

Household Structure and Social Vulnerability

Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

Abstract

The relatively high prevalence of extended-family households in New Orleans increased the incidence of household breakup after Hurricane Katrina. One-third of New Orleans households broke up within a year, compared with one-eighth nationally. Breakups were higher among families whose homes were uninhabitable after the storm, but breakups of extended-family households were higher than the national average, regardless of whether family homes were habitable. Planners and policymakers should consider pre-disaster household composition as they plan for post-disaster recovery and reconstruction.

Hurricane Katrina and one year after and compared the results with those for a matched sample of U.S. residents from a nationally representative survey over an equivalent period. They found that the composition of New Orleans households before the disaster played an important role in the social vulnerability of the population and disaster recovery.

Extended Families in New Orleans Were More Likely to Live Together Than Were Extended Families Nationwide

Before Katrina, New Orleans had a much higher percentage of multigenerational households than the national average. Households in which adult children were living with their parents were especially common and were 50 percent more prevalent in New Orleans than nationally. Children of the household head made up around 30 percent of the non-household head adults, compared with 20 percent nationally.

Many Extended-Family Households Broke Up After Katrina

New Orleans households were much more likely to break up after Katrina than were similar U.S. households during the same period. Nationally, 76 percent of metropolitan households remained intact and in the same residence, compared with 32 percent in New Orleans after the hurricane. Half of all New Orleans adult children of household heads were no longer living with their pre-Katrina household head parent just over a year later in 2006. Their incidence of separation was 2.7 times higher than the matched national sample. One in three among all adult non-household heads had separated from the household head one year post-Katrina. Cases of households breaking up with all members moving—but to more than one residence—made up only 2.1 percent of all households nationally but 23 percent of New Orleans households.

Most studies of the social impacts of natural disasters focus on individuals and population subgroups. Less is known about the impact of disaster on household and family structure. Yet, social impacts of natural disasters differ according to pre-disaster socioeconomic conditions, which describe the population's degree of "social vulnerability." The structure of households is an important component in social vulnerability. Extended-family households are often formed and maintained because of economic and physical needs. Adult children may provide care for an elderly relative who would otherwise be in a nursing home. Older adults may provide child care so parents can work. Unemployed adults may get financial support until they are able to find a job.

RAND Corporation researchers conducted a study in which they analyzed household structure as a social vulnerability characteristic. They looked at household structures among a representative sample of New Orleans residents before

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Physical Damage to Homes Does Not Alone Account for the Breakup of Families

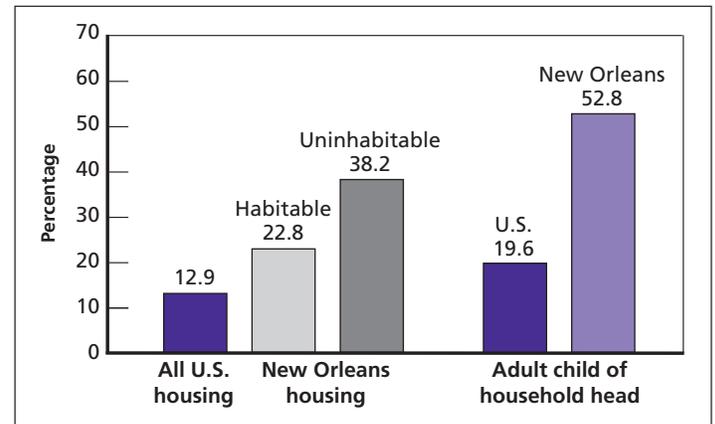
Whether a family's house was habitable or uninhabitable after the hurricane played a role in whether the household remained intact. The figure illustrates some of these comparisons from the perspective of the individual adult who may or may not be living with the former head of the household a little more than a year after Hurricane Katrina. Overall, 38 percent of non-household head adults from uninhabitable residences and 23 percent from habitable residences separated from the household, compared with the national rate of 13 percent over a similar period.

Family and Household Perspective on Social Vulnerability Should Inform Disaster Planning

A family and household perspective throws a very different light on social vulnerability to natural disasters than does an individual perspective. Whereas elders, for example, are most commonly identified as vulnerable demographic groups for evacuation, previous research found no relationship between a Louisiana parish's proportion of elders and its proportion of displaced persons. Elders' vulnerability during recovery and reconstruction needs to be understood instead within the context of their pre-disaster household structures, as their households may be disrupted by adult children or others providing in-home physical or economic assistance being forced to move away.

On the other hand, the finding that adult children of the household head were especially likely to be involved in breakup of the pre-Katrina household indicates a need to examine the adverse effects of population-displacing disasters on protective household structures at all ages. Economic vulnerability has been shown to be higher in some cases for the adult children than for their middle-aged and older parents. Adult children were found to be by far the largest single group to separate from the household head following Hurricane Katrina, and they did so at 2.7 times the national

Percentage of Individuals Who Were Not Living with Their Former Head of Household 13–16 Months After Katrina



rate of separation over this time period (see figure). In some cases, these adult children will have played crucial roles caring for and economically sustaining household-heading parents. In others, adult children may have been more economically dependent on their co-resident parent or parents. Female adult children who themselves have children are especially likely to have been economically dependent on a co-resident parent or parents. Household breakup may have severe consequences, including homelessness, for both single-parent families and single adults.

The large-scale breakup of family households after Hurricane Katrina is a major—and heretofore unquantified—social dimension of the catastrophe. Previous research following Hurricane Andrew in 1992 described a lack of accommodation of extended-family households in recovery programs tailored toward nuclear families, and the results of the present study of the consequences of Hurricane Katrina serve to emphasize further the need to provide for extended-family households in planning for recovery and reconstruction after disaster. ■

This research brief describes work done for RAND Labor and Population in collaboration with the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute and documented in "Breakup of New Orleans Households After Hurricane Katrina," by Michael S. Rendall, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 73, No. 3, June 2011, pp. 654–668 [available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2011.00837.x/full>]. This research brief was written by Shelley Wiseman. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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