



Surviving Hurricane Katrina: Resilience and Resources of Aging Families

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Abstract

Background: The limited social science literature addressing catastrophic natural disasters has paid little attention to the experiences of older families. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, older adults face prolonged displacement compounded by separation from family, property loss, and changes in the life they once knew. Integrating life course and ecological perspectives, we explored how well aging families were functioning under extreme duress of this natural disaster and how they were responding to changes in their daily lives.

Methods: Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted between January and June of 2006 with 107 adults, 60 years of age and older, who had evacuated from New Orleans area to Baton Rouge and surrounding areas.

Results: Findings document the challenges in their incredible journey of loss and emerging recovery several months after Katrina. Leaving their home and communities was difficult for older adults, as most longed to "go back home." Family strengths and commitment became apparent as they described the evacuation experience and the months that followed. Although they employed a variety of strategies (religion, active planning, and acceptance) to cope with the current devastation and the uncertainty surrounding their future, many older adults noted that they experienced more physical (coughing, sleeplessness) and emotional problems (fear, depression) since Katrina. All spoke kindly of the support their family received from distant kin and strangers; some noted difficulties in obtaining, as well as accepting, government aid.

Conclusions: Understanding aging families' capacities in the aftermath of a major natural disaster provides theoretical and practical insights for meeting and managing needs in non-normative times of crises.

Evacuation Experience

Journey from New Orleans

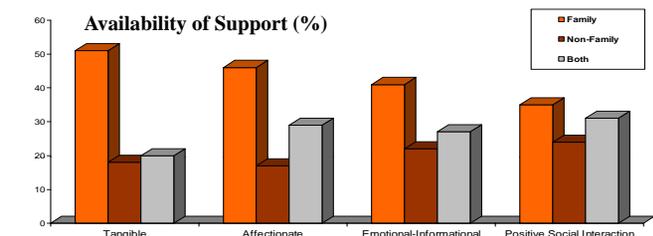
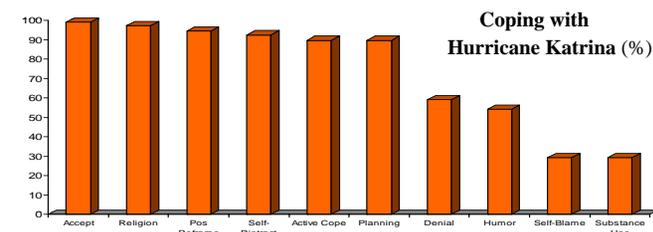
- Number of moves: 1- 8 moves ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.73$)
- Reasons for multiple moves:
 - Temporary shelter
 - Family conflict
 - Too crowded
 - Wanted own place
- Number of days to establish residence: 1-240 days ($M = 67.27, SD = 59.88$)
- Baton Rouge residence:
 - 54% Trailer community
 - 23% Own house or apartment
 - 14% Home of family member or friend
 - 8% Other



Challenges of Being Displaced

- Loneliness
- Depression
- Transportation
- Safety
- Dealing with government agencies, insurance companies
- Uncertainties (e.g., New Orleans home, future home)

Strategies & Resources



Sample & Methods

Characteristics

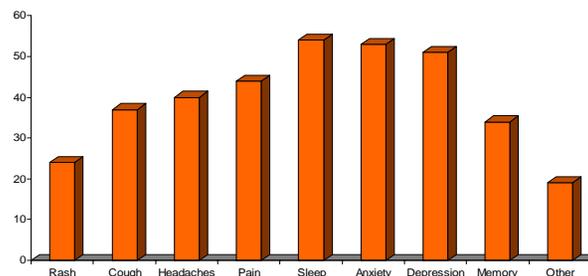
- Age: 60 - 97 years ($M = 71.8, SD = 9.22$)
- Race: 77% African American; 18% Caucasian
- Married: 21%; Living children: 83% ($M = 4.12, SD = 3.10$)
- Education: 3rd grade to graduate degree
- Monthly income: <\$499 - \$4,168+



Methods

- Participants currently residing in Baton Rouge area
- Structured face-to-face interviews focusing on:
 - Demographic characteristics
 - Evacuation timeline and experience
 - Health, service use, and emotional well-being
 - Family structure, support, and functioning

Physical & Emotional Health



Health Changes Since Hurricane Katrina (%)

Conclusions

- Although Hurricane Katrina created physical and emotional strains in the lives of older adults, they exhibited great resilience.
- Older adults employed more positive than negative strategies to cope with the uncertainty of their situation.
- More than 90% of older adults perceived having multiple types of support available; family members were the most common source of support.
- Understanding the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the lives of older adults requires consideration of individual, family, community, and society level influences.