



The Psychological Impacts of Hurricanes in Urban Communities

Tanetha Jamay Grosland, Texas Christian University

In late September 2024, the American South was devastated by two hurricanes within two weeks —Hurricane Helene, a Category 4 storm, and Hurricane Milton, a Category 3 storm. These storms brought record-breaking storm surges and widespread destruction, resulting in hundreds of deaths.

For those who survived, the aftermath of back-to-back hurricanes can take a toll on emotional wellbeing, particularly in urban areas like Tampa Bay, Florida where people's lives and routines are closely connected. In densely populated urban settings like Tampa Bay, a major disruption, like a hurricane, can create ripple effects that impact everyone. Fierce winds, flooding, and widespread damage have left urban communities grappling with collective anxiety, grief, and loss.

This emotional turmoil is amplified among children as they try to process these complex emotions and navigate the uncertainty inherent within a post-hurricane environment. Children need a safe and structured environment to navigate these emotions, which schools can provide. This is why there is an urgent need for education policy to address the emotional impact of natural disasters on students. Integrating emotional and psychological support into education policy, particularly during disasters, is critical for supporting those affected.

Challenges for Urban Education in the Aftermath of Hurricanes

Natural disasters and extreme weather pose unique challenges for education policy and politics particularly due to displacement. Sudden evacuation and displacement from one's home can be traumatic, particularly for school-aged children in urban communities due to the social aspects of emotion experiences. Over a decade after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the city's educators expressed frustration with policy responses that failed to address the emotional trauma students and families experienced. *As one educator noted*, "Kids are hurting. They're still working on their emotional side, and you want them to pass the state mandated test [...] they're not ready."

Similarly, Hurricane Maria had a profound impact on children in Puerto Rico. The complete destruction of Puerto Rico's infrastructure, compounded by the loss of loved ones, created a wave of displaced persons who had to adjust their language and customs when moving to unfamiliar places like Florida. This displacement brought about emotional challenges and a sense of dislocation for children.

After Hurricane Maria, educators and 11,554 school children from Puerto Rico flowed into urban Florida school districts, posing a novel challenge for the state's education system. In the case of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the situation is further complicated by displaced persons' political status. As U.S. citizens living in territories without full statehood, these individuals don't hold traditional immigrant status, but instead

face unique challenges from the absence of full citizen rights. Given these events, Florida provides a singular context to understand the intersection of education policy, politics, and the integration of displaced children into urban schools.

The impact of Hurricane Maria, along with the 2024 storms in Tampa Bay, evokes strong emotions that affect children in the urban education system. Implications for education policy in urban areas should not be overlooked because they have significant consequences for everyday life. The aftermath of such storms goes beyond visible expressions of sadness and emotions by educators. [Students experience a sense of loss of home](#) and feelings of abandonment, thus questioning reality and what they thought they found comforting. Understanding these emotions and experiences will improve policy responses concerning the psychological care of those in urban schools displaced by hurricane disaster.

Solutions and Recommendations

Emotions, especially in the wake of natural disasters and displacement, are not isolated experiences; they are influenced by factors in the broader socio-political environment. Given the complexity of processing heightened emotions for children, education policy is an ideal channel for students to better understand how these emotions are expressed, felt, and contextually situated during disaster.

Strategic policy actions by educational leaders, like school board members, and policymakers that focus on emotional wellbeing during these times of crisis are key to creating more effective responses to these crises. This involves documenting and collecting data on social incidents concerning emotional states and disaster responses. By documenting these emotions within the context of social, historical, and ideological factors, a more holistic approach to education policy can be developed—one that prioritizes emotional wellbeing in urban schools.

A comprehensive emotional wellbeing plan for urban schools could include:

- **Preparing for emotional responses before the hurricane:** Planning for the emotional aspects of urban education during hurricanes can improve emotional support during crises.
 - Schools should provide professional development to educators to help them understand and manage emotional needs of students prior to natural disasters.
- **Addressing emotional responses during the hurricane:** Staying in touch with school stakeholders during the hurricane or asking pre-identified stakeholders to collect emotion responses could inform future policy initiatives.
 - Stakeholders should gather real-time data on emotional responses to hurricanes. Establish a “well-being circle” where educators have immediate crisis-trained support contacts during the storm. This immediate support network would help educators manage their own stress and emotional responses, allowing them to stay better equipped to support students during and after the crisis.
- **Supporting Emotional Recovery Post-Hurricane:** To support students and staff in the aftermath of a hurricane, post-crisis education policies should address the emotional impact of displacement, loss, and recovery. Schools can prioritize long-term mental health support by integrating trauma-informed practices and resilience-building strategies into their programs.

- Leverage research findings to create tailored professional development for educators, equipping them with the skills to recognize trauma responses and foster emotional resilience in students.

Capturing diverse narratives on the role of social positions within schools (e.g., gender, language, geography, citizenship/statelessness, race, socioeconomics) can impact policy outcomes. Incorporating insights from these varied perspectives into policy can better equip urban educators to support students' emotional needs in future disasters.

A more comprehensive response to hurricanes that examines collective emotions such as fear, grief, and loss, will provide mechanisms for hope and resilience that shape future education policy preparedness. This investigation into the role of emotions in urban education policy can improve responses to hurricane disasters and drive policies that are both compassionate and effective.