

“Pushed Out on My Own”: The Impact of Hurricane Katrina in the Lives of Low-income Emerging Adults

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Stacey J. Bosick¹

Abstract

Drawing on life-history interviews, this study explores the impact of Hurricane Katrina in the lives of 57 low-income, African American mothers who were 20–31 years old at the time of the storm. Hurricane Katrina massively disrupted the social networks upon which these mothers relied to facilitate life transitions and make ends meet. The literature would predict that the loss of these important supports would hinder the respondents' transition-to-adulthood experiences. To the contrary, those who relocated away from social ties were more likely than those who returned to report qualitative improvement across life domains. Relocators credited Hurricane Katrina with affording them structural opportunities that lead to a greater sense of independence, a fundamental component of adulthood. This work contributes to our theoretical understanding of the role of familial support during the transition to adulthood.

Keywords

Katrina, transition to adulthood, social ties

What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everybody is so overwhelmed by all the hospitality. And so many of the peoples in the arena here, you know, they're underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.

—Barbara Bush

Following Hurricane Katrina, former First Lady Barbara Bush and her husband, former President George Bush, toured the Houston Astrodome evacuation shelter in their home state of Texas. The tour represented efforts on the part of the administration to improve public opinion about the evacuation process. However, Barbara Bush's evaluation that the evacuees were *better off* sparked outrage, particularly among those already critical of the federal response to the hurricane. The implication that the shelter environment—with its closely clustered cots and public

¹University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Stacey J. Bosick, University of Colorado Denver, 1380 Lawrence Street, Suite 420, Campus Box 105, P.O. Box 173364, Denver, CO 80217-3364, USA.

Email: stacey.bosick@ucdenver.edu

restrooms—was a more favorable living situation than the evacuees' underprivileged neighborhoods offended many members of the public.

Although many evacuees found the shelters helpful and even hospitable, one would have been hard-pressed to find an evacuee who, given the option to return to her prehurricane home, would have preferred to live out her life in a shelter. But would evacuees return to New Orleans given that their old homes could never be returned to prehurricane status and given new opportunities they would experience *outside* of the shelters? That was another matter. The assumptions by the media, politicians, and other public figures were that evacuees would naturally wish to return to New Orleans. Yet the U.S. Census showed a 29.1 percent drop in the population of New Orleans from 484,674 in 2000 to 343,829 in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2001, 2011).

This article draws on the narratives of 57 low-income, primarily African American, mothers who were ordered by then-Mayor Ray Nagin to evacuate when Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005. They were between 20 and 31 years old at the time of the storm. This period of the life course is marked by a density of life events considered important to the transition to adulthood (Rindfuss 1991). Prior to the storm these women benefitted from New Orleans-based social ties to make ends meet and facilitate life transitions. Their social location at the intersection of class, race, and gender suggests their transition-to-adulthood experiences would be jeopardized by distance from their social ties. This article reports the counterintuitive finding that those who relocated were more likely to identify qualitative improvement across life domains and view these changes as important to their progression to an independent adulthood. I discuss the implications of these findings for our theoretical understanding about the role of familial support during the transition to adulthood.

Literature Review

Life-course researchers typically use five milestones to represent the transition to adulthood: completing school, beginning full-time employment, moving out of the home of origin, marrying, and becoming a parent (Arnett 1997; Hogan and Astone 1986). While lower-class minorities and other vulnerable populations may not adhere to middle-and upper-class norms about the priority, timing, and order of these events (Edin and Kefalas 2005), it is clear that these events are consequential to a range of life outcomes impacting social mobility including educational achievement, occupational status, and later-life earnings (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan 1991; Hogan 1980; Osgood et al. 2005b). Jobs in today's global economy increasingly require advanced degrees, and those who postpone childbearing and marriage while achieving educational and occupational goals are generally at an advantage (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). Moreover, successfully navigating these transitional events impacts one's ability to achieve independence and self-sufficiency, which young people across race and income-levels value as fundamental components of successful adulthood (Arnett 2004).

The period of the life course dedicated to pursuing these events has become more protracted and, as a consequence, requires higher levels of familial support. Schoeni and Ross (2005) document that the time and money parents provide their 18- to 34-year-old children has increased dramatically over the past 30 years, largely due to longer length of schooling, later ages at first marriage, and increases in single parenting. While continued financial support appears to positively impact behaviors like college attendance, Hamilton (2013) finds that it also creates a disincentive for students' academic efforts. Johnson (2013) similarly notes a downside. Prolonged financial support, she argues, appears to increase depressive symptoms, especially for those who have already taken on some adult roles. This work suggests it would be useful to explore the relationship between other forms of prolonged support and the transition to adulthood.

Youth whose parents are equipped with educational and economic resources are more likely to receive financial support (Osgood et al. 2005a; Siennick 2011), which is mobile and frees

youth to explore and pursue opportunities even if these experiences require them to live away from the home of origin. While Arnett (2004) highlights this period of the life course as a time to explore life's possibilities, this freedom may be limited to privileged youth. Lower-income youth are more likely to receive support in the form of childcare assistance and the ability to continue living in the parental home. Unlike financial support, these forms of support require geographic proximity to social ties (Jayakody 1998; Kerckhoff 1993; Osgood et al. 2005a). This distinction, suggests that the transition behavior of low-income youth would be hindered by geographic disruption of their social ties, such as in the context of Hurricane Katrina.

A rich literature on the lives of low-income mothers also documents the importance of social supports to "make ends meet." They often have complicated support networks, which help them by providing housing, childcare, and financial assistance (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Edin and Lein 1997). A less tangible form of support is emotional (Richardson, Barbour, and Bubenzer 1991). These resources differ significantly by race (Hofferth 1984; Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1990; Parish, Hao, and Hogan 1991), though Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) note that many race differences in kin support may be attributable to social class. White families are more likely to benefit from cash assistance. Cash assistance is mobile and does not require physical proximity to one's support network. African American mothers are more likely to receive "practical support," which requires them to live near or with their social ties. Specifically, African American families are more likely to live in extended family households and more likely to benefit from childcare assistance than white families (Hofferth 1984; Hogan et al. 1990; Parish et al. 1991; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004). Together, this work suggests that low-income mothers, and African American low-income mothers in particular, would be disadvantaged by geographic separation from their social ties.

Yet the structure of New Orleans changed dramatically as a result of Katrina, and in ways that impacted the functioning of social supports. The city suffered from fundamental economic and social problems prior to the storm, which were deeply exacerbated by the destruction of infrastructure (Whelan 2006). One year following the disaster, New Orleans experienced an unemployment rate of 7.2 percent and a labor force that was 30 percent smaller than it was just before the storm (Liu, Fellowes, and Mabanta 2006). Population-driven infrastructure including public transportation, medical care, and daycare services had not been restored (Liu et al. 2006; Picou, Brunsma, and Overfelt 2010). Facing enrollment shortages, colleges and universities canceled classes, eliminated programs, and reduced faculty and staff employments (Eargle, Esmail, and Das 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Hurricane Katrina severely damaged or destroyed over 160,000 homes and apartments in New Orleans. Thus, those who returned faced a housing shortage and rents that were, on average, 39 percent higher (Crowley 2006; Liu et al. 2006).

Race, gender, and social class are among the key predictors of disaster vulnerability (Cutter et al. 2006). Katrina and its aftermath disproportionately impacted low-income African Americans, particularly women (Litt, Skinner, and Robinson 2012; Seager 2012). Lori Peek and Alice Fothergill (2008), for instance, highlight how women's disproportionate childcare responsibilities inhibited their post-Katrina recovery by limiting options for employment, housing, and services. Providing childcare was itself an increased challenge in these deteriorated conditions (Reid 2012). Low-income African Americans were slower to return to New Orleans than their white counterparts (Bevc, Nicholls, and Picou 2010; Haney, Elliott, and Fussell 2010). This trend, in combination with New Orleans's deeply disrupted infrastructure, would have made it difficult for the kinship networks of low-income mothers to function as they had prior to the disaster (Litt et al. 2012). While low-income evacuees lacked social ties in their landing destinations (Henrici, Helmuth, and Carlberg 2012), they benefited from undamaged infrastructure of these cities. Further, although the opportunities and characteristics varied across landing destinations, support from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and charitable organizations (see, for example, Holcombe 2010) may have contributed to their ability to survive without kinship networks.

It is therefore unclear whether New Orleans-based social ties would constitute a strong pull factor for low-income mothers or whether—and to what end—the new opportunities arising out of these new structural circumstances would supplant the role of social ties in facilitating their transition-to-adulthood experiences. To shed light on this matter, this article exploits the exogeneity of Hurricane Katrina to explore the roles of social support and opportunity structure in shaping the transition-to-adulthood experiences of low-income, African American mothers.

This context provides a unique occasion to study the role of social support in shaping the transition-to-adulthood experiences of low-income, African American mothers.

Method

The 57 respondents were originally part of a multisite project that began prior to Hurricane Katrina. The initial project, the Opening Doors demonstration study, is an experiment designed to learn whether new types of financial aid, enhanced counseling services, and instructional innovations improve graduation retention and longer-term academic success of low-income community college students. The New Orleans-based participants ($n = 1,019$) in the original study had enrolled in two community colleges in New Orleans in 2004–2005. To be eligible for the study, students had to be parents of at least one child under the age of 19, have a high school diploma, and have a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Ninety-five percent of the initial participants were female. They had an average age of 24.9.

About half of the participants ($n = 492$) had answered a 12-month follow-up telephone survey when Hurricane Katrina interrupted the study and displaced most of the respondents. The research team organized a qualitative follow-up study consisting of in-depth interviews to explore adversity and resilience among these students. With the help of a research firm, we relocated the respondents using their original contact information (especially cellular telephone numbers and email addresses) and publically available records. In a handful of cases, the telephone numbers were not valid for our respondent, but did belong to a family member who offered more current information. We were ultimately successful in relocating 81.7 percent ($n = 402$) of those participants who had completed the 12-month survey. Of those, 47.7 percent were living in the New Orleans metropolitan area, 12.5 percent were elsewhere in Louisiana, 24.9 percent were in Texas, 4.7 percent were in Georgia, and 10.2 percent were in other states.

As they were located between April 2006 and March 2007, we screened for those who had lived in Orleans or Jefferson Parish prior to the storm and included only those who had experienced damage to their prehurricane home. Because we aimed to explore adversity and resilience, we wanted to limit variability in the sample to those who were materially affected by the storm and had to evacuate for an extended period. We decided to include only women in the qualitative sample. We interviewed respondents as they were located and screened until we reached data saturation. We sampled about half (28) of our respondents from those who had returned to the New Orleans area and the remaining from those who relocated to the most typical destinations: other locations in Louisiana (6), Houston metropolitan area, (13) and Dallas metropolitan area (10). All but 2 of the 57 women we interviewed were African American. Their demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Two other interviewers and I met some respondents in interviewer offices, restaurants, and coffee shops. Many of our respondents had transportation and scheduling constraints, and found it more convenient to meet in their own homes. All three interviewers are female and ranged from 28 to 40 years old at the time of the interviews. Two are white and one is African American. Sarah R. Lowe, Kara Lustig, and Helen B. Marrow (2011) note differences in the way our interviewees spoke about race when with a white interviewer versus the African American interviewer, but interviewer race did not appear to influence interviewee's overall views on the role of racism during the storm and evacuation efforts. At the time of the interviews, one interviewer was a doctoral

Table 1. Demographic Information ($n = 57$).

Demographic Indicators	Returners	Relocators	Full sample
Female	28 <i>100.0</i>	29 <i>100.0</i>	57 <i>100.0</i>
African American	26 <i>92.9</i>	29 <i>100.0</i>	55 <i>96.5</i>
Mean age at interview	25.9	25.5	25.8
Mean number of children	2.0	2.1	2.0
Enrolled in school in August 2005	19 <i>79.2</i>	20 <i>76.9</i>	39 <i>78.0</i>
Working in August 2005	21 <i>80.8</i>	25 <i>86.2</i>	46 <i>83.6</i>
Married in August 2005	6 <i>21.4</i>	10 <i>34.5</i>	16 <i>28.1</i>
Living independently in August 2005	18 <i>69.2</i>	19 <i>70.4</i>	37 <i>69.8</i>

Note. Percentages are italicized. All differences are statistically insignificant.

student, one interviewer was a professor, and one was a university administrator with a doctoral degree in sociology. While the educational backgrounds of the researchers are certainly not unique to this study, it is possible that the interviewers' educational backgrounds may have encouraged respondents to emphasize their commitments to their educational goals. This would not explain the observed differences between respondents that are highlighted in this article, however.

The interviews were semistructured and covered a range of topics including their experiences with Hurricane Katrina, their childhood and family of origin, their education, work, partnering and parenting histories, and their expectations and hopes for the future. All of the interviewers used the same interview schedule and life-history calendar (Freedman et al. 1988). On average, interviews lasted 90–120 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

With the help of a research assistant, I then coded and analyzed the data using ATLAS.ti software. I took an inductive approach, beginning with a broad interest in understanding how our interviewees self-evaluated their post-Katrina recovery. I moved iteratively between theory and data analysis, developing and then refining codes as the data analysis progressed (Charmaz 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994). After it emerged that social ties played a large role in the decision-making process, for instance, I developed additional codes for what the women identified as the benefits and drawbacks of social ties. I quantified patterns using ATLAS.ti and then searched for disconfirming evidence. This process resulted in the findings described below. All of the respondents' names are pseudonyms.

Results and Analysis

The Silver Lining

Hurricane Katrina presented a number of hardships to the women we interviewed. For some, particularly the quarter of our sample (14 respondents) who did not evacuate prior to the storm, the hurricane was a very traumatic event. Interestingly, however, we asked all of our interviewees to tell us about “the most important bad thing” that had ever happened to them and only 9 respondents offered Hurricane Katrina. The women instead recalled a broad range of experiences including being sexually victimized in childhood, witnessing violence in their neighborhoods, and struggling with ongoing health problems. When interviewees were urged to compare Katrina

to these events, they consistently responded that Katrina was not as bad. In fact, in nearly every interview, respondents described aspects of their lives that were positively impacted by the storm. Seven respondents even offered Katrina as “the most important good thing” that had happened in their lives thus far.

This is consistent with Dan P. McAdams and Philip J. Bowman’s (2001) work describing how individuals cope with uncontrollable events during the life course. Coping with uncontrollable events is a complicated developmental task. In order to maintain a sense of well-being, individuals must exert some control over negative events. They often do so by finding a redeeming benefit or silver lining (McAdams and Bowman 2001). A short time after Katrina our interviewees were quick to offer an upside to having experienced the disaster. Kendra is a 28-year-old mother of five. She was under great stress in the days following Katrina because she was having trouble locating her brother. We interviewed her in Houston where she had since purchased a home with her husband. Respondents had various ways of expressing the idea that Katrina gave them new perspective on life. For instance, four respondents referred to Katrina as a “wake-up call.” Kendra was one of them.

INTERVIEWER: Sometimes things happen that make a big difference in people’s lives. What do you think is the most important good thing that has ever happened to you?

KENDRA: I can say my family got stronger after Katrina. I’ve always had this outlook on my kids, the goals I have for them. But my family was shattered a little bit. As far as my marriage. . . after Katrina we actually got stronger. I love my kids unconditionally. Same thing with my husband. I loved him before but I love him even more now. Katrina kind of woke me up.

Those who had returned to New Orleans similarly emphasized the way the tragedy helped to bring their families closer together. Brandy moved into her parents’ home in New Orleans following the storm. She’s the mother of one child.

INTERVIEWER: Have your activities changed since before the hurricane?

BRANDY: Before the hurricane, I didn’t spend a lot of time with my son. I played with him, but not a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What changed that?

BRANDY: The hurricane. Like the events with it. When we passed the bridge and saw all those people out there and the bodies that were covered with the sheets, it made you get closer to your family. Me and my sister and mom, we are already close. It just made us get a little closer.

Important differences emerged, however, when we asked the women to compare their life circumstances before and after the storm across a number of more specific domains. These included employment, education, living arrangements, and parenting. Contrary to our expectations, the relocators were more likely than the returners to report qualitative *improvement* across these domains. The fact that the returners and relocators were similarly able to point to general, redeeming benefits of Katrina suggests that the more positive reports by relocators about specific life transitions were more than a means of coping with an uncontrollable event.

Conceptualizing Transition to Adulthood

We discussed with our respondents the traditional, middle-class expectation that young people should achieve certain milestones in order, for instance, finishing school before getting a job and

becoming married before having children. While they viewed the timing and order of life transitions as consequential to later life outcomes, they did not view traditional routes as realistic in their lives. Broader notions of self-sufficiency and independence surfaced as more central themes. This is consistent with Arnett's (2003:70) work, which finds "consensus among emerging adults across ethnic groups that becoming independent from parents and learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person is an immutable requirement for adult status."

Sixty-three percent of the women we interviewed had become mothers as teenagers and all but six had their first child outside of marriage. While they viewed motherhood as their first step toward adulthood, marriage did not surface in their narratives as a salient marker of adulthood nor a pathway to independence. Seventy percent were living with parental figures (usually their mothers) at the time Katrina struck, and 80 percent of the students were also working.

Reaching educational goals, on the other hand, reverberated throughout the interviews as particularly pressing and salient in their lives. This is no doubt due in part to the fact that college enrollment was a criterion for selection into the original study. The women were working primarily as service employees (e.g., fast food cashiers, restaurant servers, and hotel front desk clerks) and administrative support personnel (e.g., office assistants and receptionists). Most were pursuing associate's degrees and certificates in applied fields (e.g., nursing, computer networking, and accounting). Importantly, they viewed college completion, not as a direct marker of adulthood, but as a means of achieving stable, well-paying employment that would make a self-sufficient, independent adulthood possible.

Relocators

Those who were still living outside of New Orleans at the time of our interview emphasized change in their lives since Katrina. These "relocators" referred to Katrina as "liberating" and viewed it positively as a needed "push" in their lives. They credited the disaster with granting them "fresh starts" and "clean slates." Sherice, a 23-year-old living in Houston, highlights the more open opportunity structure in Houston as compared to New Orleans.

SHERICE: Hurricane Katrina was a blessing to me. I thank God that everything happened. And not just saying that because none of my family is dead or we have another house. Just to get out of New Orleans . . . Because when you live in something, you only see what you see . . . God, you gave me an opportunity to get out of a place that was below sea level. It's hard to get a job there, the poverty rate there. You allowed me to get out of there and to get into a place where there's more opportunities. And anybody who is out of New Orleans is in a place that has more opportunities than New Orleans.

Rather than viewing Katrina as an obstacle, the relocators viewed Katrina as pushing them toward a more independent adulthood. They voiced enthusiasm about their educational and employment trajectories, as well as changes to their parenting and residential environments.

Like those who had returned to New Orleans, those who were still living away at the time we interviewed them felt that Katrina had delayed their progress through school. The relocators and returners reported similar rates of enrollment (46 and 39 percent, respectively; *n.s.*). Yet the students who had relocated were twice as likely as the students who had returned to report *qualitative* improvement in their educational trajectories, including greater resolve for reaching their educational goals. These respondents also reported changing majors, being enrolled at stronger institutions, or achieving higher grades.

Danisha is a 28-year-old mother of three living in Dallas. She failed a course during the semester prior to Katrina, which made her ineligible for financial aid. Due to this financial setback, she was

only enrolled in one class at the time Katrina hit. When I interviewed her at her home in Dallas, she was employed as a cafeteria worker and had just finished a full semester earning “one A and two Bs.” I asked her how realistic it was that she would achieve her goal of attaining an AA degree.

- DANISHA: It’s real. I have my mind set on it. And I don’t think at this time nothing is going to stop me. Nothing is not going to change me.
- INTERVIEWER: There aren’t any obstacles that could get in the way?
- DANISHA: No. I don’t care if I become cripple. I’m going to wheel in there in a wheelchair. I’m going to become a surgical tech, and that’s my goal in life because I want my children to have things that I didn’t have when I was younger. For me to do that, I have to become somebody. And I don’t want to be no cafeteria worker all my life, working in a cafeteria for all my life. I don’t want to do that. I want to, you know, be somebody.

Although the relocators and returners were employed at similar rates (83 and 86 percent, respectively; n.s.) the relocators were also more likely to report qualitative improvements in their employment trajectories. More than half of the employed relocators (57 percent) told us that their jobs were better paying, more fulfilling, or had more opportunity for promotion than their prehurricane positions. I interviewed Tanya, a 24-year-old single mother of one daughter, in her apartment. I asked if her career goals had changed since relocating to Dallas. She told me: “I didn’t have a real goal before the hurricane. I was just trying to survive. I didn’t have one at all.” Tanya had decided to take a break from school and was working as an administrative assistant to a traffic court prior to the storm. She detailed a particular experience at her new position in Texas that allowed her to envision herself in a managerial role and motivated her to continue in school.

- TANYA: When I [started] there, it was all . . . disorganized. I’m like, “oh, we cannot work like this. I think ya’ll need to do something. How did this get like this?” . . . [My boss was] like, “Go ahead; you can do it. Just come through me and, you know, just let me know what you’re doing and . . . you have free range to do what you want to do. That’s your chance to get more experience in being in this position.”
- INTERVIEWER: And so did you change things?
- TANYA: Yes. It’s running so much smoother. But it’s more stressful because I never had a position where I made decisions or where, you know, I had to plan out the workload, delegate work assignments. I never had to do that. So- but that gave me, like, I can do this. I think I need to go get my bachelor’s so I can get paid to do this. So that worked out perfectly.
- INTERVIEWER: So it encouraged you to continue with school?
- TANYA: Yeah—Because I can do this at a higher level and really get paid for it because I’m pretty good. I made the office *work*.
- INTERVIEWER: And do you think of it as a job or a career?
- TANYA: It feels like a career this time because I good at it; I’m good at it. You know, it’s challenged me to think. I feel like I’m an asset . . .

The women perceived differences in the opportunity structure of their new cities compared to pre-Katrina New Orleans and speculated that these differences were made more extreme by the destruction of infrastructure in New Orleans. Specifically, they pointed to stronger educational and job opportunities. Further, nearly all of them pointed to safer neighborhoods and better schools for their children, which allowed them to feel effective as mothers. Importantly, they credited themselves with “seizing” the new opportunities they were faced with. They saw

themselves as savvy actors and felt responsible for making residential decisions that led to better employment, education, and parenting environments. Keisha, a 27-year-old married mother of one, had been enjoying her work as an educational assistant prior to Katrina. She was working in banking when we interviewed her at her home in Dallas and reported that her annualized salary had increased by about \$15,000. She describes her feeling of self-efficacy.

INTERVIEWER: When you think about your life before the hurricane and your life after, do you see that things have gotten better or changed for the worse?

KEISHA: I feel like I have accomplished more. I feel that I have put myself in a situation where I can give my son a better education and as far as me—job wise—I don't feel that I'm limited.

While their residential moves allowed them to take advantage of opportunities that advanced their movement into adulthood, their moves also contributed more directly to independence. Seventy percent of the sample was living dependently prior to Katrina, yet relocators were more likely than those who returned to have moved to independent living arrangements since Katrina. About 89 percent (all but three) of the relocators were living independently compared to 67 percent of the returners ($p < .05$). They were living away from their social supports including parental figures upon whom they had depended prior to the storm. Consistent with Michael J. Shanahan, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Erik J. Porfeli's (2005) work affirming the association between demographic transitions and subjective age identity, the relocators strongly linked independence from their parents with their self-perceived adulthood.

Nearly two-thirds of our respondents became mothers as teenagers. While they reported that the birth of their child caused them to grow up and mature, they also reported that their own parents and guardians played a large role in raising their children. This support, while helpful, simultaneously undermined their own status as parents. Now living on their own, they reported having greater parental control, responsibility, and competence. Felicia, a 25-year-old single mother living in Houston, articulated this well. We asked her when in her life she began to feel like an adult.

FELICIA: I guess I kind of consider myself as an adult not having to go to my parents. I think more when I became independent. I didn't really consider myself an adult, despite me being a mom. I didn't look at myself being like that because I had so many problems, I was living like a child. Momma, I have this problem; I need help with it. I had this financial problem; I need help with it. So, I didn't consider myself an adult because I wasn't living like an adult then until I was able to take care of my own things.

INTERVIEWER: So, was it when you became independent out here that you started feeling like an adult?

FELICIA: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So, it sounds like it is the first time you've been alone with your kids?

FELICIA: Yeah, the first time I'm actually independent and . . . can take care of things on my own . . .

INTERVIEWER: What's it like being independent?

FELICIA: It feels much better, a lot less stressful definitely. I didn't like to depend on anyone, I mean especially with someone depending on me too. So, I didn't care for it at all. My family never gave me any hard problems about anything. They were always there to lend a helping hand, but it's nicer to be able to take care of things on your own like you're supposed to anyway.

We asked all respondents to tell us about family members or people in their lives that they “talk with regularly” and “depend on for help or support.” Interestingly, Felicia was one of only a quarter of relocators who had a pre-Katrina friend or family member—in this case, her mother—living close enough to provide assistance with responsibilities such as childcare. Those in her position described such support as minimal compared to the support they had in New Orleans. Consistent with the other relocators, the bulk of their supports had returned to New Orleans and they had not yet developed substitute social relationships. They viewed themselves as less reliant on social ties and more independent than they were prior to the storm.

One should not overlook the various temporary resources available to our interviewees following the storm, as they pursued new experiences and opportunities in absence of their social supports. All but two of the interviewees (including returners) had received government assistance. This support ranged from one-time cash payments through FEMA (usually \$2,000) to ongoing rental payments through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which was available to those who had been living in government-subsidized housing prior to Katrina. All of our interviewees also received material assistance from churches, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, or other charities. This structural support was more mobile than the kinship-based support they had received in pre-Katrina New Orleans and helped make relocating possible. While the relocators and returners initially received similar levels of support, the relocators ultimately benefited from governmental support for a longer period. This was due to the fact that much of the support was granted to the “head of household,” a status lost by returners who moved to New Orleans and back in with their parents or grandparents. It is unclear from our interviews whether the relocators would have experienced the same degree of success in their new environments had it not been for these supports and how their lives changed once this aid became unavailable.

At least in the short term, however, the relocators were more likely than the returners to stress ways in which their lives had improved since Hurricane Katrina. They noted progress and positive shifts across key life domains and emphasized ways in which the residential change contributed to a greater sense of accomplishment and self-sufficiency.

Returners

The returners differed from the relocators by emphasizing continuity between their lives before and after Katrina. Among the returners the transition through key life events involved picking up where they had left off prior to the storm. Our interviewees faced structural inequalities which made them especially vulnerable to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. Most were working part-time or low-paying jobs that did not offer paid leave during the disaster and were unavailable upon their return to New Orleans. Only two of the previously employed returners were no longer working, but only five of them had returned to the same jobs. The majority (79 percent) had found jobs that they considered similar in nature and pay. Nearly all of the women were living in subsidized housing or renting privately owned apartments that were uninhabitable or unavailable by the time they returned. Only a couple of respondents were living in the same homes or neighborhoods in which they had lived prior to the storm, but the majority (68 percent) described living circumstances that were comparable in terms of neighborhood safety, quality of schools, and social demographics. While their educational programs were temporarily closed, more than a third (39 percent) had reenrolled in school by the time of the interview. Nearly all of them returned to the same educational and vocational programs in which they were previously enrolled.

Latasha (28 years old) returned to New Orleans with her husband and two children. She was in school to become an elementary school teacher prior to the storm, and these plans had not changed. Throughout her interview, she emphasized her efforts to get her life back to the way it was prior to the storm.

- INTERVIEWER: Do you think that things have changed for the better or changed for the worse?
- LATASHA: [They're] really about the same . . . It's like a broken puzzle and you just have to pick it up, pick up and just put it back together . . . You want to pick up and get to where you was before because of your children and your family . . . And that's all I'm trying to do is just start back over. Start over and get back to where I was before.
- INTERVIEWER: Has it been difficult, or do you think it's come pretty easily?
- LATASHA: It's been difficult. It's been difficult, but you just have to take it one day at a time.

Like Latasha, returners viewed Katrina as an obstacle in their movement through key life transitions. They discussed the difficulty rebuilding their lives and "starting all over again" in a context in which support systems and infrastructure were lacking. They saw these factors contributing to further delays in their progress toward careers, independent living, and especially school completion. Shauna, a 28-year-old mother of one, was living with family in her pre-Katrina neighborhood at the time of her interview. She was studying for an associate's degree in computer networking prior to the storm and hoped to move into that field when she completed school.

- INTERVIEWER: Did Hurricane Katrina affect your career plans?
- SHAUNA: Yes . . . It delayed me a whole year on my plans of finishing school. It knocked a lot of my organization off.

Note that Shauna answered a question about her career plans with a response about education. This was typical of our interviewees. They viewed education as a fundamental prerequisite for better paying, more stable employment, and ultimately greater self-sufficiency. Thus, frustration about the extra time needed to complete their degrees was a common complaint.

- SHAUNA: Everything else was going the way I wanted it to go . . . So the only thing stopping me was the hurricane. It took a year from me.

The returners worked hard to rebuild their lives and as they did so, they emphasized regaining stability over making changes. We asked Petrice, a 21-year-old nursing student and single mother of one, to tell us about the biggest challenge recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

- PETRICE: Trying to start all over. It's like at first, where do you start?
- INTERVIEWER: Where did you decide to start?
- PETRICE: By saying I would go pick up where I left off at school. I wasn't going to try to change anything.

Similar to other returners, Petrice's primary focus was school. She postponed other transitions, viewing them as longer-term goals.

- INTERVIEWER: Where do you think you'll be in five to ten years?
- PETRICE: I should be completed with school and independent.
- INTERVIEWER: Independent how?
- PETRICE: Able to take care of things financially... Take on the role of the adult. Being more independent and moving out of my mother's household and having my own place.

At least in the short term, the returners sought continuity. The use of language like “starting all over again,” “rebuilding,” and “putting things back together” reverberated throughout their interviews. They struggled to pick up life where they had left off.

The “Pull” of Social Ties

Virtually all of the respondents in the study were born and raised in New Orleans. As was typical among New Orleans residents, their support systems were almost exclusive to New Orleans before the storm. Consequently they were deeply undermined by the storm and its aftermath (Litt 2008; Peek and Fothergill 2008; Willinger and Knight 2012). While we did not ask our respondents for a detailed accounting of the number of their social ties who had returned to New Orleans, all but a couple of respondents—returners and relocators—described having more supports in New Orleans than any other location. Yet even our respondents who returned to New Orleans to benefit from their social networks experienced some difficult gaps, as other social ties were scattered throughout the nation. Michaela, a 30-year-old cosmetology student and single mother of one, explains,

I had a physician who really cared about her patients. She’s not here anymore . . . It’s really hard. A lot of things are just not here anymore.

Consistent with the other returners, Michaela had to face the reality that her support system was further attenuated by the damaged infrastructure of New Orleans. Once clustered within their neighborhoods, their social ties were now spread throughout the city in a context in which only half of the public transportation routes were operating (Liu et al. 2006). Due to the post-Katrina housing shortage, rents had skyrocketed, even as maintenance services were lacking. Michaela describes the additional burden this places on her social ties.

I have to call constantly for maintenance to come . . . You know, they say “we’re coming.” No, they never come. So eventually I’ll call like my dad or somebody over to come and fix it for me, and I just—I’m like the rest of the people in the city . . . The [rent] is almost twice the amount that I was paying pre-Katrina.

The damaged infrastructure of New Orleans and diminished services of public and private organizations placed greater strain on the returners’ social ties to not only function in this context but also compensate for new deficiencies. Despite these deteriorated social conditions, social ties overwhelmingly remained their fundamental reason for returning.

MICHAELA: My family is here, thank God; my mom is back; my dad is back; my sisters are back. So the support system is there . . . [But] certain organizations or agencies I can go to and get help with different little things that I need, they’re not here.

INTERVIEWER: So what made you come back to Louisiana because a lot of those things that you’re talking about . . . really aren’t under your control.

MICHAELA: I came back to New Orleans because I was missing my family. I’m not saying that I cannot survive without my family; but like I said, I’m a single parent and I have a boy, and he needs to be around a positive male figure. And—

INTERVIEWER: Who is that figure?

MICHAELA: My father. He’s around my father like every other day just about. My family, my mom helps me—she babysits him while I work and in school and studying.

To be sure, social ties were also very strong among relocators. The relocators deeply missed New Orleans. They considered New Orleans home and longed for the cultural and social connections they had with the city and their neighborhoods. Those who relocated pointed to the loss of access to social ties as the fundamental drawback of doing so. While they celebrated opportunities for an independent adulthood, they articulated that these opportunities came at the cost of social ties. They viewed the decision about whether to relocate or return as a choice between opportunities and social ties. Twenty-four-year-old Tanya relocated to Dallas with her daughter and describes this trade-off.

As far as opportunities, there are more opportunities here. That's the better part of it. But, like, that love that I talked about with my sister and my family, that's complete—I still love them, but it's not as close because we're not there, you know, together every day. But the love is still there. You still feel it, but it's not the same of level of closeness.

Our interviewees primarily described two ways that their social ties interfered with their movement to independent adulthood. First, the sense that, among their New Orleans-based networks, “nobody's going anywhere,” was pervasive. They described their view that New Orleans-based social networks limited their access to information that could benefit their educational and work trajectories. This idea is consistent with Cecilia Menjivar's (2000) finding that some socio-economically homogeneous social networks can be inertial and serve to stymie mobility. Members circulate the same information and resources, and provide limited opportunities for advancement (Menjivar 2000). Mothers' dependence may also limit their drive to broaden these social networks to include members with new information and resources (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998). Twenty-eight-year-old Tameka explains how opportunities were out of the reach of her social ties. Her husband wants to return to New Orleans, but she is against the idea. She prefers to remain living in Houston.

He wants to go back but I'm like, no. I like the schools out here for my son. I like the schools for myself. I like the opportunities. I don't think they have many opportunities in New Orleans. You had to have the right connection.

In short, the relocators saw opportunities in New Orleans as inaccessible to them. They did not view their social networks as capable of providing requisite inside knowledge or connecting them to useful educational and employment opportunities. They viewed returning to their social ties in New Orleans as jeopardizing the opportunities they now had exposure and access to. This was supported by returners like 24-year-old Deonte. She describes how she convinced her husband to return to New Orleans after they had temporarily relocated to Marietta, Georgia.

I said, “We might as well move back home. We'll do so much better home.” I lied to him. We did better out there. They had more money out there. But I wanted to be around my family.

The second way in which social ties undermined progress toward an independent adulthood was more direct. The relocators viewed living with or very near one's parental figures as a central marker of dependence. Relocating away from New Orleans required that they move to independent living circumstances, where they faced more intensive household and parenting responsibility. Demara is a 24-year-old mother of two. As was typical of the respondents, Demara moved several times after Katrina. Although she settled just 90 miles from New Orleans, in Baton Rouge, she saw herself as having relocated away from New Orleans-based social ties. She describes how the pressure of having to make it on her own feels better to her:

- DEMARA: Better because I was able to move and I'm not so dependent on my family now. I know I have to do this on my own.
- INTERVIEWER: Even though it's hard not being with them?
- DEMARA: Yea. But I know I have to do it on my own now because they always pampered me. I didn't have to want for anything and now I know I have to get up to go to work because I have these two to feed . . . For me it's better. It's like a dream for me because in New Orleans, I didn't have a problem with my family but they are the type of family that they are so close, they are too close. And I needed some space. So it's real good for me.

Returners, too, held the view that living with or heavily depending on one's parental figures is incompatible with an independent adulthood. Jade, a 28-year-old Dallas-resident and single mother of one, felt obligated to return to New Orleans to be with her grandmother, who raised her. She was one of five relocators who planned to return to New Orleans. She describes her mixed feelings about moving back in with her grandmother:

- JADE: I don't have to be an adult here. I come here and, you know, and we play board games . . . and I don't feel 28, I feel like I'm 17, 18 years old when I come here.
- INTERVIEWER: Right. Is that good or bad?
- JADE: Both . . . It's mostly good, because it's like I feel stress free—not worrying, because . . . she helps me pay my bills and all of this, but I want to be able to do it on my own, you know, versus having my grandmother do it for me.

In summary, the low-income mothers we interviewed expressed deep connections to their social—primarily familial—ties. The relocators lamented the new geographic distance from these supports. However, they overwhelmingly viewed returning as incompatible with the structural opportunities that had become available to them and the outcomes they now envisioned for themselves. This assessment was supported by returners who viewed their decision to return to social ties as attenuating their individual opportunities.

Katrina as an Exogenous “Push”

I have described how those who relocated were more likely than those who returned to describe being “better off” across life domains including employment, education, parenting, and independent residence. Qualitative changes in these areas, I have argued, contributed to a greater sense of independent adulthood. Yet an important question remains. Did relocating serve as a “turning point” in their transition to adulthood or were those who were more independent prior to the storm simply more likely to relocate?

Life-course researchers use the term *turning point* to refer to the redirection or modification of a life trajectory (Elder 1985). Andrew Abbott (1997) argues that life trajectories are by nature “inertial,” but adaptation to life events can lead to discontinuity between past and present. The suggestion that Hurricane Katrina may have induced turning points in the lives of those who experienced it is not new. David S. Kirk (2009, 2012) exploits the exogenous nature of Katrina and demonstrates how residential change led to lower levels of recidivism among ex-prisoners. Much debate has centered on whether events, such as residential transition, truly *cause* change or whether change-ready actors self-select into these experiences. Peggy C. Giordano, Stephen A. Cernkovich, and Jennifer L. Rudolph (2002:992) find middle ground by recognizing the

influence of events, yet emphasizing the “up front” work undertaken by an actor to produce “and sustain a different way of life.” Rather than viewing life events and transitions as truly exogenous, they posit that change-ready actors select elements in the environment that will energize and secure life redirection.

Consistent with this focus on human agency in locating and appropriating “hooks for change,” I find that, indeed, twice as many of the relocators than the returners had considered leaving to pursue opportunities outside of New Orleans prior to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. This suggests these more independent-ready interviewees appropriated Hurricane Katrina to realize their independence. At the same time, our data reveal that the disaster was a necessary catalyst for change. The relocators credited the hurricane as an essential “push” that propelled their thoughts into action. In light of these narratives and the language used, attributing the relocators’ greater independence purely to pre-existing differences appears overly simplistic.

Twenty-eight-year-old Kendra had already been considering moving to Houston with her husband and five children. Of the quarter of relocators who reported having had a desire to relocate prior to the storm, her plan was the best articulated. Still, she notes the role of Katrina. “I get two weeks’ vacation time. We were going to come to Houston and visit and if we like[d] it, we were going to move out there in a year or two. Katrina just pushed the issue.” In her case, it is possible that she and her family would have relocated even without Hurricane Katrina’s push.

Other respondents who described a prior interest in relocating went on to outline obstacles that kept them from doing so. Faith is a 32-year-old mother of five, now living in Houston. Typical of our respondents, she pointed to her support system as the primary factor preventing her from leaving New Orleans prior to Katrina. To her point, she and her husband were in the process of buying a house in New Orleans closer to her parents’ house.

INTERVIEWER: And had you considered moving to Houston?

FAITH: I did. It was out of moving here, moving to Atlanta, and I thought about California.

INTERVIEWER: And do you think that you would have moved to Houston had the hurricane not hit?

FAITH: I’m not sure. I probably would, but it wouldn’t have been no time soon. You know how you just keep putting it off? Because I wanted to leave since I finished high school. But just procrastinating and having a family there and a support system, that kind of kept me there.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. What’s your support system like out here?

FAITH: It’s completely different. [Some] family is here, but they’re scattered. And I’m not real close with my other family that’s here. So really, it’s my husband and my children, that’s it, and my church . . . So I just came here and really starting from scratch.

INTERVIEWER: How has that been for you?

FAITH: It was hard at first, because I went through some other situations, and I was kind of destitute going through that by myself. Like I said, everybody was going through their dilemmas, so I didn’t have anybody to turn to. It was hard, but at the same time, it allowed me the opportunity to get the dependence on myself and in God that I should have had a long time ago. So I think it still worked out for good.

When I asked Tanya whether she had ever considered moving, it was clear that she had. Still, the questions she asks herself elucidate her apprehension to move away from social ties. Her narrative also suggests that her decision to relocate to Dallas was fairly arbitrary. These features

point to a lack of planfulness and suggest that relocating would have been unlikely in absence of the external force of Katrina.

- TANYA: A lot times, honestly, I wanted to leave because I knew there were better opportunities in other places . . . but [there] was always something [holding me back]—the fact that I’m not going to know anybody. I don’t know how am I going to transition? Do I go out and get a job? Who’s going to take care of my daughter while I try to get established? It was just a number of factors that held me back. And when the storm came, we were just like forced, you know, to push. You’re going to have to figure it out.
- INTERVIEWER: Where had you thought about moving?
- TANYA: . . . Atlanta would have been the place I would have moved to.
- INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see. Why didn’t you go to Atlanta when you were relocating?
- TANYA: Because we were here in Texas already . . . So I was just—I’ll start here.

The other three-quarters of relocators did not indicate any previous desire to move out of New Orleans. They reported having been satisfied with their residences, jobs and other aspects of their lives until they were exposed to new opportunities in other cities. All of our respondents were enrolled in college for at least some part of the 2004–2005 academic year. At the time Katrina struck in the summer of 2005, the relocators were as likely as the returners were to have registered for the fall semester (79.2 and 76.9 percent, respectively; *n.s.*) and been employed (86.2 and 80.8 percent, respectively; *n.s.*). This suggests they had similar levels of investment in New Orleans. Now living in Dallas, Jasmine (28 years old) explicitly explains how the strength of her social ties prevented her from previously considering residential change.

- INTERVIEWER: When you were living in Louisiana had you thought about moving out?
- JASMINE: No.
- INTERVIEWER: No?
- JASMINE: Not really . . . I was so—you know, I was close to my family. If I needed them, they was there for me. I never thought about—and I never would have thought that I would be here. I never thought that.

In short, while some of the relocators had considered moving prior to the storm, their narratives illustrate variation in the extent of planning for such a move and suggest that, for all but one, the idea was fleeting. While they often recognized that new opportunities would be available to them in other cities, they noted that their dependence on social supports kept them from relocating. Pursuing these opportunities became more realistic when set against the damaged infrastructure of New Orleans and supported by disaster relief. Unobserved differences may further explain which women were more likely to take up these new opportunities. From the perspective of the relocators, however, Katrina was an essential ingredient in turning their ideas into action. In this way, the unforeseen push of Hurricane Katrina challenged the long-standing pull of their social ties.

Conclusion

The women in this sample faced a number of disadvantages prior to Hurricane Katrina as a result of their social location at the intersection of race, gender, and class. They were challenged to accomplish important life transitions including college completion without the financial support middle- and upper-class parents are typically able to provide their children. As low-income, African American mothers, this sample counted on kinship ties to help with daily needs including

housing and childcare as they worked their way through school. These forms of support were geographically embedded in New Orleans.

Despite the expectation that these women would suffer greatly from Katrina's disruption to their social ties, those who were still living away from these supports at the time they were interviewed reported qualitative improvement across life domains. They touted better employment opportunities, stronger educational programs, safer schools and neighborhoods for their children, and more independent living circumstances than they had prior to the storm. In short, our respondents reported greater independence, which, consistent with Arnett (2004), they viewed as a fundamental requirement of adulthood. The women saw themselves, not as passive players, but as effective actors seizing opportunities that led them to feel more accomplished and self-reliant. They felt that the decision to relocate outside of New Orleans was responsible for this positive turn in their lives. They viewed their fresh independence and improved structural opportunities as incompatible with returning to their New Orleans-based networks.

Those who returned to New Orleans overwhelmingly reported doing so in order to benefit from social ties. They viewed childcare assistance, dependent residential circumstances, and other benefits as essential to rebuilding their lives. They sought to return to the circumstances they were in prior to the storm. High on their list was returning to school, as they viewed educational attainment as a fundamental step toward independent adulthood. They were far less likely than the relocators were to report improvements across key life domains or having been propelled to independent adulthood by Hurricane Katrina. They credited social ties with providing material and social support during their transition to adulthood. At the same time, they reported various limitations associated with these social ties, keeping them from opportunities they might have elsewhere and placing them into the role of a dependent child.

The findings imply a paradox in which the social ties upon which low-income mothers rely as they transition to adulthood may undermine their independence, a value they espouse as fundamental to adulthood. The geographically fixed nature of this familial support often takes the form of dependent living arrangements and conflicts with their ability to pursue opportunities in other geographic locations. This highlights an important disparity between the forms of support available to transitioners from lower income versus higher income families. The findings further contribute to a growing literature on the drawbacks of prolonged parental support during the transition to adulthood (Hamilton 2013; Johnson 2013).

Despite the lack of social ties to provide material and social support in their new environments, the relocators did benefit from various social services provided in the aftermath of the storm. Support from FEMA, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, churches, and charities certainly helped the relocators as they attempted to live more independent lives. It is unclear whether the improved opportunities they described, including better paying jobs, would have been enough to sustain them in absence of this aid. Only five relocators told us that they still intended to return to New Orleans. However, it is likely that, as this aid became unavailable, it became more difficult if not impossible to make ends meet. Others may have come to see returning to their social ties as more advantageous. The pull of social ties may also become stronger as the infrastructure of New Orleans continues to improve and social networks further stabilize.

Still, the findings suggest that it is possible and useful to facilitate exploration by vulnerable populations during the transition to adulthood. Promoting semiautonomous living situations for students with children may offer such emerging adults a fresh context in which to pursue alternative lifestyles and explore new possibilities for upward mobility. Providing subsidized daycare at our community colleges and universities may also help to decrease the reliance on familial social ties. Furthermore, it would be useful to expose vulnerable populations to educational and occupational trajectories that might otherwise fall outside their view of life possibilities. Building more institutionalized routes from education to employment would also allow these populations to envision unfamiliar careers as tangible possibilities. At the same time, it is important to

consider ways to provide these institutional supports without undermining the familial bonds. Vulnerable populations should not have to choose between opportunity and social ties.

This study is limited in its ability to determine why some of the women relocated and others returned. I did not identify any differences in their demographic characteristics or pre-Katrina lifestyles. The women described having similarly supportive social ties prior to the storm, and these social ties returned to New Orleans in equal numbers. The women also described receiving similar levels and forms of relief immediately following the storm. It may be that those who wound up relocating were, by chance, exposed to clearer structural opportunities in the form of educational programs and employment opportunities. Alternatively, it may be that the relocators were equipped with qualities, such as a stronger achievement orientation, that enhanced their ability to take up new opportunities. Although not observed in this study, such differences may have fueled their willingness to settle outside of New Orleans. This study is further limited in making comparisons between white and African American respondents because we only interviewed two white respondents. Both had returned to New Orleans by the time of our interviews.

Finally, it would be a mistake to conclude that the relocators, or any Katrina evacuees, were categorically *better off* having experienced this disaster, as Barbara Bush famously suggested in her tour of the Houston Astrodome. The relocators celebrated new experiences and opportunities, which facilitated their movement toward an independent adulthood. Still, they mourned a great number of losses, from irreplaceable photographs of their children to their connection to New Orleans' culture. Most of all, they mourned the loss of social ties to communities that had nourished them from birth. Their social ties also mourned the loss of those who had relocated. These networks struggled to overcome new structural challenges in post-Katrina New Orleans without some of the key participants in their longtime exchange of emotional and material support (see also Litt et al. 2012). To conclude overoptimistically would be to neglect the structural conditions that place impoverished communities at continued disadvantage and the importance of strong social ties to compensate for these structural limitations. Additional follow-up interviews are underway and it will be enlightening to learn how the rebuilding of New Orleans and the loss of FEMA and charitable support shape the longer-term residential decisions and life outcomes of these women.

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Author Biography

Stacey J. Bosick is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Colorado Denver. Her work focuses on the transition-to-adulthood experiences of vulnerable populations.