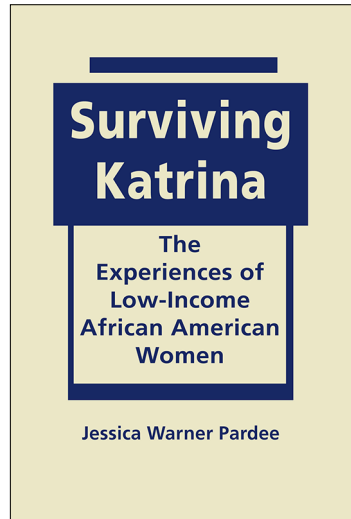


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**Surviving Katrina:  
The Experiences of Low-Income  
African American Women**

Jessica Warner Pardee

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314  
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telephone 303.444.6684  
fax 303.444.0824

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# 1

## Understanding Katrina

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on Monday, August 29, 2005. By Tuesday, multiple levees had failed in the City of New Orleans.

Morgan: It came up all day, at one time. There were no lights, no boats. We were trapped. The water come up high, and we trapped. We can't get out. Our apartment was in the center. Nobody had lights, nobody had water. It was one neighbor hollering at the other neighbor. We couldn't get out for five days or better. We had no water, no light, no nothing. I was afraid to step down because the water was up to my neck.

... It was horrible. It was something I never experienced. I wasn't aware of this. I know God does things for a reason but—but, I never experienced it. People was yelling and screaming. Babies couldn't help themselves. I couldn't help myself. At night, you couldn't help yourself. You couldn't go to the neighbor's. You think of lighting a candle, but were afraid of a fire. Who would help me?

There was no warning, and we had no water. All we heard was there was a hurricane watch, and the next thing you was in darkness. I wouldn't want anyone to experience that. I couldn't sleep, nor nothing. Wouldn't want nobody to go through it. It was horrible. Sometimes I dream, thinking I'm seeing things. I couldn't sleep for two and three days, for weeks. I'm getting over it a little, but it's nothing like home. I don't like to see it on TV. Anything about Hurricane Katrina is a reminder. Thank God I'm still here, and my mother and sisters and children still here, we made it. My heart goes to the ones that didn't make it.

Jessica: So did the power go out before the storm or as the storm passed?

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Morgan: When the water was rising up, everything was off. It started to lightning, and that just shut down everything.

Jessica: Do you remember what the storm was like? Was there wind or rain?

Morgan: It was horrible. You could hear the rain hitting. The wind hit the window and it made that sound, like “whooh-whooh.” It was just in one corner. Then you look outside, and see the water is not going down, it’s coming up, and up, and up. All that night it was raining. The rain come constantly down, and the water was just coming up.

Jessica: How were things the next morning?

Morgan: The water was up. It was just up. If you try to go down the steps, the water was up to your neck. I was scared. I didn’t know what was in that water. The toilets backed up, and there was sewerage on the floor. You couldn’t flush a toilet or nothing. [...] After a few days passed, you’d think the water would go down, but it never went down. The whole five days I was in there, the water was still up. The sewerage line popped and the water line bust, which was making it worser.

Jessica: How did you get out?

Morgan: The man in the boat. There was security and an army man in a boat. They was kicking the doors in to make sure the people was out. At night, we were trying to do something with a flashlight to tell them we was in there. I was scared to go down the steps to where water was. [...] How we got out? We was yelling, and a boat came by. There was all this water, and they had to pick me up because the water was so high....

Jessica: How much water was in your apartment?

Morgan: Well, it was a lot of water. That water was high. I could see it through the door when it was coming in. When that other levee popped, it was further in. Then there was a man on a boat riding past. He said that “everybody needs to get out before it gets too dark.” I let them know I was there.

Jessica: Who was with you?

Morgan: My son went to try to get help. I don’t know if he got trapped in somewhere. He could swim. He said, “Ma, I can make it”—he being 34 years old. He went back to try to get help. He said “If you see a

boat, get in it, get on it.” He was looking for that boat. Then he hollered to see if I was okay, I said “yeah.” We keep in touch. I’m in here by myself. I don’t want to ever experience nothing like that.

Morgan’s experience is not unique. Like so many of the 51 women interviewed for this study, the details of the disaster—watching homes fall down in front of their eyes, waking up to water surrounding them, waiting days for help to arrive, facing water levels above one’s head, lacking food and water, struggling to survive—demonstrate just a sliver of the traumatic catastrophe that was Hurricane Katrina. While this book focuses on the experiences emanating from the city of New Orleans, for those in other areas of the Gulf Coast, the destruction was even more absolute. According to Kai Erikson, Hurricane Katrina “was the most *destructive* disaster in our history when one considers the amount of harm it did.” (italics in original).<sup>1</sup> “Unfathomable” barely describes the true depth of Hurricane Katrina’s losses, which include 1,720 initial deaths.<sup>2</sup>

In response, this book has two purposes. First, it provides a formal examination of how low-income, African American women prepared for, survived through, and attempted to recover after Hurricane Katrina. Through the illumination of the intersectional relationship between poverty and disaster, this project details whether low-income women were able to successfully transfer poverty survival strategies to the context of Hurricane Katrina, and what those experiences meant for redefining the concept of disaster recovery among this highly marginalized population. This research matters because these women’s experiences also provide insight into the bitter realities of continued social inequality and segregation in our society, exacerbated by the storm into instances of racial and class-based bias and violence. This book documents those experiences and demonstrates their sociological relevance.

Second, the book is written with the aim of guiding you, the reader, through the disaster experience as it is lived by survivors. While reading a book can never fully express the lived reality of such a catastrophe, it is my goal to sensitize you to the myriad of social inequalities that disasters of this magnitude illuminate, so as to provide a context in which to better understand the evacuation, survival, and recovery experiences of women with extremely limited resources. For without understanding the circumstances of the least advantaged, how can we possibly make decisions as a society that will ensure the protection of *all* our citizens when the next Katrina occurs?

## **Landfall**

The force of Hurricane Katrina as it made landfall was less than expected. Peaking as a Category 5 storm, Katrina weakened as it approached land, and came ashore as a strong Category 3. On a scale of 1-5, a Category 3 is in the middle. However, the physical and social devastation, in combination with the storm surge, were that of something much stronger. This medium-level storm blew out windows on downtown high rises, tore a hole in the roof of the Louisiana Superdome where thousands sheltered for safety, burst levees from the pressure of the water backed up behind them, and simply flooded over others, dissolving the earthen mound that held the concrete levee barriers in place until they flipped over, releasing the deluge that was behind.<sup>3</sup> Roofs and walls were torn off of homes, some of which collapsed upon themselves. Trees and houses splintered, and in places like the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans, entire neighborhoods were washed away, leaving the wooden remnants scattered about like a box of matches tossed onto the ground in anger. Here each match represents the memory of a family or home lost to the storm. For those who saw the affected areas in those early months, the devastation wrought by Katrina was seemingly infinite, absolute, and simply unimaginable—a true catastrophe. No warning could prepare us for this.

As a catastrophe, Hurricane Katrina was so intense that its classification is separate and apart from that of a disaster.<sup>4</sup> Catastrophes include events such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and Florida's Hurricane Andrew—a Category 5 storm that leveled parts of Southern Dade County.<sup>5</sup> Hurricane Katrina, whose damages covered 93,000 square miles of the U.S. Gulf Coast<sup>6</sup> and devastated New Orleans, Mississippi's Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, and Gulfport areas, covered a much wider swath of territory than Florida's Hurricane Andrew. Moreover, in the case of New Orleans, the levee breaches that followed Katrina's winds greatly exacerbated the scope and depth of the disaster in the city. Thus, the classification of Hurricane Katrina as a catastrophe results from the extensive wind and storm surge damage in coastal Mississippi, the failure of the levee system in New Orleans and the devastatingly high death toll across the entire Gulf Coast region.

At this point, most Katrina books provide a detailed account of Katrina's effects on businesses lost, the number of people displaced (over 1.5 million), and other facts and figures. I'd prefer not to do so, and direct you to read Lynn Weber and Lori Peek's meticulously researched discussion of these statistics.<sup>7</sup> Instead, this book is focused

on the *lived* experiences of low-income African American women. As such, it seems fitting to introduce you to them and the study early, so you can come to understand Hurricane Katrina not by the numbers, but by the way it affected real people: women who simply wanted to protect themselves, their families, their children, and their grandchildren from harm.

### Meeting the Women

The study's purposive sample consists of 51 women: Simone, Louisa, Olivia, Ann, Alike, Keebra, Linda, Ruth, Vivienne, Zarah, Callista, Ingrid, Aliyah, Sheila, Vanessa, Angela, Destiny, Iris, Thelma, Joanna, Jada, Ebony, Morgan, Lydia, Abigail, Janelle, Thea, Keisha, Faith, Twila, Mary, Sharon, Asia, Julia, Mercedes, Amaya, Coral, Barbara Jean, Ruby, Giselle, Eurdice, Trinity, Lillian, Savannah, Gloria, Daphne, Sarah, Perla, Althea, Regina, and Violet.<sup>8</sup> All are Black or African American.<sup>9</sup> Each woman was assigned a pseudonym to protect her identity, and those names were chosen by using a baby name website, then selecting African American baby names, then sorting them by generation. More traditional names (Sarah, Ruth, Barbara Jean, Ann) reflect older respondents. More contemporary names (Jada, Zarah, Aliyah, Mercedes) reflect younger respondents. To the extent possible, names were chosen to match the personalities of the women and/or in correspondence with their experiences (e.g., Faith, Lillian).

All of the women had been residents of the city of New Orleans when the storm made landfall, and averaged nearly six years of residency in their public housing units prior to the storm, though some had been in the system much longer. The sample was taken from lists of former and current public housing residents, displaced by the HOPE VI redevelopment of the Desire and St. Thomas communities in New Orleans. (See the Appendix for a more detailed account of the sample frame's origin.)

As a group, the mean age was just over 50 years old, making many mothers to adult children and caregivers to grandchildren whom they raised. Just eleven women had children under the age of 18 (21.6%), and another four were raising their grandchildren (7.8%). Most (55%) were single; 12% married, 16% divorced, and 12% were widowed; the remainder were separated or cohabitating. While public housing residents are often envisioned as young single mothers with many children, in the two housing sites that form the geographic starting point for sample recruitment, there was an informal housing authority policy to rehouse older women without children first, followed by families who

had been long-term public housing residents, then families with small children last.<sup>10</sup> As a result, there are far fewer very young children among this population than might otherwise be expected.

For these women, educational opportunities had been limited during their lifetimes: 41% had no educational degree, while 47% had a high school degree or a GED. Immediately, this lack of education predisposes these women to job opportunities in the service industry of the labor market, as manufacturing was very limited in the region. Just 10% had an Associate's or Bachelor's degree. Only one respondent, a school teacher, had a graduate degree (Master's). With these low educational levels (88% with a high school education or *less*), these women are highly representative of the limited educational attainment of the broader population of the city at that time. In addition to, or perhaps because of, their low educational attainment, ninety percent (n=46) of women interviewed had earned below \$20,000 in 2004, the year prior to Katrina.

Twenty-nine women evacuated themselves despite demographic characteristics suggesting they would leave at lower rates, if at all.<sup>11</sup> Of those 29 women, 22 women left before the storm arrived and seven women left afterwards. 26 women specifically identified family or friends with whom they left in private vehicles, while the remaining three left in their own vehicles. Among those who did not evacuate, nineteen women reported being "rescued" from their flooded homes out of twenty-one women who were stranded in the city during the storm; among them were Trinity, Lillian, Regina, Louisa, Ann, Alike, Linda, Zarah, Sheila, Vanessa, Angela, Joanna, Jada, Ebony, Morgan, Lydia, Thea, Keisha, Twila, Mary, and Eurdice. Giselle, who worked at a convalescent home during the storm and aftermath, was neither stranded nor evacuated, nor did she and her husband leave immediately after the storm. Overall, decisions about evacuation timing were determined through the engagement of narratives, defining the storm as safe or a threat, or revolving around financial concerns including the potential for job loss (a detailed discussion is developed in Chapter 3). Table 1.1 presents these descriptive statistics.

In summary, the women in this sample represent a population of African American individuals with limited incomes and finite resources, but also an ability to transform situational social capital into survival resources for themselves and their family members. Throughout the remainder of this book, their capacity for agency within the social structural constraints of catastrophe will be explored.



**TABLE 1.1** Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

Variable	N=51	
Sex		
Female	100%	
Age		
mean	51.33	
s.d.	14.26	
Race		
Black	100%	
Marital Status		
Single	54.9%	(n=28)
Cohabiting	1.9%	(n = 1)
Married	11.8%	(n = 6)
Widowed	11.8%	(n = 6)
Divorced	15.7%	(n = 8)
Separated	3.9%	(n = 2)
Educational Degree		
No degree	41.2%	(n = 21)
High school/GED	47.1%	(n = 24)
Assoc./Bachelor's	9.8%	(n = 5)
Graduate degree	1.9%	(n = 1)
Income category		
0-\$20,000	90.2%	(n = 46)
\$20,000-\$40,000	9.8%	(n = 5)
Homeownership		
No	72.5%	(n = 37)
Yes	7.8%	(n = 4)
Missing	19.6%	(n=10, all pretest)
Length of residency in pre-Katrina housing in years		
Mean	pretest = 4.74, final = 6.02	
s.d.	1.82, 7.15	

Note: pretest n=10, final survey n=41.

## **Studying Katrina as a Scholar-Survivor**

I am a Hurricane Katrina survivor. I evacuated from New Orleans to escape the storm on Saturday, August 27, 2005 around 8 p.m., and did not return to my home for nearly six weeks. Since the moment I saw the storm headed for my city on television, I have not had a single day where I did not think about the storm, its destruction, or this study. It is exhausting. It is also imperative that this work be continued, in memory of those who lost their lives and homes unnecessarily, and in honor of the women who were strong enough to share with me what was in many cases the very worst experiences of their lives. It is from this vantage point that I engage both my training as a sociologist and my experience as an evacuee and decade-long resident of New Orleans to help elucidate not only the disaster, but the cultural significance of the events for residents. A detailed description and reflection of my role as a scholar-survivor is developed at length in the Appendix.

## **Collecting the Data**

Telephone interviews form the foundation for the study, primarily because many respondents were displaced from New Orleans and no research funding for meeting with women in person was available. Whether using cell phones, setting up landlines in new FEMA apartments, or by borrowing someone else's phone, women found ways to contact me upon receiving one of the hundreds of recruitment letters that I sent. Only one respondent interviewed lacked her own phone and she utilized a neighbor's phone to complete the interview. (See the Appendix for a detailed account of the recruitment process, research sites, study history and context, and the author's navigations of data collection within her own displacement as a Katrina survivor.) All interviews were collected between October 2005 and December 2006.

Each interview had two parts: the first was a section of closed-ended questions on evacuation, employment, assistance before and after the storm, and demographic characteristics. The second section included open-ended questions, allowing women to describe their evacuation and recovery experiences in detail and in their own words. The first section required 5 to 15 minutes to complete while the second section typically took between 30 to 90 minutes. Responses were typed during the interview and edited after; interviews were not tape-recorded. To address confidentiality, all names in this work and other published works from the study use a set of pseudonyms. Compensation included a \$20 gift card and two hotline numbers for free counseling services.

From these interviews, key theoretical questions were answered to be considered at length in this volume: Are poverty survival strategies transferrable to disaster contexts? While scholars have studied everyday survival within poverty,<sup>12</sup> how is that experience altered when a disaster is layered onto the analysis? How exactly did these low-income women face a catastrophe such as Hurricane Katrina, given their persistent social disadvantage? To what extent do race, class, and gender mitigate and transform those experiences? What mechanisms may become available to promote survival during a disaster, which are not available in normal daily life? The book also asks: Were these women able to recover? And, what does disaster recovery even mean for low-income, minority women, when the literature's definition of failed recovery shares the same characteristics as living in poverty every day?<sup>13</sup> How can you recover back to a disastrous state? The theoretical underpinnings of these questions are presented in depth in Chapter 2 for the interested reader. Now, I would like to focus the reader's attention on the experiences of Ruby and Lydia, fellow survivors of the storm. I have selected these cases to exemplify just how complex a woman's holistic disaster experience was.

### **Ruby's Experience**

A typical woman in this study, 56-year-old Ruby had been unemployed at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Having lost her husband in 1994, Ruby moved into the new Abundance Square mixed-income housing, built at the old Desire public housing site in New Orleans. Abundance Square was located along the Industrial Canal, roughly opposite where the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet connects to the system. An opportunity for a new life, the pristine housing was high quality and comparable to apartments marketed as "luxury" in the city's for-profit housing market. With handicapped accessible units, freshly painted walls, insulated windows, and central air conditioning, the new units were sunny, appealing, and seemed to be a nice place to raise a family. When Ruby spoke with me, she explained she was among the first wave of families to move into the Abundance Square apartments. She shared her unit with six other family members—two daughters and her four teenaged grandchildren, ages 13, 15, 16, and 18. Ruby was responsible for the care of her grandchildren after their mother, her third daughter, had been murdered.

Like nearly half the women in this study, Ruby had evacuated as best she could before the storm, attempting to take her family to a small

Louisiana town halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Amid traffic, Ruby missed the exit:

It was very stressful. We had left my house at 12 p.m. and we got ourselves going through Jefferson Parish. The people could drive in their vehicles, even with the door open. It was stressful and hot. It was 5:30 p.m. when we hit Airline Highway. We went through Jefferson Parish, then back to Airline. On the way out, I was in [my town]. I had passed [the town] by like two to three miles. Then, a hard rain came down. Then, a man on the radio said the storm would hit Baton Rouge before New Orleans, so we turned back.

Normally, this drive would take about 40 minutes. With the evacuation traffic, Ruby's journey took over five and a half hours. This slow pace for evacuation is common, and a consideration when deciding whether to shelter in place or leave. For elderly individuals, becoming stranded in a car on the highway can actually be far more dangerous than sheltering in place.

Since her first evacuation location was in the direct storm path according to the radio newscaster, Ruby returned to her son's home in a New Orleans suburb and rode out the storm there. After two days passed, the whole family went to the New Orleans International Airport, where they were stranded for a few more days until being transported to a church in a small Louisiana town near Shreveport. It was there that Ruby learned about the flooding of her neighborhood, which she described to me briefly: "I was living upstairs, but there was still water. I got 9-10 feet in my house. I lost everything downstairs and my stuff was ruined." Living in a two-story apartment which began on the second story of the building, Ruby's entire main floor was flooded, destroying her furniture and belongings. In her bedroom, located "upstairs" on the building's third story, her clothing and other things were destroyed as mold permeated anything above the flood line, growing unabated in the hot, humid Louisiana summer. Ruby lost everything except her life.

Staying in the church near Shreveport for the next two and a half weeks, Ruby and her family began to piece together survival systems during their immediate displacement. First, Ruby's daughter found an apartment with the help of the church members where they were staying. By embracing her access to situational social capital in the form of help from the church women, their knowledge, and financial resources, Ruby's daughter worked to establish housing stability for her family. Once settled, her daughter then helped Ruby to get her own apartment in the same complex and community where the church had sheltered her.

As Ruby's new apartment only had two bedrooms instead of the four her family needed, it was just a starting point, and a difficult one. In her new home, Ruby's rent increased by \$82 a month compared to before the storm. Ruby also received food stamps, although her allocation was reduced from over \$300 before the storm to \$226 monthly afterwards because her eldest granddaughter had turned 18 and was no longer covered by the program, despite her continued dependence upon Ruby.

Ruby faced the most difficulty with her medical care, requiring medical prescriptions for blood pressure and regular screenings for diabetes. In New Orleans, her medications had cost just \$18 a month at Charity Hospital; in her new home in Northern Louisiana, her medications were \$259 per month. Consequently, Charity Hospital was another Katrina casualty, closed permanently by the State of Louisiana after the storm. So, while Ruby was housed, fed, and receiving medical care, her monthly costs were significantly higher for herself and her family, while her incoming assistances had decreased.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Ruby epitomizes the evacuation, displacement, and recovery challenges experienced by so many women in this study. She attempted to engage her poverty survival strategies in new post-disaster contexts, only to find that reliable programs like food stamps and Medicaid were no longer sufficient to meet her family's needs in other parts of the state. Ruby is like so many of the other women you will meet here—women who, after trying to rebuild their lives, managed to survive yet not actually recover to even the basic level of impoverished security they experienced before the storm.

### **Lydia's Experience**

Lydia is the face of the working poor. A homeowner, a surgical technician, and a mother to a 16-year-old son and an adult daughter, in her 48 years Lydia built a stable life, albeit one that was certainly limited by her salary of less than \$20,000 a year. Despite working in a full-time, semi-skilled position, Lydia represents families throughout the country that struggle to make ends meet on low-wage work.<sup>15</sup> While low-income, she is hardworking, responsible, and committed to her job and community. In fact, as flooding decimated the city, she was working at a major downtown hospital where workers manually ventilated patients as long as they could while waiting for evacuation crews to arrive.

For Lydia, making arrangements to protect her son was a top priority as the storm approached New Orleans. Taking precautions,

Lydia took the storm very seriously, recognizing the threat it posed, and openly identifying the consequences it had for her extended family:

I put the children's birth certificates, put important papers, in a Ziploc bag. I had a bad feeling. I asked my youngest son to come with me, but he didn't want to come to the hospital. Then I saw it hadn't turned. I called my oldest brother to pick up my son, and they went to Atlanta. Then my brother after me, he stayed, and he drowned. Everybody else left. I was the only one who stayed in the hospital. There was children crying. People wanting milk for their children, and we turning them away. There was bodies floating, and people dying. I stayed until we was evacuated. Then my family called, 'cause they found my brother's body. Katrina. That's an experience I'd never forget.

As was the case during other interviews within this study, Lydia articulated many traumatic experiences in just a moment's time. Lydia's actions to protect her son reflect both a mother's responsibility to "do gender" by providing a way for him to leave town while she stayed,<sup>16</sup> as well as the mechanism for that evacuation—the engagement of kin-based social networks<sup>17</sup> that literally gave him a car ride to safety. She also described how her younger brother's failure to evacuate resulted in his death, reflecting race-based, class-based, and gender-based patterns of evacuation decision making.<sup>18</sup> Next, her own commitment to her workplace reflects how financial narratives become part of the evacuation decision making process (See Chapter 3). Finally, she describes the lived experience of the storm itself, demonstrating how even formal institutions such as hospitals were simply unprepared for the catastrophe that unfolded before the city and the nation. Together, this brief statement connects several themes throughout the book, demonstrating how the processes of disaster unfold and can be simultaneous and multifaceted for any given individual.

Stranded for about a week, Lydia and her coworkers pooled their food in an effort to keep themselves and their patients alive. After three days, the National Guard airdropped food on the top of the building—tuna fish and raviolis. Yet, the lack of power and an intermittently working backup generator left patients needing ventilators to perish because, as Lydia recounts, "There were people, we had to move some people on ventilators. We had to get them out. [...] They didn't have enough people to pump air into people." Over time, rescue boats finally arrived to ferry people to transportation staging grounds. For Lydia, this was the downtown Post Office, where she boarded a bus to Texas. Once there, she and some coworkers made their way to the airport, where they parted ways. For Lydia, her next step was to take a flight to stay with her

daughter in Virginia Beach, where she engaged a kin-based survival strategy to help herself during this time. After a few weeks, her son, who had evacuated to Atlanta with family, also joined Lydia there.

During her displacement, Lydia quickly found work—an uncommon opportunity for many women in this study and another common survival strategy used in everyday poverty.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the money she earned quickly dissipated—in addition to rent on an apartment in Virginia, she was also continuing to pay her mortgage on her damaged home in New Orleans. In fact, the only formal assistance she received at that time was food stamps since she had relocated outside the disaster strike zone, even though some evacuees were receiving monthly rental assistance by this point in time.<sup>20</sup> In this way, her reliance on her daughter, a source of kin-based support, put her in a less opportune location to receive the federal aid which was being granted more quickly to evacuees displaced to larger evacuee centers, such as Houston, Baton Rouge, or Atlanta.

By the time of our interview in August 2006, Lydia had finally qualified for a small amount of FEMA money and a trailer. Although the trailer was delivered to her home in April, she did not receive the keys until July and was unable to move back there due to the lack of work available in New Orleans. In Virginia, she had just signed an employment contract for a year when we spoke, suggesting while a work-based path to recovery was available, it was only available if Lydia stayed in Virginia. In short, in order to initiate her own recovery, she had to live in a geographic place that itself was undamaged, since her New Orleans-based life, including her home and job opportunities, were extremely slow to return to normal. In this way, living an extended displacement became Lydia's best recovery option, reflecting a choice many women in this study had to make as they began to rebuild their lives in the face of uncertain futures.

Comparing Ruby and Lydia's experiences, it becomes quite apparent that kin-based networks are not only an important survival strategy for living in poverty, but also are similarly engaged in disaster circumstances. Throughout the book, the importance of kin (both blood and social) for saving lives through enabling evacuation, providing shelter, or being a reason to "keep it together" will be demonstrated time and time again. Often undervalued due to their financial limitations, the positive aspects of low-income networks reflect deep commitments to family and community; in many cases, help came from those who couldn't afford to assist, yet did so anyway (See the Chapter 5 for examples).

By contrast, work- and assistance-based strategies were often dismantled. Lydia's case presents a woman who was able to find work, but for many others work was an elusive opportunity, especially among those who relocated to evacuation magnets, such as Baton Rouge, Houston, and Atlanta, where the labor market could not absorb the excess workforce. Fortunately, Lydia's relocation to Virginia put her in a less crowded labor market, improving her recovery potential. Yet, the consequence of being outside the hurricane's impact zone was a restricted ability to access FEMA aid and other social assistances. In this way, geography simultaneously enabled recovery through employment, but disabled recovery through assistances for Lydia. Together both Ruby and Lydia's experiences reflect the broader myriad of challenges low-income, Black women faced as they worked to rebuild their lives with only the clothing on their backs.

### **The Book's Outline**

The remainder of the text will present and analyze the lived experiences of female low-income disaster survivors, from evacuation to displacement, and for some, to their return to New Orleans. For readers seeking the academic groundings of the work, the theoretical discussion of poverty, survival strategies, and disaster recovery may be found in Chapter 2. From there, the book advances in three parts, in which the chapters are organized around a chronology of possibilities representing the different pathways evacuees could and did follow: from preparing for the storm to returning to, or staying away from, their New Orleans home. All pathways begin with a single decision—whether to evacuate or stay through the storm. From this moment, some paths wind through periods of stable housing experiences, while others push further into deeper displacement and uncertainty. This analysis considers each step along the way, from preparing for the storm in Chapter 3, to evacuating in advance in Chapter 4, or “riding out” the hurricane in Chapters 5 and 6, with the last often leading to being stranded in New Orleans during the disaster's aftermath. Eventually, women sought shelter in new communities, as discussed in Chapter 7, and lived through displacement, as explored in Chapter 8. Ultimately, evacuees had to decide between remaining away from New Orleans or returning home, as recounted in Chapter 9. As the accounts move further away from the storm itself, the women's narratives merge, representing many more commonalities than differences in their unified struggles and patterns living outside of, as well as within, the city of New Orleans.



Finally, out of respect for the survivors of the storm, I have worked to make their experiences the centerpiece of this book, and have moved the citations into endnotes. Doing so is a purposeful choice to make the data and analysis the centerpiece over the references engaged. In the vast Katrina literature, numerous quantitative and theoretical commentaries abound. For those looking to make sweeping generalizations, I direct you elsewhere; this sample size is too small and specific for that purpose. Instead, this book is committed to providing low-income, Black women a voice as victims and survivors of both the storm and our society's inadequate response to it. Too late came the help and too long was the suffering, as women, men, and children languished in the hot Louisiana sun, waiting days on end for water and food after being terrorized by nature and man alike. As a survivor myself, it is my hope that by reading this book, you will come to understand the texture of the experience and to rethink the meaning of Katrina for our society and for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Erikson 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Weber and Peek 2012: 1.

<sup>3</sup> NOVA 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Dynes and Rodriguez 2005; Rodríguez, Trainor, and Quarantelli 2006; Harrold 2006; Kates et al. 2006; Cutter and Emrich 2006; GAO 06-934.

<sup>5</sup> Adams et al. 2002; Gladwin and Peacock 1997; Smith and Belgrave 1995.

<sup>6</sup> The White House 2006: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Weber and Peek 2012.

<sup>8</sup> One fifth of women were in the pretest sample. The "pretest" sample refers to interviews gained early in the process, prior to the securing of any type of funding. The final survey is a modified version of the Neighborhood Change Survey, a NSF funded project to understand the evacuation and recovery experiences in selected New Orleans neighborhoods. Combining this research with the larger project allowed participants to receive a twenty dollar gift card as compensation.

<sup>9</sup> These terms are used interchangeably throughout the text, specifically because some women did not identify with the African American identity, and were not timid about telling me so. However, to preserve confidentiality, I do not specifically link the identity preferences to the exact women.

<sup>10</sup> This rehousing strategy was articulated to me verbally by an employee of the Housing Authority of New Orleans on a date I cannot specifically recall, roughly within the 6 month period prior to the hurricane (August 29, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Elliott and Pais 2006: 308.

<sup>12</sup> Edin and Lein 1997.

<sup>13</sup> See Erikson 1994; Freudenberg 1997, 1993; Edelstein 2004; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004; Adams et al. 2002; Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001; Corresponding poverty research: Wilson 1987, 1996, 2010; Massey and Denton

1993; Murray 1984, 1994; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2001; Edin and Lein 1997; Rainwater and Yancey 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Dreier 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Edin and Lein 1997; Ehrenreich 2001.

<sup>16</sup> West and Zimmerman 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Litt 2012; Edin and Lein 1997; Stack 1974; Dynes 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott and Pais 2006; Haney, Elliott, and Fussell 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Pardee 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Miller 2012.