

Leaving New Orleans: Social Stratification, Networks, and Hurricane Evacuation

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The evacuation strategies of most upper and middle-income residents were quite straightforward: make a hotel reservation or arrange a visit with out-of-town friends and family, board the house windows if you can, pack the car, get some cash and leave town. These residents most often evacuated during the voluntary or mandatory evacuation period in the 24 to 48 hours before the storm was predicted to hit. For this group, the costs of leaving on Saturday were lower with respect to missing work or school since the storm was projected to arrive on Monday. They were likely to have been informed by television, radio, internet, e-mail, or telephone of the hurricane's projected path long before it arrived. Nevertheless, the majority of those evacuating waited until Sunday to leave (Anderson 2005). Indeed, riding out the storm is an old New Orleans tradition. In the past, many better-off New Orleanians have chosen to stay in the city during hurricanes, evacuating "vertically" to the upper floors of the downtown hotels. As Hurricane Katrina approached, however, hotel officials denied them their rooms and encouraged them to leave of their own volition (Mowbray 2005).

Low-income residents had fewer choices with respect to how to prepare for the imminent arrival of Katrina. Since the storm was at the end of the month and many low-income residents of New Orleans live from paycheck to paycheck, economic resources for evacuating were particularly scarce. Furthermore, low-income New Orleanians are those who are least likely to own vehicles, making voluntary evacuation more costly and logistically more difficult. These residents were also more likely to depend upon television and radio for news of the storm, and alarm from these channels only became heightened in the last 48 hours before the storm arrived. Although most of these residents joined the flow of traffic out of the city on Sunday, many remained in their homes hoping for the best, and others headed to the Superdome rather than taking the few city buses available to out of town shelters (Filosa 2005). Those going to the Superdome and later the Morial Convention Center believed that these shelters would provide sufficient protection until the storm had passed but hadn't considered the flooding that occurred when several levees were breached. In fact, the people hit hardest by the flooding were also those from neighborhoods where poverty was most concentrated as a result of the concentration of federally subsidized housing (Katz 2005). Not coincidentally, they were least able to leave the city without assistance.

Although evacuation strategies were stratified by income, elderly people and those with chronic health conditions or disabilities within each social stratum were less likely to evacuate than those in good health. Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard's story of a Kenner City employee's elderly mother calling her son from a nursing home in the first four days and eventually succumbing to the rising water was played out repeatedly in other nursing homes where the oldest old remained due to frailty and poor health (Meet the Press, 2005). During the evacuation for Hurricane Ivan in 2004 most deaths occurred among the elderly who were unable to bear the heat and stress of getting caught in the day-long traffic jams arising from a poorly planned evacuation strategy. During Hurricane Katrina the elderly and disabled died in the Convention Center and in their homes throughout the city of the symptoms of diseases such as asthma, diabetes, and high blood pressure that are easily managed under normal conditions but that become lethal when access to medicine and treatment is cut off. Even though

economic resources may mitigate the danger of evacuation for the elderly and disabled, it does not entirely eliminate the additional risks to which they are subject. Understanding this, many elderly and disabled simply chose not to evacuate the city prior to the storm.

Not everyone can evacuate the city, even in a mandatory evacuation. Doctors, nurses, hospital employees, police officers, and other essential city and state employees remained in the city to perform their jobs. New Orleans police officers, Fish and Wildlife workers, and other city, state, and federal employees assisted in evacuating residents from their houses, rooftops, and elsewhere as the floodwaters rose. As hospitals closed down and evacuated patients, doctors, nurses, and hospital staff were often stranded. Some of these workers were evacuated from the Superdome and Convention Center, while others managed to get back to their homes and cars and drive out of the city. Other medical personnel were redeployed to the Louis Armstrong Airport which had become a makeshift hospital. Accounts from this group of people are harrowing and heroic and go far to explain why a total evacuation of the city was impossible.

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