Hurricane Katrina by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Data Collection

The study was conducted using qualitative and quantitative methods. Focus groups were utilized for in-depth community study. Second, a self-administered questionnaire was administered to those affected by the hurricane and participated in the previous research.

The questionnaires were distributed and collected via personalized drop-off/pick-up to 118 out of the 123 individuals that participated in studied earlier. The drop-off/pick-up method insures a relatively high response rate [1,2]. Information was collected on these individuals' characteristics, such as age, sex, race and ethnicity, and education. The questionnaire asked about measures of well-being for each person.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were also conducted in major communities within the two counties with those affected by the hurricane, community residents, and other stakeholders with an interest in the well-being of the community and that of those displaced by the hurricane. These groups were structured to provide more detailed information about economic development strategies, challenges, and hopes of those people displaced. Focus group questions were formed by the questions from the survey. Ten focus groups (5 group interviews in each county) were conducted. Some of the participants were individuals affected by the hurricane.

Group size ranged from five to ten participants. Each session lasted approximately two hours. Each group was asked to comment on community action and economic development issues since Hurricane Katrina. The authors incorporated a common core of questions concerning economic development, rebuilding efforts, and decision-making issues into all of the interviews. Additionally, various public and quasi-public events, from county government and city council meetings and agency board meetings to annual county fair we attended to gather more information.

Results

Majority (94%) were African Americans, and 45% had no education beyond high school (Table 1). Only 9.6% were married, and 77.4% were females. Regarding their job situation, 86% were unemployed ten years later.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Respondent (N=118).

Category	Percent
Educational Attainment	
Less than high school Diploma	45
High school Diploma	40.7
Some college Education	11.3
Race	
Black	94
Hispanic	6
Gender	
Male	22.6
Female	77.4
Marital Status	
Married	9.6
Divorced/separated	39.2
Widowed	12.7
Never married	26.6
Living with someone	4.9
Employment Status	
Employed	14.4
Not employed	86

About 66% of the respondents said they are not very optimistic about the way things will turn out in the future (Table 2) while 48.4% said they have no faith in their own abilities to rebuild their lives.

Table 2: Perceptions about rebuilding efforts and trust in government (N=118).

	%
Taking everything into consideration, how stressful overall would you say your experience of ten years after the hurricane has been?	
Average	5.3
Stressful	36
Very Stressful	72
Ten years after the hurricane, how optimistic do you feel about the way things will turn out for you in the future?	
Very optimistic	3.9
Somewhat optimistic	12.4
Not very optimistic	39.7
Not at all optimistic	41.9
How much faith do you have in your own abilities to rebuild?	
Some	25
A little	28
None	48
How much faith do you have in your neighbors, friends or relatives to help you Rebuild your life?	
Some	18
A little	22
None	63
How much faith do you have that the government will help you rebuild your life?	
Some	5.3
A little	10
None	89
How much, generally speaking, do you trust government officials?	
Some	9.8
Only a little	20
None	71

Many survivors (89%) have no faith that the government will help them rebuild their lives. Majority of the survivors (71%) have no trust in government officials to help people in need. Many (71.5%) are still very stressful (Table 3).

Table 3: Rating of how various people and organizations responded to Hurricane Katrina (N=118).

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
a. FEMA	7.3	14.6	20.3	57.7
b. The State	1.6	8.1	30.9	59.3
c. Local government	1.6	9.8	33.3	55.3
d. The National Guard	5.7	13	26	55.3
e. The Red Cross	8.1	15.4	30.1	46.3
f. The Insurance industry	2.4	14.6	23.6	59.3
g. Your family	33.3	43.9	10.6	12.2
h. Your close friends	26.8	37.4	19.5	16.3
i. Your neighbors	29.3	30.9	24.4	15.4
j. The American public	4.1	20.3	39.8	35.8

Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) got a 58% and the State government 59.3% percent poor rating

from the survivors that dealt with them. The state is poorly rated by most 90% percent while the insurance industry is poorly rated by almost 85% percent of the respondents. The family, friends, and neighbors were all rated positively by a significant proportion of the survivors ten year later.

Discussion

Many of the hurricane survivors are not very optimistic about the way things will turn out in the future and are very stressful ten years later. These findings provide insights into the precarious situations poor survivors living in rural place like Alabama face despite some improvements in urban areas. Many of the survivors still struggle with mental problems 20 years after the hurricane.

Another interesting finding is that majority of the survivors had no faith in government officials to help them in time of need. Yet, these are the officials that were to help alleviate hurricane related problems. More research is needed to understand the relationships of government officials with hurricane survivors. Such information will have policy implications for EMA and hurricane survivors in rural America.

Conclusion

The purpose of this brief report was to examine the well-being of some families affected by Hurricane Katrina living in rural Alabama and determine how they are faring ten years after the hurricane. Even now, 20 years after the Hurricane Katrina life is still difficult for many of the survivors. Many are still pessimistic about the future. Due to the tragic loss of many things, live can never be made totally whole again. As one survivor put it "it feels like only yesterday the world was ripped by the

Hurricane." As one resident said "I've never felt more helpless."

Most of all, several hundred thousand people processed a trauma that was both personal and collective. That trauma, as well as what people made of it, is the theme of several stories.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is still the subject of local grumbling for its performance during Katrina. Its leader back in 2005 had no disaster experience, and the agency was slow to deliver supplies or help stranded residents. Field interviews suggest the government is not following their mandates over the years.

Many African American residents saw the hurricane and its aftermath as a parable about racism in America. The counties African American majority disproportionately lived in flood-prone areas. Unsupported stories after the storm cast many African American survivors as looters, and government reconstruction aid appeared to favor white residents.

The brief report has some limitations. To establish generalizability of the results, the study should be replicated in other geographic locations in Mississippi and Louisiana.

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