

## **The Displaced New Orleans Residents Pilot Study**

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Very little is known yet about the current whereabouts, well-being, and plans of people who lived in the City of New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck on 29 August 2005. In this paper, we report on a new pilot study that we have designed and are fielding to assess these issues. The pilot study is being fielded during September and October 2006, and data from the study will be available by November 2006.

The results from this pilot study will provide valuable preliminary information for researchers, policymakers, and the public in understanding the impact of the hurricane and its aftermath. The pilot study will also form the foundation for a longer-term and more extensive effort to track the hurricane victims and examine how they fare in the coming years.

### **Background**

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Louisiana, in the morning of August 29, 2005. Thousands of residents had fled the city in advance of the hurricane, following the order by the city's mayor for a mandatory evacuation. Many thousands of residents remained behind, however, either in their own homes or in one of the shelters set up by the city. The city suffered considerable damage from the hurricane, but even more damage from flooding caused by breaks in at least two levees. In the following week, the remaining residents were evacuated from the city.

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and flooding, New Orleans residents were scattered around the country, living with friends or family, in hotels, in shelters, and or in newly acquired housing. Many displaced residents returned to the city during the past year, but others have decided not to return. Data from FEMA and U.S. Postal Service change-of-address records provide some information on the current whereabouts of displaced New Orleans residents. However, these data contain little detail about displaced residents' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics or measures of well-being and plans for returning to the city.

The toll from the hurricane for former New Orleans residents is likely to be immense. Many people had family members or friends who died or were injured, many houses were severely damaged or destroyed, many people lost their jobs or businesses, and everyone's lives were severely disrupted. A critical need in assessing the impact of the hurricane and in planning a recovery is to obtain representative data on the whereabouts, status, and well-being of former New Orleans residents. The dispersion of former residents makes this an extremely challenging undertaking. However, the value of these data for policymakers and the public is very high.

## **Approach**

The pilot study is based on an area-based probability sample that is representative of pre-Katrina dwellings in the City of New Orleans. By using an area-based probability sample, this study will be able to examine the contextual effects of local neighborhoods on individuals and families. In particular, we will be able to examine how local resources and infrastructure, poverty levels, race and ethnic composition, social networks, and collective processes shape outcomes.

There were several important considerations that guided the sample design.

First, we stratified the sample by flood depth. We did so to reflect the dramatically different experiences of residents based on the damage to their housing, which was directly related to flood depth (McCarthy, Peterson, Sastry, and Pollard, 2006). Drawing on estimates by census block of flood depths on 31 August 2005—a day on which flood depths were close to their maximum—we distinguished areas in which there was no flooding from areas in which the flood waters were of moderate depth (less than 3 feet flood depth) or of high depth (4 feet or more). Approximately 30 percent of dwellings were located in areas of New Orleans that did not flood, while 20 percent were located in areas with moderate flood depths and 50 percent were in areas of high flood depth.

Because of higher costs and lower expected rate of success in tracing residents from the high flood depth stratum, we undersampled residences in this stratum and oversampled those in the no-flooding stratum.

Second, we created a block-level file for New Orleans, with information on the number of postal addresses and various demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. We used this file to implicitly stratify blocks by sorting the file according to: (a) tract; (b) proportion of the population that was black, distinguishing tracts with high (>92 percent), medium (33-92 percent), and low (<33 percent) percentage black; and (c) proportion of households that were owner-occupied (as a continuous variable).

Third, we stratified the listing of addresses in each of the sampled blocks by whether there was a name and a telephone number associated with the address. We oversampled “named” addresses in order to lower costs and increase the likelihood of tracing residents.

Based on this sampling scheme, we drew a sample of approximately 350 residences in New Orleans, with 36 percent from the no flooding stratum, 23 percent from the low flood depth stratum, and 41 percent from the high flood depth stratum. About two-thirds of the sampled dwellings had names and telephone numbers associated with the addresses.

Fieldwork efforts are focused on tracking respondents wherever they currently live, including following residents back to New Orleans. Respondents are administered a short paper-and-pencil interview by mail, by telephone, or in person.

We are currently using state-of-the-art tracing techniques to locate sampled respondents and are interviewing respondents that we find. Tracing approaches include searches in the national

change-of-address database, credit bureaus (such as Trans Union), death records (using the Pension Benefit Information service), locator services (such as Telematch and Accurint), reverse telephone directories (for respondents and neighbors), and various Katrina survivor web-sites. When leads are obtained, respondents are traced by telephone and in-person through on-the-ground tracing activities.

When a sampled household is found, the head of household is selected as the respondent and completes a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire includes a roster that identifies all pre-Katrina residents and asks about their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, pre-Katrina circumstances, and their current location and status. Information is also collected on respondents' evacuation and resettlement experiences, likelihood of returning to New Orleans (if they are still living outside the city), as well as current and former income, health status, schooling, marital status, and employment.

Respondents receive an incentive payment, and may be motivated to respond by a desire to tell their stories and to represent survivors in a scientific study of this devastating event.

## **Results**

In this paper, we present the preliminary results from the pilot study. We describe the study design and report on our ability to locate and successfully interview displaced New Orleans residents. We also describe the migration and relocation experiences, mental health, employment, and future plans of the respondents. We end with a discussion of the lessons learned from the pilot study and of the prospects for launching a longitudinal study of demographic, social, economic, and health effects of Hurricane Katrina on the displaced population of New Orleans. Our conclusions highlight the challenges and opportunities of studying this unique population.

## **References**

McCarthy, Kevin, D.J. Peterson, Narayan Sastry, and Michael Pollard. 2006. *The Repopulation of New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina*. RAND: Santa Monica, CA.