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Drivers of Return Migration and Permanent Relocation Among Hurricane Katrina Survivors: A Qualitative Analysis

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Hurricane Katrina displaced nearly all of New Orleans' 455,000 pre-Katrina residents. While several research teams have investigated the dynamics of return, few studies have employed a qualitative approach, which makes possible a more nuanced exploration of decision making using words and phrasing of those directly affected. Qualitative interview data from 50 participants were analyzed, including both New Orleans residents who had permanently relocated as well as those who had returned to the city by the 5-year anniversary of the storm. The results suggest broad domains of decision making: (a) post-Katrina housing affordability and cost of living, (b) family ties and social support, and (c) the pull of home and place attachment. These results have implications for future research, as well as for disaster preparedness planning and recovery.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, displacement, return migration, disaster recovery, qualitative analysis

Acute disasters can spur widespread displacement and migration. Estimates state that over 20 million people are displaced by disaster each year, and this number is expected to rise in the future as the frequency and intensity of extreme weather and climate-related disasters increase (Cisse et al., 2022). Disaster-related displacement and return migration have many implications for community recovery, including health, social ties, education, and economic opportunities (Ebi & McLeman, 2022; McMichael et al., 2012; A. Merdjanoff et al., 2023; Torres & Casey, 2017; VanLandingham et al., 2022). Understanding what factors influence whether people return is essential for facilitating community recovery.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina (2005) was one of the worst natural disasters the United States has experienced. The hurricane and its aftermath exposed a fractured response system marked by a lack of coordination (Davis et al., 2020; Logue, 2006; Zakour et al., 2018). New Orleans residents were especially impacted by Katrina. Nearly all of the city's 455,000 pre-Katrina residents were forced to evacuate and temporarily—or in some cases, permanently—resettle elsewhere (Elliott & Pais, 2006; Fussell, 2015). The analyses derived from the Displaced New Orleans Residence Survey (DNORS) data set have provided insights into the posthurricane experiences of affected households. Studies have identified the severity of housing damage, age, and income as key factors influencing the likelihood of returning within the first year after the hurricane (Groen & Polivka, 2010). Displacement adversely impacted multiple facets of life for New Orleanians, including employment outcomes, household structure (Chaganti & Waddell, 2015; Rendall, 2011), and mental health—housing damage and homeownership status were significant predictors of whether someone experienced emotional distress (A. A. Merdjanoff, 2013). These impacts were not evenly distributed. Structural patterns of residential segregation, which concentrated Black residents into lower-lying areas of the city, resulted in higher rates of severe flooding and housing damage for New Orleans' Black residents compared to other groups (Fussell et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, levels and patterns of return have been variable among population subgroups during the almost 2 decades that followed (Fussell, 2015; Fussell et al., 2010).

Displacement and Return

As noted above, housing damage and displacement following Hurricane Katrina are associated with a range of adverse outcomes.

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Extended displacement appears to exacerbate these negative effects (Paul et al., 2024). Longer duration displacement has been associated with loss of work and income, educational disruptions, mental health issues, and other negative effects (Hamideh et al., 2022; Hansel et al., 2013; Zissimopoulos & Karoly, 2010). Numerous studies have documented the challenges that displaced residents experienced as they tried to rebuild their homes and communities or resettle in new locations (Browne, 2015; Erikson & Peek, 2022; Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Kroll-Smith et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2012). While some were able to eventually return to their pre-Katrina neighborhoods, many displaced residents permanently relocated to cities and towns outside of New Orleans. In a review conducted by Paul et al. (2024), the authors identified factors that influenced a household's decision to relocate, including housing, utilities, and neighborhood damage. However, the review also concluded that factors like place attachment and social capital were important considerations, particularly as time progressed and people were making decisions as to whether they would return home or stay where they were (Paul et al., 2024). Many quantitative studies have used proxy measures to assess place attachment like "tenure time" or "participant was in their hometown" (Costa et al., 2022; Nejat et al., 2019). These proxy measures are reasonable for surveys but fail to capture the complex social processes that influence why some displaced residents eventually return while others permanently relocate.

Study Objectives

While several research teams have investigated the dynamics of return, few studies have employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative interviews are well suited for improving our understanding of the push and pull calculus underlying eventual decisions to return or remain away. In qualitative interviews, participants are able to explain the dynamics of their decision making in their own words, taking into account what was going on in their lives at that time.

Method

The DNORS explores the location, living arrangements, health, and well-being of New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005. The study employs a probability sample of individuals and families living in Orleans Parish, Louisiana at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted in mid-2009 and mid-2010. Researchers tracked and contacted sampled respondents and interviewed them over the phone or face to face wherever they were living at the time of the survey.

To complement the rich survey data from DNORS, investigators conducted qualitative interviews with 50 DNORS participants from 43 households during 2011 and 2012. These qualitative data form the basis of the Displaced New Orleans Residents Qualitative Study (DNORQS). Participants were screened and selected from the larger DNORS sample using a quota sampling strategy. Only participants who had previously indicated a willingness to participate in a possible follow-up qualitative study were considered for inclusion. Four individuals declined to participate. All participants were offered $50 gift cards as an incentive and gesture of appreciation for their time. Interviews ranged in length from 30 min to 2 hr. All interviews were conducted face to face. Guidelines and other materials for the qualitative interviews were reviewed and received human subjects' approval prior to beginning fieldwork.

DNORS respondents were identified for possible participation in DNORQS by stratifying for (a) current place of residence (returned to New Orleans vs. permanently out-migrated), (b) (relative) level of damage ("below $50,000 damage" vs. "$50,000 or above"), and (c) socioeconomic status ("at or below the median average for New Orleans at the time of Katrina" vs. "above the median average"). The semistructured interview guide was designed to elicit open-ended responses in relation to broad questions about reasons for return (or permanent relocation); changes in quality of life pre- and post-Katrina for the respondent and their household; obstacles and sources of support for coping with Katrina-related problems; and future plans for the individual and family. Age, race, and sex were not considered as selection criteria. At the time of the interviews, 21 respondents were residing in New Orleans, while 29 were living in Texas, Mississippi, or Louisiana. Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptive data for the DNORQS sample.

Analysis

We analyzed 44 transcripts from 50 participants using Dedoose qualitative software. Dedoose is a collaborative and web-based application that supports qualitative and mixed-methods research data management and analysis. Transcripts were coded in three phases using a modified grounded theory approach that incorporated both inductive and deductive analysis. We applied the constant comparative method for analyzing qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

During the first phase of analysis, each transcript was coded by two graduate students with training in qualitative analysis using an iterative-inductive analysis that began with open coding to assign descriptive or interpretive labels to emerging themes (Cascio et al., 2019; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). These codes were then reviewed with the larger team of investigators to develop an initial codebook based on both a priori constructs that have emerged from previous studies and constructs that emerged inductively during open coding. The second phase involved axial coding that allowed us to make connections between the open codes and to finalize a codebook to be applied to all transcripts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). For the third and final phase, two investigators coded the remaining transcripts per the final codebook. From the coding schema, we generated themes using a grounded theory approach to identify meaningful patterns from the data. These three phases of analysis made possible iterative comparison and review and created opportunities to resolve discrepancies within the codebook, enhance interrater reliability, and identify thematic content to inform our research question.

Results

Our analysis suggests that an interrelated set of factors influenced decisions about whether to return to New Orleans or permanently relocate to cities like Houston, Atlanta, and Baton Rouge. We group these factors into three broad categories: (a) post-Katrina housing affordability and cost of living, (b) family ties and social support, and (c) the pull of home and place attachment.

"Pushed Out": Post-Katrina Housing Affordability and Cost of Living

As noted in previous studies, housing prices skyrocketed in New Orleans following Katrina (McKenzie & Levendis, 2010). The lack of affordability coupled with housing recovery programs plagued

Table 1
Proposed and Actual Sampling Distribution

Location	Degree of damage	Socioeconomic status	*N* (proposed)	*N* (actual)	Household
New Orleans (returned)	Significant	More privileged	5	5	5
		Less privileged	5	6	6
	Light or none	More privileged	5	5	5
		Less privileged	5	5	5
Elsewhere (did not return)	Significant	More privileged	5	7	5
		Less privileged	5	9	7
	Light or none	More privileged	5	10	6
		Less privileged	5	4	4
Total			40	51	43

with delays pushed many to permanently leave the city. Participants who ended up settling in a new locale often cited housing costs as a driving force. Many of these participants found that they were able to get more for their money in their new location, which provided greater financial stability. This was particularly true for a 51-year-old, African American woman who had owned her home in New Orleans East. Facing foreclosure, she had relocated to Houston and was renting her home.

> I don't have to work two jobs. I was working two jobs (in New Orleans) because I had to keep the mortgage and I realized that I can't do both. The insurance went through the roof. The property tax went up. Before the storm, my property tax was less than $100. Today it is $5,000.

Cost of living was a common theme both for participants who returned to New Orleans, as well as for those who relocated. Many found that the cost of living in New Orleans increased so dramatically after Katrina that it became financially prohibitive for them to return. A 41-year-old African American woman who was living in the Gentilly neighborhood noted that "everything [was] more expensive" and that this contributed a great deal to her increased stress following Katrina. This same participant reported a general frustration among locals for feeling "priced out"—and essentially "pushed out"—of New Orleans. An older African American man who was a native New Orleanian noted:

> They went up on everything; they doubled the prices on everything. So that didn't help. And I mean I am telling you, I talk to residents now that have restored their houses and have been back down there and even now when I talk to people they talk about how much it costs to live there.

Participants cited increases in rent, taxes, and insurance and noted how the available jobs in New Orleans did not pay enough to cover these costs. Echoing the principles of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007), one participant believed that this was done purposefully to prevent native New Orleanians from returning to the city. Another native New Orleanian participant (51-year-old, African American woman), who had relocated to Houston, expressed how this made her feel unwanted in her hometown:

> I had insurance and that tripled to $4,000. Then you go up on my property taxes and then you go up on my mortgage. You are telling me that you don't want me there. So, I'll stay away. It's okay and I know a lot of people feel that we weren't worth it because there's no way that the property taxes, the mortgage, and the insurance should have gone that high.

Formal support from government-funded housing recovery programs (e.g., Road Home) and disaster recovery organizations (e.g., Red Cross) served as drivers for both return and relocation. On the one hand, participants talked about how the Road Home program facilitated their return. On the other hand, people commented that receiving timely support in their new location, whether it was rental assistance or insurance money because of housing damage, made it easier to secure housing arrangements and settle into their new lives. In addition, the Road Home program seemed to serve as a barrier to return for many people. One participant specifically noted that the "slowness of the Road Home Program" prevented him from returning to New Orleans. To some, this meant that the city government did not do everything it could to facilitate the return of displaced residents. Instead, by "making it more difficult," there were many people who wanted to return but were unable to do so because of housing costs and the rising cost of living.

"Being Close": Family Ties and Social Support

Many respondents emphasized how both family ties and social support influenced decisions to return to New Orleans or permanently relocate. Following displacement, participants noted that having family close by made it easier to remain in their new location because family there could provide the support needed to settle in and feel at home. This familial support seemed to ease the transition and help relocated participants establish a new sense of normalcy.

Table 2
Respondent Characteristics

	Race			Sex		Age		
Location	Black	White	Other	Male	Female	<45	45+	Total
New Orleans (returned)	12	8	1	12	9	7	14	21
Elsewhere (did not return)	17	12	0	12	17	4	25	29
Total	19	20	1	24	26	11	38	50

An older African American man who had relocated with his wife to Alexandria, Louisiana said:

> Having relatives here … it was easy to find somewhere we could go and get organized and get settled in. Which we did in a couple of weeks. The transition wasn't too bad. I think the transition is not as bad if you can go somewhere and you have relatives there.

Another participant similarly acknowledged how critical it was to have her adult daughter nearby in her new location. Although a native New Orleanian, this participant had moved to the Lafayette area of Louisiana to live with her adult daughter's family. She shared: "I really value family and I am so glad that my daughter and her family lived here and received us. To me, it is so important to have good relationships with family members in general, and especially children."

Having family nearby helped participants feel as though they had the support needed to navigate any challenges encountered during the recovery process, including navigating their new community. Participants spoke about feeling "more connected" to their new locales because they had family there. The transition to a new environment was made easier because there were trusted people who could be "count[ed] on for advice" and give them the "lay of the land."

Even for participants who wanted to eventually return to New Orleans, having familial networks that could provide emotional and tangible support during recovery outweighed the desire to immediately return to New Orleans. Being close to family seemed to outweigh the dissatisfaction and challenges associated with living in an unfamiliar city. A young man who expressed his desire to return to New Orleans but had relocated to Houston acknowledged that "being around family" was "the most important thing" to him. He continued:

> Probably my family, all of us together around, you know closer together. A lot of them, my sister and they really want to stay here. And a lot of people, my other brothers and them, they wanted to go back home. That is probably, all of us being closer around each other.

For this participant, and his family, being together in a single location was more important than returning to New Orleans as quickly as possible. Even though there was disagreement among the family as to whether they should permanently relocate in Houston or move back to New Orleans, they decided to stay put and stay together rather than split up. For these participants, family ties outweighed the importance of place. For other participants, as we will see in the next section, there was nothing more important than being in New Orleans.

"It Was Time to Go Home": The Pull of Home and Place Attachment

Many participants eventually returned to New Orleans, despite finding satisfactory housing and employment in other towns and cities. For these participants, it appears that the pull of New Orleans and the desire to return "home" became too strong to ignore. Henry, a 78-year-old White male homeowner from Algiers said, "Where else would I live? I wouldn't have lived anywhere but New Orleans. I just don't want to live anywhere else. This is home." Other participants expressed that New Orleans was "the only place [they] knew" and "where [they] were from" so it became impossible to ignore their desire to return home. One participant who had temporarily relocated to Houston shared how she was homesick for New Orleans. This 60-year-old African American woman had evacuated to Houston with her adult daughter and mother and returned to New Orleans about 6 months after the storm. New Orleans was the "place [they] loved" and they realized it was "time to go home" after being in an unfamiliar place for a few months.

For those who had evacuated and lived in other cities or towns in the years immediately following Katrina, New Orleans remained a place unlike any other. A 41-year-old African American female participant from Gentilly told us,

> I always looked at it as home. You know how they say there's no place like home? It's still, it's our custom, it's just part of my culture to be here. I'm still used to Mardi Gras, and us, we have big old Easter bashes at the park and all that stuff. And it's just the customs are still here.

Despite the prospects of future disasters and the economic challenges of living in post-Katrina New Orleans, participants felt as though turning their back on their city was denying a piece of themselves. A 60-year-old White female participant who had returned and was living in the Broadmoor neighborhood of New Orleans said, "My people are here, and New Orleans is a part of me. If you love this city, it gets into your blood. It's like a person." This participant felt a responsibility to contribute to the rebirth and rebuilding of the city. She continued:

> I see New Orleans like a grande dame, she's just this amazing woman, and probably like—maybe like an 80 year old woman who's just lived an amazing life, you know—and, or even like your grandmother. If you're walking down the street with your grandmother and she falls down, do you step on her back to keep on walking? No, you pick her up, you dust her off, you make sure that she's okay and then you keep walking together.

Even participants who were not native New Orleanians discussed how they wanted to "see [it] through here, in the city." One participant, a 32-year-old African American man originally from Florida, described how he had developed a "sentimental attachment" to the city. Despite the challenges of being in a rebuilding city, this participant was able to finish his college degree and believed that returning was a "good decision." It is important to note that this participant was able to secure an affordable rental unit that helped facilitate his return to the city.

For those participants who had settled in other locations, there remained the pull of New Orleans. A 71-year-old African American woman who relocated to Columbia, Mississippi had decided not to return to New Orleans because she felt that the levees system was not safely repaired. Years later, she longed for New Orleans despite making what she considered a necessary decision for safety:

> I regret not being in New Orleans. I miss a lot of things because I was used to going to church all the time and going out on the corner and getting you a po'boy. I am used to that. I miss a lot; I miss the people.

Limiting future storm risk was a common sentiment among those who had permanently relocated. However, it did not come without the emotional toll of being torn away from their hometown. A 28-year-old White participant who had relocated to Shreveport, Louisiana to live with her parents shared: "I always try to tell myself I don't miss New Orleans too much and I don't want to go back but I miss it so bad. It is so much easier not having to worry about hurricanes and evacuations."

Discussion

Complementing the existing set of extensive and excellent quantitative analyses of dislocation and return after Hurricane Katrina, this qualitative analysis of the DNORQS interview data highlights the reasoning of displaced residents as they weigh their decisions of whether to remain away or go back—a key dimension of the "why" of permanent displacement or return. Decisions to stay or return were motivated by economic opportunities and barriers but were also strongly influenced by familial and social connections as well as connections or attachment to "home."

Economic opportunities in new locations, coupled with the high cost of living and the economic uncertainty of a post-Katrina New Orleans, made returning home for some an unattractive or even unrealistic option. Even among those who decided to return to New Orleans in spite of this new economic reality found that the cost of living was a continual source of stress. Government and nonprofit programs designed to assist with return were viewed both positively and negatively by participants. Timely assistance made huge differences for some. Persistent delays resulted in others deciding to stay in their new location.

Social networks and family connections were central factors for many as they were deciding whether to return home to New Orleans or permanently relocate. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Fussell, 2015; Pendley et al., 2021; Waters, 2016). Our study fleshes out these earlier findings by illustrating that social connections can operate as both barriers and facilitators for return. For those who relocated, having family connections in their new location significantly eased the transition to life in a new place. However, the loss of a social network, particularly among neighbors, was very disruptive to those who did not return. For both displaced and returned participants, social networks and family connections also acted as a buffer to other challenges, like economic instability.

A strong place attachment to New Orleans emerged as a central theme, both for those who returned and for those who remained away. For some participants, the pull of "home" was too great to ignore, despite good opportunities in their new location and significant challenges back in New Orleans. Even for those participants who decided to remain away, the continual pull of New Orleans remained salient. This importance of place attachment has been noted in previous research focusing on Hurricane Katrina (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2009).

More recently, place attachment has been highlighted in research focusing on wildfires in California and Colorado, where the disruptions led to "solastalgia" or emotional distress experienced when one's home environment is being degraded (Brown, 2023; Morales-Giner & Mook, 2025). A more sinister aspect of place attachment that permeated some of our interviews was a feeling of unwantedness, a sense that New Orleans no longer "loved you back." Rather, some participants felt as if they were intentionally being pushed out.

Strengths and Limitations

Complementing the existing population-based research focusing on postdisaster decision making regarding whether to return or permanently relocate, this article provides a deeper look into the decision-making process that participants undertook as they contemplated these choices. A major limitation of our—and other—qualitative studies is that they have limited generalizability to broader populations, given their small and nonrepresentative samples. To mitigate this shortcoming, we recruited our study participants from a larger representative sample of Katrina survivors and included participants who had decided to return, and participants who had decided to permanently relocate. Our purposive sampling strategy resulted in ample inclusion with regard to race, sex, age, and socioeconomic status. Data saturation of themes became readily apparent throughout the analysis, suggesting an adequate sample size. Researcher bias, particularly in the analysis stage, is another potential limitation. To mitigate this, researchers used a three-phase analytic strategy that included iterative comparison and reviews. This strategy was employed to resolve discrepancies and increase reliability, in addition to identifying core themes from the data.

Conclusion

Recent wildfires in Maui, Hawaii and Los Angeles, California destroyed thousands of structures and displaced tens of thousands of people (*2025 Fire Season Incident Archive | CAL FIRE*, n.d.; Suresh et al., 2024). As climate change leads to more frequent and more severe disasters, increasing numbers of displaced persons will be forced into decisions about whether to return home or relocate. Disaster recovery frameworks—and disaster recovery planning—must incorporate the factors that drive these decisions, including economic opportunities, social connections, and place attachment. For example, disaster recovery programs should consider the role that neighborhoods play in facilitating recovery and help displaced persons maintain their social networks. These programs should also attempt to ensure that displaced persons—and persons at high risk of displacement in a future disaster—are included in a meaningful way into pre- and postdisaster planning in order to lessen perceptions of exclusion and unwantedness. Doing so will better equip disaster professionals to support neighborhoods as they make plans to mitigate the impacts of future disasters and for rebuilding afterwards.

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