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Randolph Burnside
Southern Illinois University

Laura Hatcher
Southeast Missouri State University

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Guest Editors' Introduction

The Opportunities and Challenges of Disaster Recovery

Randolph Burnside

Southern Illinois University

Laura Hatcher

Southeast Missouri State University

When we initially conceived of this symposium, it was in the wake of doing research on the differences in response to flooding hazards in two distinct contexts: New Orleans and rural Missouri. Our own work indicated that varying cultural and socioeconomic contexts created opportunities and special challenges in emergency management during disaster recovery, and because we were curious about what other scholars found in specific case studies, we proposed this special symposium. The response we received was remarkable. We had dozens of manuscripts from a wide variety of viewpoints and multiple disciplines. The work was complex in that it typically sat on disciplinary borders: while invoking the themes and issues present in the emergency management literature, it also engaged with particular disciplinary concerns such as voting, public health issues, or race and ethnicity. In fact, one of the chief difficulties we found as special editors for this issue was finding reviewers for our manuscripts who felt comfortable reviewing work that was *both* emergency management/disaster studies *and* a case study involving specific issues that disciplinary scholars would find interesting. In short, this special symposium, which has taken some time to put together, presents an array of case studies that are complex and yet elegant; engaged in the very issues we wanted in the original call; yet rigorous and nuanced in their arguments.

As readers will see, our issue has several articles examining recovery after Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps not surprisingly, we had many manuscripts proposals involving one of the most catastrophic storms in US history. We chose, given that the anniversary of Katrina's landfall loomed on the horizon, to present several of those manuscripts in this issue. However, we were also fortunate in having several manuscripts that provided some different perspectives, often comparative, on other issues. This issue, then, is divided into two sections: the first explicitly focuses on Hurricane Katrina, while the second section presents case studies of other areas where missed opportunities and challenges arose during disaster recoveries.

We begin our examination of Hurricane Katrina with Taunya Lovell Banks analysis of the suppression of Black working class political expression in the wake of Katrina. Professor Banks reminds us that, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans politicians used the destruction and displacement of the Black working-class to discourage black resident from returning to New Orleans. These impacted communities, she tells us, responded by increasing various traditional communal neighborhood activities as an instrument of political protest. The city, then, responded through more vigorous regulation and increasing fees. In

short, as Professor Banks tells us, the use of “racially biased city permitting structures” becomes a “cautionary tale about how cities can enforce social control by manipulating tiny details in municipal laws.

We continue our examination of post-Katrina New Orleans with Sara Chaganti and Jasmine Waddell’s essay examining the impact of race and place in employment changes among Hurricane Katrina’s evacuees. Using data from the Displaced New Orleans Residents Pilot Study, Chaganti and Waddell examine the way Hurricane Katrina survivors were able to maintain or even better their pre-Katrina employment status. Displacement, they find, has a negative effect on employment status and that African Americans suffered the most from long-term displacement and loss of full-time employment. Given that finding new employment is critical to the ability of displaced individuals to regain stability for themselves and their families, this study sheds light on how displacement during a disaster, particularly long-term displacement, can impact different groups within a community. For future disaster research, this finding is significant, particular for researchers interested in finding ways to assist disaster survivors in regaining stability and rebuilding their lives.

Through another prism, Brox and Lay provide us with a study of how difficult political processes can be to maintain after a disaster. Their research engages the methodological challenges presented to survey research in the aftermath of a natural disaster. They conducted a traditional survey just days before the mayoral election in New Orleans in six months after the disaster. Their work suggests that while survey work is challenging in a post-disaster context, researchers interested in understanding political attitudes in such a context should employ multiple methods and reconsider the way usual questions are framed. Their work provides us not only with a cautionary tale for researchers attempting polling in this context, but also suggests the degree to which indecision and confusion of disaster survivors can impact polling results.

With finish our examination of Katrina with the very important work of political scientist Tanya Buhler Corbins’ examination of social justice issues, in which she suggests that a large-scale event often presents special opportunities for overcoming unevenness in the political power among various populations. Using textual analysis, she exams the testimony of 240 witnesses, who testified during congressional hearings after Hurricane Katrina. These witnesses were advocating for particular policies to address various social inequities. She found that not-for-profit advocates and private citizens successfully addressed contentious social, political, and environmental issues that are typically neglected during the disaster recovery period. Furthermore, she noted that witnesses advocated for recovery policies that include the needs and concerns of traditionally marginalized groups. Finally, she posited that a careful examination of this material provides us with a holistic recovery approach that incorporates ideas including sustainability, resilience and various social equity considerations.

In the second section of this special issue, we look at the ways several other issues arise in disaster scenarios. Lisa Gorman and Christopher Stoney present a three-case study analysis of the way opportunities for reform and challenges to progress occur in federalist nations. Changes in federalism can impact the disaster response of government in various ways. Their work suggests that, in the area of public health, path dependency thinking and the barriers of federalism can impede not only the emergency response, but also the ability to learn and reform disaster management systems.

Back in the United States, John Gasper examines the whether (and what) political factors affect federal disaster aid. Using county-level data from 1992 through 2005, Gasper finds that political factors do, in his words, “shade a president’s decision to deny aid,” but that this effect may be important only during presidential election years because some of these

factors emerge only during the election cycle.

Finally, Alexander Hall examines the way the National Coastal Warning System developed as a response to the North Sea Flood of 1953. Richly descriptive, Hall demonstrates that a government can, through detailed inquiry and the use of scientific expertise, change public policy in tangible ways. Extreme weather events provide opportunities for changing attitudes toward risk, and provide states with new roles for disaster recovery.

We want to thank all the scholars who participated in the long process of finishing this issue, as well as all the scholars who submitted proposals and manuscripts that we, sadly, had to turn down. We also wish to thank our reviewers for their hard work in helping us make this the best issue possible. We hope our readers find the work presented here as interesting as we do, and look forward to years of discussion about emergency management, disasters, and the many lessons we learn about better public management from them.