



## **Time Does Not Heal All Wounds: Psychological Problems for Poor Mothers Five Years after Hurricane Katrina**

**Elizabeth Fussell**, Brown University

**Jean E. Rhodes**, University of Massachusetts-Boston

**Mary C. Waters**, Harvard University

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005. Thousands of residents were displaced, enduring threats to personal wellbeing, lost homes and property – and in many cases enduring the death of friends or family members. What happens to the long-term psychological health of residents who experience such traumas? What lessons can be learned to inform future efforts to support and help people who suffer in major disasters?

Most research on how people fare after disasters relies on interviews after the fact. Scholars do not know that a disaster will occur before it actually does, so they can arrange interviews only after people have already gone through the traumatic events. Important measurements may not be available about people's health and circumstances prior to the disaster – and people interviewed after the fact do not always know or remember what scholars need to know.

By sheer chance our research team had already interviewed over a thousand New Orleans residents not long before Hurricane Katrina struck. Our interviewees were a special group, not representative of all city residents, but we have the great advantage of knowing a lot about their health and circumstances before the catastrophe. We have been able to track the experiences and outlooks of hundreds of disaster victims for five years after Katrina hit New Orleans.

### **A Unique Research Opportunity**

Between 2003 and 2005, our research team was taking part in a national study of the performance of low-income adults enrolled in community college programs. We had interviewed a thousand New Orleans residents, collecting what researchers call "baseline data" on each person's race, income, family and social circumstances, and psychological health.

The hurricane changed the focus of our research entirely. The storm displaced most of the people we had interviewed, who moved to 23 different states. Nevertheless, we managed to track down 562 women for two follow-up surveys in 2006-07 and 2009-10. In the end, we could use repeated survey results from 532 women to track their life circumstances and psychological health from just-before to years-after Hurricane Katrina. We had a unique window into the struggles people go through to recover from such a life-changing event.

Our respondents all had relatively low incomes, and their average age was 26 years when Katrina happened. More than four-fifths are African Americans, and all are mothers. Most live with one or more children, but only

35% live with a spouse or partner.

A quarter of the women we studied had indications of psychological stress before the hurricane – which is not surprising, because people with low incomes often experience such problems. We wanted to learn how many suffered additional immediate or long-term severe trauma or persistent stress following the event. And we hoped to learn why some women were able to recover from Hurricane Katrina more readily than others, or at least recover to the same degree of health they enjoyed prior to coping with the storm – all questions which could only be answered with baseline data.

## **The Ongoing Toll of Hurricane Katrina**

Even five years later, Hurricane Katrina continues to affect the lives and outlooks of the people of New Orleans – including the low-income mothers we studied.

The people we studied were hurt by the storm when it happened. Eighty percent of the women we interviewed suffered damage to their home. Mothers and their children often experienced serious traumas, including spending time without adequate food, water, or medical care, and not knowing whether other family members were safe. After the storm, nearly a third said they had lost a friend or family member – often one of the many older people who died as a result of the storm and its aftermath.

These traumas had significant and ongoing effects on mothers' mental health. Most of these low income women were suffering from a serious emotional health problem, such as post-traumatic stress, a year after the storm hit. For many, the emotional impact was still evident four years after the storm.

## **Who Did Better?**

Studies have shown that women, children, and poor people are especially at risk for posttraumatic stress after natural disasters. Of course, some fare better than others; and our study confirms some previous findings about the factors that help some rebound. Poor mothers with slightly higher incomes experienced less ongoing stress, perhaps because it was easier for them to get back on their feet economically. And women with stronger networks of friends and family prior to the hurricane recovered better and gained higher levels of emotional health over time.

## **The Help People Need to Surmount Disasters**

Years after Katrina, many of our interviewees continue to have traumatic flashbacks or ongoing stress, or both. Supportive mental health services are important, not just right after a disaster but long after. This is especially true for low-income disaster victims who do not have prior cushions of financial or social resources to help them surmount the disruptions and trauma occasioned by a catastrophic event like Hurricane Katrina.

Even long after Katrina, the interviewees who suffered damage to their homes were the most likely to keep suffering from chronic psychological stress. In New Orleans, poor evacuees often faced a prolonged search for new homes, with delayed or uncertain help from all levels of government. Along with ongoing mental health services, improved government responses can play a major role in helping disaster victims rebuild their lives.

Read more in Christina Paxson, Elizabeth Fussell, Jean Rhodes, and Mary Waters, "**Five Years Later: Recovery from Post Traumatic Stress and Psychological Distress among Low-Income Mothers Affected by Hurricane Katrina**," *Social Science & Medicine* 74 (2012): 150-57.