HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE FORGOTTEN COAST OF MISSISSIPPI

The study of natural disasters is particularly challenging, as they are enormously complex and demand mastery of a number of disciplines ordinarily beyond the reach of any individual researcher working alone. The full sociological, geographical, historical, economic, cultural, political, and physical impacts of – and recovery from – a natural disaster are so vast, the contours so manifold and complicated, that only a genuinely and thoroughly interdisciplinary approach can begin to master the scope, scale, and meaning of the event.

Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005 with devastating consequences. Almost all analyses of the disaster have been dedicated to the way the hurricane affected New Orleans. This volume’s highly interdisciplinary approach examines the full impact of the disaster on southern Mississippi. While communities along Mississippi’s Gulf Coast shared the impact of the hurricane, their socio-economic and demographic compositions varied widely, leading to different types and rates of recovery. This volume combines baseline geographic data on the social and built environment and the hazard vulnerability of the region with a historical narrative on past conditions that influenced the pre-Katrina settlement history. It further includes a statistical analysis of historical rates of settlement and demographic change in the region and forecasts the future trajectory of settlement and demographic change post Katrina. This volume not only furthers our understanding of the pace of recovery and its geographic extent, but also explores the role of inequalities in the recovery process and those antecedent conditions that could give rise to a “recovery divide.” It will be especially appealing to researchers and advanced students of natural disasters and policy makers dealing with disaster consequences and recovery.

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Figures</th>
<th>page vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Boxes</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Authors</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The Forgotten Coast
- The Nature of Recovery
- Is the Past a Prologue to the Future?
- Setting the Geographic Stage
- Setting the Social Stage
- The Unfolding Story

2 Remembering the Coast: The Road to Camille
- Introducing Camille
- Prelude to Camille
- Continuity, Change, and Hurricane Camille
- History, Redux
- The Political Economy of Recovery

3 The Second Big One
- Before the Storm
- Hurricane Katrina and Its Immediate Aftermath
- Different Places, Different Impacts

4 Uneven Recovery
- Recovery: For Whom and by What Measure?
- Population Ebb and Flow
- Restarting the Economic Engine
- Changes within the Landscape
- The Phoenix Rises: Rebuilding the Homes
- Recovery by the Numbers
- A Real Recovery?

5 Powering an Unequal Recovery
- Power Over: Making the Rules
Contents

Power Over: Winning the Contest 100
Power Over: Spinning the Outcome 102
The Power of the Spin 104
Power With: Organizing and Advocating for the Vulnerable 107
Processes Producing an Unequal Recovery 110

6 Slow Going for Neighborhoods 114
Six Stories 114
Damaged Landscapes and Lives 120
A Tale of Three Damaged Communities 127
Sticker Shock: Hazard Insurance and Differential Recovery 129
Into the Details, One Neighborhood at a Time 135
Forgetfulness 140

7 Waiting for the Next Katrina 141
Increasing Risk and Exposure 142
The Recovery Calendar 144
Altering Preexisting Trajectories 146
Contested Views and Constrained Recovery 157
What Does the Future Hold? 162

8 Recovery Divides in a Changing World 164
Generalizing Recovery: The Theory 164
Lessons from Mississippi’s Experience 169
Scaling Up 171
Where in the World? Comparing Recovery Experiences 173
Postscript 186

9 Epilogue 187

Index 191
Figures

1.1 Continuous change in community development patterns over time  page 8
1.2 A punctuated trajectory of community development  8
1.3 Study area map  10
2.1 Early time line of significant events on the Mississippi coast  17
2.2 Hurricane of 1947, Coleman Avenue, Waveland, Mississippi  26
2.3 Military personnel unloading relief supplies  27
2.4 Long Beach, Mississippi (before and after), Shopping Center, Jefferson Davis Avenue and U.S. Highway 90  31
3.1 The Social Vulnerability Index  49
3.2 GOES-12 satellite image of Hurricane Katrina  53
3.3 Raised house in Waveland, Mississippi, inundated by storm surge  55
3.4 Forest damage in Carriere, Mississippi  57
3.5 Damage impact area  60
3.6 Amount of residential damage estimates for selected communities and the three Mississippi counties  62
4.1 Casinos moved landward  65
4.2 Shrimp boat on Edgewater Drive in Pass Christian  67
4.3 Population changes 2000–2012 in (a) Hancock County, (b) Harrison County, (c) Jackson County, and (d) overall percentage change in population  69
4.4 The damage survey grid for fieldwork  79
4.5 Estimating disaster recovery from photographic evidence  80
4.6 The geographic pattern of recovery 2006–2010  81
4.7 Before and after transect along Beach Boulevard (Highway 90)  82
4.8 Clusters of building permits 2005–2008  84
5.1 Port of Gulfport  98
5.2 Y’All Mart  108
5.3 Housing reconstruction  110
5.4 Volunteers in Waveland, Mississippi, September 11, 2005  113
6.1 Waveland, Mississippi, June 2013  115
6.2 Diamondhead, Mississippi, June 2013  116
Figures

6.3 St. Louis Bay bridge 117
6.4 Casino row, Biloxi, Mississippi 118
6.5 Moss Point, Mississippi, schooner loading at L. N. Dantzler Lumber Co.’s mill 119
6.6 Moss Point, Mississippi, today 120
6.7 Progression of recovery over time in the six study communities 122
6.8 Beau Rivage Casino in Biloxi, Mississippi 125
6.9 Spatial clusters of residential building permits in the hardest hit communities after Katrina 128
6.10 Neighborhood analysis for Waveland, Mississippi 137
6.11 Humor is one of the mainstays of recovery 139
7.1 Changes in the development footprint along the Mississippi coast 143
7.2 Mississippi recovery calendar 146
7.3 Coastal Mississippi’s slab landscape 147
7.4 Population growth 1820–2010 148
7.5 Projected population growth 149
7.6 Employment trends 1967–2010 150
7.7 White to black ratios, 1850–2010 152
7.8 Age trends 1930–2020 154
7.9 Social vulnerability 2000–2010 155
7.10 Dwelling unit density 1850–2010 156
7.11 Elevated housing, part two 161
7.12 The historical time line 1960 and beyond 162
8.1 Maule, Chile, 2010 earthquake 174
8.2 Tohoku, Japan, 2011 earthquake 175
8.3 Flooding in Bangkok, Thailand, November 2011 179
8.4 Flood inundation from Hurricane Sandy in the New York metropolitan area 183
8.5 Seaside Heights, New Jersey, on April 30, 2013 185
## Tables

3.1 Hurricanes making landfall in Mississippi 1960–2004  
3.2 Hazard losses 1960–2004 (in 2012 dollars)  
3.3 Presidential Disaster Declarations and Emergency Declarations 1960–2004  
3.4 Exposure of the built environment assets before Hurricane Katrina  
3.5 Selected demographic comparisons prior to Hurricane Katrina  
3.6 Houses damaged or destroyed by storm surge and flooding  
4.1 Change in the population composition 2000–2010  
4.2 Major regional employers  
4.3 Building permits by cluster  
4.4 Recovery by the numbers  
5.1 Distribution of CDBG funds in millions 2006–2008  
5.2 Total CDBG funds expended by program type 2012  
6.1 Building permits and level of damage  
6.2 Flood insurance profiles of six communities  
7.1 Long-term employment trends  
8.1 Understanding recovery and its obstacles  
8.2 Key findings from Hurricane Katrina recovery along Mississippi’s coast

page 42  
43  
44  
45  
48  
61  
70  
72  
85  
88  
96  
97  
123  
133  
151  
169  
173
Boxes

1.1 Biloxi’s Little Saigon  
1.2 Racial segregation and Jim Crow laws  
3.1 The Social Vulnerability Index, SoVI®  
3.2 Planning for Katrina’s arrival  
3.3 FEMA’s Residential Substantial Damage Estimation (RSDE) Tool  
4.1 The Port of Gulfport: A tale of one post-Katrina contest  
4.2 Repeat photography and disaster recovery  
4.3 Building permits as a proxy indicator of recovery  
5.1 Unheard voices  
5.2 Local obstacles  
5.3 Voices from grass roots  
6.1 Wind or water? It makes a difference  
7.1 Flood insurance reform  
7.2 Elevating homes: Voices from the field  
8.1 The U.S. National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF)  
8.2 Cascading impacts at home and abroad: Tohoku and Fukushima Dai’ichi

page 3
12
47
52
60
76
78
83
95
99
109
134
158
160
167
178
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LYNN WEBER is a Professor of Psychology and Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina. For more than thirty years, she has led in developing the field of intersectionality – examining the nexus of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of inequality. In addition to her work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and in conjunction with a national research network on persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina, she and Lori Peek edited *Displaced: Life in the Katrina Diaspora* (2012).
This book is a collective effort born out of the Hurricane Katrina experience. In the days leading up to landfall we watched with trepidation as the Gulf Coast prepared for yet another major hurricane. It was only afterward that the magnitude of the destruction became evident – homes and businesses were destroyed, universities and colleges lost valuable research equipment and data to floodwaters, and residents and students were displaced to locations all across the country.

Hurricane Katrina provided a natural laboratory to examine all facets of coastal resiliency – from the natural processes of ecosystem restoration to the societal challenges of relocation, repopulation, and reconstruction. The University of South Carolina saw the opportunity to facilitate the collection of perishable data. Under its Coastal Resiliency Information Systems Initiative for the Southeast (CRISIS), eighteen funded research projects surveyed ecological damage, law enforcement response, beach conditions, the perceptions of affected residents, community damages, and infrastructure breaches, among other topics. The competitive research program was supported by the Vice President for Research and Health Sciences Office, enabling research teams to get into the field three to four weeks after the storm. This was an unprecedented effort by the university, and many thanks are due to Harris Pastides (who was vice president for research at the time and is now university president), who had the vision and wisdom to see how this would help researchers, but more significantly how it would help the region and the nation better understand coastal vulnerability. As recipients of this initial funding, we were able to conduct our first coastal Mississippi investigation in October 2005 – with a team of two faculty (Susan Cutter and Jerry Mitchell) and six graduate students (the CRISIS field cohort). With later support from the National Science Foundation (Grant CMMI-0623991), we have been able to monitor recovery in the region since 2006.

More than thirty-five graduate students at the University of South Carolina have been involved in this work. Many are no longer students, but are now professors and disaster professionals. They spent countless hours on this project and not only left blood, sweat, and tears on the coast, but also took with them lessons, memories, and
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Last, and certainly not least, we thank our families, who also experienced Hurricane Katrina, but in more indirect ways. They kept things running smoothly on the home front while we were dispatched to the field and provided solace and encouragement as we worked through the analysis and writing. It has been a rewarding eight years for us personally and professionally. While we have captured parts of the story of disaster recovery in coastal Mississippi, there is much more to learn.