

Post-Katrina Guiding Principles of Disaster Social Science Research

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall near the state line between Mississippi and Louisiana, causing widespread devastation and mass evacuation of the area. Mississippi coastal communities were heavily damaged by the natural destructive winds and tidal surge. In New Orleans, technological failures in the levee system and organizational failures in evacuation, emergency response, and re-development activities defined this disaster.

Hurricane Katrina unleashed a wave of research as survivors and society struggled to find answers for this latest “American Tragedy.” Research continues to unfold as communities and urban areas commence redevelopment – an often contentious process. Within this context, it is prudent to outline research needs that address Katrina-related issues and that provide information to communities seeking to reduce vulnerability and improve preparedness and response.

On November 18-19, eighteen social scientists who specialize in risk and disaster met under the auspices of the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University to develop a set of criteria to guide research during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Following is a distillation of their recommendations:

Disaster research should contribute to:

- 1. Reducing vulnerability of populations to disaster, promoting the sustainability of human and ecological systems, and enhancing the resiliency of communities.**

Hurricane Katrina re-affirmed a need to cultivate disaster-resilient communities based on principles of socio-ecological sustainability. We need research that can enable communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a wide range of natural and technological hazards, as well as analogous events like terrorism, while simultaneously protecting civil liberties and preserving cultural heritages of communities.

- 2. Understanding social impacts of the particular events on affected populations, beginning with reconstructed baselines and continuing through a full assessment of the consequences over time.**

Hurricane Katrina, like all disasters, provides natural experimental conditions for advancing understanding and mitigating social and cultural impacts from such occurrences. We need research to assess a wide spectrum of social and cultural impacts beginning with pre-disaster conditions and following through various disaster phases. Research should take local knowledge into account and seek to understand what survivors need from local perspectives. Baselines should include pre-existing assessments of community resilience arising from social, physical, and ecological locations.

3. Developing policies and emergency practices to effectively prevent and mitigate disaster consequences.

Hurricane Katrina created a series of public policy and emergency management crises at the federal, state, and local levels, many of which have yet to be resolved. We need research that provides greater understanding of public policy issues relevant to developing disaster resilient communities, as well as research that improves emergency practices. In particular for Katrina, we need an assessment of political/governmental practices and intergovernmental agreements that exacerbated or facilitated emergency responses with an eye on how future events in other locations can be better negotiated and resolved.

4. Using comparative analysis that allows for a particular disaster to be compared with other disasters.

Hurricane Katrina is a wake-up call for every community to seriously examine its own disaster resiliency and for the nation to assist in this collective effort. We need research that enables comparisons with other events and other communities while offering a critical investigation of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches.

5. Facilitating recovery of individuals and communities.

Hurricane Katrina produced unique catastrophic effects including extreme damage to the built environment, economic disruption, and dispersal of hundreds of thousands of residents in the Gulf Coast region across the country. As a result, recovery processes will be more protracted, discontinuous, and conflict-ridden than have been observed in other U.S. disasters. Research is needed on all units of analysis (individuals, households, businesses, social systems, communities and the region) to assist in their recovery and to plan for other catastrophic events.

6. Collecting data and disseminating findings in a timely manner.

Hurricane Katrina revealed a need for reliable information and informed decision-making to assist in recovery and restoration. Throughout the time that hurricane Katrina entered the Gulf of Mexico, made landfall, was responded to, and left a devastating aftermath in her wake, significant misinformation was communicated to the public and decision-makers alike. With recovery and reconstruction lying before us, we now need credible, well-informed information. We need research that is accurate, useful, and timely.

7. Enhancing stakeholder participation, collaboration, and empowerment.

Hurricane Katrina ripped the social fabric of several states, hundreds of communities and neighborhoods, thousands of businesses and social organizations, hundreds of thousands of families and countless numbers of individuals. Repairing the social fabric requires research that contributes to democratic processes by protecting civil liberties, enfranchising disempowered groups, decreasing social vulnerability, and rebuilding social capital.

8. Developing new knowledge on understudied disaster related issues.

Hurricane Katrina, like the terrorist attacks on 9/11, is a benchmark event in American history and continues to attract a significant amount of social science and humanities research interest. We need research that contributes to a dynamic expansion of knowledge by examining understudied issues and perspectives of disasters such as Diaspora and community redevelopment.

Acknowledgements

A Katrina Summit was held November 18-19 at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center (SSRC). Major funding was provided by the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (MIS-605270). Duane Gill, SSRC Associate Director for Research on Society and Environment and Coordinator of the Societal Risk Unit, organized and presided over the Summit. The Summit included 18 invited scholars (anthropologists, geographers, psychologists, and sociologists) from various U.S. institutions who study disasters, risks, and hazards. Five participants were from New Orleans universities.

In alphabetical order, the participants were: Francis Adeola, Lee Clarke, Maurie Cohen, Mike Edelstein, Ann Kos-Edwards, Duane Gill, John Green, Eric Jones, Anthony Ladd, Brent Marshall, John Marszalek, Dennis McSeveney, Steve Meinhold, DeMond Miller, Joanne Nigg, Liesel Ritchie, John Sorensen, and Barbara Vogt.