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Title: Tracking Migratory Behavior of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees: A Three-Stage Sample of New Orleanians

Extended Abstract Submitted for Presentation at the 2006 annual PAA meeting¹

INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Katrina struck the U.S. Gulf Coast on August 29th and damaged approximately 90,000 square miles of housing throughout the region; President Bush declared it “one of the worst natural disasters in our nation’s history.” News sources now place the number of evacuees, or “internally displaced persons,” from the hurricane at approximately one million, with roughly half coming from the City of New Orleans, which remains under full, militarily enforced evacuation.

There are few precedents for this scale of sudden urban out-migration in U.S. history. One contender is the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which displaced nearly 500,000 persons, but these were largely rural residents. Other contenders are the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which displaced approximately 200,000 persons, and the 1871 Chicago fire, which displaced approximately 100,000 persons. While catastrophic, these disasters did not result in complete evacuation of their local populations, nor did they send so many evacuees to so many places. Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, the American Red Cross reported operating 707 temporary shelters in 24 states to assist evacuees with their reluctant migration.

The primary objective of the proposed study is to identify as quickly as possible a multi-stage sample of 450 evacuees from the City of New Orleans. It will then develop and administer a phone survey to gather data on demographic characteristics, spatial adjustments to evacuation, and short-term social and economic consequences. Results will contribute to knowledge about the social dynamics of large-scale, urban evacuations and to two pertinent areas of recent urban research: (a) internal migration, and (b) dispersal of residents from high-poverty neighborhoods.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

¹ Please note that this submission may be incomplete due to problems with dislocation resulting from Hurricane Katrina. If you have any questions regarding this submission, please contact me by phone (919-619-4781) or by new email address (jimevac@hotmail.com). Thank you.

Disasters are local events with spatial consequences. In cases of mass evacuation, migratory behavior becomes critical for understanding these consequences and for clarifying links between social and spatial life generally. The proposed study will collect data that will contribute to migration theory generally and to perspectives on the relocation of poor, inner-city populations to alternative sites. Results will improve extant theories on these subjects, which in turn may inform public planning for future urban evacuations and resettlement programs.

Over recent decades migration has regained a prominent position in social scientific research. Heuristically, this research can be divided into three stages. The first stage was primarily empirical, as researchers documented native shifts from North to South and flows of immigrants across national borders. This literature often invoked but did not develop theories of economic globalization to explain how these two processes of population redistribution were entwined. The second stage of migration research has been more theoretical, advancing propositions about path-dependence and social networks to explain migrants' destination decisions, spatial clustering, and processes of local incorporation. This literature postulates that between global forces and individual actions exist social networks that integrate individuals into social groupings that shape their migratory behavior. The third stage of research is more recent and seeks to understand how path-dependence and social networks shape migratory dispersal to new destinations. A fundamental question is whether these dynamics coincide or differ from social processes that encourage spatial concentration.

Data collected from evacuees will provide an excellent opportunity to engage these issues because the entire target population will have experienced the same migratory "push" simultaneously. These circumstances contribute to a quasi-experimental design in which migratory timing and motivation are held constant, allowing variation in personal resources and social networks to come unambiguously to the fore of migratory behavior. Within this unique experimental design, extant models of path-dependence and network influence suggest a number of hypotheses regarding (short-term) migratory behavior. Representatives include the following:

- . Net of distance, the migratory paths (destination propensities) of evacuees correlate positively with the migratory paths (destination propensities) of out-migrants in years preceding evacuation (reflecting path-dependence, even in scenarios of mass evacuation).
- . Net of distance, destinations with greater numbers of residents born in the state of evacuation will receive proportionally more in-migrants from this evacuation than other states (reflecting operation of spatially dispersed social networks).

These and related hypotheses will be examined through detailed survey questions in addition to aggregate data on spatial units coming from governmental sources such as the 2000 population census.

Because New Orleans is/was a city of extreme inequality and concentrated poverty, data collected in the proposed study will also inform theoretical debates about class differences in migratory behavior, including how individual and neighborhood resources at one point in time (prior to evacuation) influence choices and outcomes at later points in time (after evacuation). This contribution will draw from two lines of research. The first line is older and posits a curvilinear relationship between socioeconomic status and attachment to place. The argument,

informed by historical observation, is that affluent members of society cultivate local bases of status and prestige that they are reluctant to abandon (e.g., membership in a prestigious social krewe); by contrast, poorer members of local society often lack personal and social resources needed to facilitate migration, so they also exhibit high rates of local persistence (a.k.a., place attachment), but for different reasons. These theoretical insights, while supported by prior research, have never been tested in the context of complete evacuation of an entire city. By examining the return propensities of different classes of residents to New Orleans following clearance for resettlement, the proposed study can help adjudicate proximate causes of class-based spatial persistence. For example, if affluent classes are more likely to return to the city after evacuation than poorer classes, all else equal, then support accrues to the resource-based argument regarding class variation in place attachment. However, if rates of return are similar for poor and affluent residents, the resource-based argument weakens and socio-cultural explanations for place attachment gain support.

The second line of research in this area is newer and addresses more explicitly the consequences of concentrated, inner-city poverty for individual and family outcomes. This literature has grown to encompass a number of theoretical traditions, including the “social capital” perspective, which contends that poor neighborhoods impede flows of information and resources across social networks, leaving residents socially isolated. A corresponding postulate is that relocation from these poor neighborhoods to other residential contexts will improve the life chances of those involved. Because the City of New Orleans has long been one of the nation’s poorest and blackest cities (67 percent African American and 25 percent in poverty), it provides a unique test of this postulate on a scale never before (or likely ever) repeated. Insights from recent relocation programs such as HUD’s 10-year “Moving to Opportunity” initiative will inform instrument design and permit tests of how and to what extent short-term migratory behavior following mass evacuation parallels or diverges from similar relocations stemming from longer-term governmental programs. Enhancing the intellectual merits of these efforts is the ability to make assessments across a wide range of individuals and families, not simply those who lived in the city’s least advantaged neighborhoods and public housing complexes. These literatures suggest a number of hypotheses for investigation, including:

- . Following migratory evacuation, affluent residents will return more quickly and in larger numbers than poorer residents (indicating strong attachment to place plus the personal and social resources to actualize this preference).
- . Net of individual characteristics, residents formerly residing in high-poverty neighborhoods will rely more strongly on public assistance than social networks in their spatial adjustment to evacuation/relocation (because their networks are less equipped to assist than those of similar individuals from less-impooverished neighborhoods).