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# Displacement, Gender, and the Challenges of Parenting after Hurricane Katrina

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*In emergency situations and in the aftermath of disaster, parents are essential in caring for children. Yet very little has been written explicitly about the experiences of mothers and fathers—either as individuals or partners—in postdisaster contexts. With the understanding that parenting is a gendered endeavor that occurs in a society stratified by race and class, this article focuses on the responses of mothers and fathers to Hurricane Katrina. This article draws on data gathered in Louisiana through observations, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with parents and other adults responsible for the care of children. Through a qualitative analysis, this research examines the strategies that mothers and fathers used to deal with the challenges of parenting in the aftermath of Katrina, the role of advocates who worked on behalf of families, the importance of kin networks, and the uniqueness of New Orleans and what the city means for families struggling to recover after the storm.*

**Keywords:** parenting / mothers / fathers / children / gender / race / social class / displacement / Hurricane Katrina / New Orleans

*It's almost easier to be here than to actually go back to New Orleans. My heart goes out to those who can't go back. My heart goes out to me because I can go back. But I'm almost afraid. It's not the same. Nothin' is the same any more . . . So with the youngest girl, I think she's like, "I want to go home." It's gonna be hard to impress on her that home is not home no more.*

—Christie, African American mother of two young children,  
former resident of New Orleans

The immediate tragedy of Hurricane Katrina played out on rooftops, on highway overpasses, and in mass shelters as families called for help and searched for food, water, and medical care. For weeks after the storm, the media televised unforgettable images of mothers handing babies to helicopter pilots and of fathers carrying their crying children through the murky floodwaters. What would become of Katrina's kids? Who would care for them, protect them, and ensure their recovery?

As the images of the disaster have faded from the evening news and disappeared from the front pages of our national papers, so too have many of the questions about the health and well-being of children and their families after the storm. Yet many pressing challenges remain. Hurricane Katrina and the floods that followed destroyed hundreds of thousands of

homes. More than a million Gulf Coast residents, and as many as 125,000 children from Louisiana alone, were scattered across the United States (Freeman 2007). Unmet physical and mental health care needs among still-displaced families—a disproportionate share of whom are African American, poor, and from New Orleans—have reached epidemic proportions (Abramson and Garfield 2006). Evacuee children in new schools have too often encountered overcrowded classrooms, hostile environments, and overworked teachers (Picou and Marshall 2007). Families that have returned to New Orleans have been hard-pressed to find acceptable educational alternatives in a district that was collapsing before the storm, and is now attempting to rebuild after dozens of schools were destroyed and over 7,500 of the most experienced teachers were fired (Casserly 2006). Weary parents have worked hard to find employment, affordable housing, and reliable childcare, while also trying to explain to their children what happened to the home and life they knew (Fothergill and Peek 2006).

Parenting is incredibly challenging work, even in nondisaster times. In the aftermath of a catastrophe the magnitude of Katrina, parents have faced enormous obstacles in keeping their children safe and ensuring that their emotional, educational, and physical needs are met. Despite the central role that parents play in their children's lives and in their postdisaster recovery, very little has been written about mothers and fathers—either as individuals or partners—following the storm.

With the understanding that parenting is a gendered endeavor that takes place in a society stratified by race and class, this article focuses on the responses of mothers and fathers to Hurricane Katrina. We begin by reviewing the literature on parenting in nondisaster and disaster contexts. Then we discuss the approach and methods that were used for this research. Next, we explore the various parenting strategies that mothers and fathers assumed, the challenges they faced, the role of supportive advocates who assisted parents, the importance of kin networks, and the ways that the displacement from New Orleans has affected the experiences of families. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications of this research.

## **Parental Responsibilities in Non-Disaster and Disaster Contexts: Past Research**

Parents provide daily care, emotional nurturance, guidance, discipline, economic support, health promotion, and protection for children. New parents often report that they feel unprepared for the transition to parenthood and overwhelmed by the amount of work that parenting takes (Cowan and Cowan 2000). A number of studies have demonstrated that caring and providing for children is difficult and time-consuming (see

Galinsky 1999), and parenting may lead to a loss of identity and independence (Cowan and Cowan 2000) and diminished leisure time (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Schor 1991). Parenting also has been found to have negative effects on marital satisfaction as parents have little time or energy left for their spouses or partners (Belsky and Rovine 1990), and parenting in blended families is difficult as the stepparent must negotiate and establish a new role with new children (Mason 2003). Gay and lesbian parents face the same parenting challenges, yet with the additional burdens of fewer legal protections and possible discrimination and stigmatization in the larger culture (Chauncey 2004; Stacey 2007). An increasing number of parents face the problem of a lack of affordable, high quality childcare (Clawson and Gerstel 2007; Helburn and Bergmann 2002), and poor parents have additional concerns regarding safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, and good public schools (Edin and Kefalas 2007; Kozol 1991; Newman 1999; Rubin 1994).

Despite some normative shifts, parenting in the United States is still predominantly viewed as the work of women. For married or partnered women, research has found that they do the majority of parenting work, such as feeding, dressing, and bathing infants and young children and doing homework with older children (Hansen 2005; Hochschild 2003; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). For the increasing number of women who head single-parent families, the responsibilities of parenting are often not shared at all. Historically, fathers have had a less active role in the everyday functions of parenting and have had their role defined more by providing economically for their children. Research has found that for various economic and historical reasons, African American children are more likely than other children to be raised by a single mother and see less of their fathers (Collins 2000; Dickerson 1995). Today, research indicates that even though many fathers want to be more involved and emotionally closer to their children than their own fathers, men still define being the financial provider as the most important part of their parental responsibilities (Townsend 2002). These gendered ideologies are reinforced by cultural representations that continue to portray mothers as the primary parents and fathers as part-time, secondary parents (Wall and Arnold 2007). Women also face a culture that subscribes to an "ideology of intensive mothering," setting high expectations for the perfect mother that go far beyond feeding and sheltering and that calls for mothering that is emotionally absorbing and time and labor-intensive (Hays 1996, 9). Overall, in the United States and in most other societies around the world, the expectations—and reality—of everyday and immediate responsibilities of parenting and caring for dependents fall on women.

Likewise, in disasters, research has consistently shown that much of the household responsibility for preparedness actions, evacuation decisions, and sheltering is assumed by mothers (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek

2006; Enarson and Scanlon 1999; Fothergill 2004). These private sphere responsibilities include taking care of the children during all stages of a disaster (Fothergill 2004; Halvorson 2004). The division of labor at home, particularly regarding caregiving roles and responsibilities, may increase women's predisaster vulnerability and place additional burdens on women during recovery (Ikeda 1995; Rivers 1982).

Indeed, the gendered division of labor may be even more pronounced in disasters, with women cast as nurturers and men as protectors. Alway, Belgrave, and Smith (1998) found that in Hurricane Andrew, gender roles were often suspended during the most acute phases of the crisis and were necessarily adapted to and renegotiated under adverse conditions, yet they proved to be quite resilient, guiding behavior both before and after the storm. The dominant role for women was that of nurturer or comforter—soothing children, taking care of parents, cooking, and playing “hostess” during and after the hurricane were all responsibilities assumed by women. Men, on the other hand, took on the role of protector, as they attempted to get their wives and children out harm's way, shield family members from the storm, guard their homes from suspected looters, and clean up the debris outside the home. Although their focus was not exclusively on parents, the analysis conducted by Alway and colleagues (1998) sheds light on the essential, but different, roles that both mothers and fathers played in Hurricane Andrew. Moreover, their research shows that gendered roles and identities that women and men asserted before and after the disaster were not only shaped by personal interactions but also by institutional arrangements. Specifically, the pressures and expectations of paid employment often pushed fathers in the direction of the provider role (which subsequently meant that, generally speaking, men were not involved in hurricane preparations because they were required to work), while mothers were often pulled into the homemaker role because of the lack of reliable childcare and the fact that their schedules were typically more flexible or their incomes more expendable.

In his work on the Buffalo Creek disaster, Erikson (1976) offers accounts of various things that parents did for their children in the aftermath of the devastating flood. For example, one father had to repeatedly reassure his young son that the family was not going to drown. A mother talked of how she would hold her son and daughter in the middle of the night because they would wake up screaming and crying in fear of another storm. Parents commonly expressed significant concerns about their children's well-being, and they did their best to comfort them.

Psychologists and mental health experts have written guidelines for helping parents and children cope with their reactions to disasters and other traumas (for example, see Figley 1989; Heft 1993; Pynoos and Nader 1988). Familial support is vital in ensuring that children cope effectively with loss and begin the process of postdisaster recovery (Prinstein, et al.

1996). However, in families that have been through a disaster, parents may: (1) be emotionally distraught themselves, and thus find it difficult to fulfill all of their children's needs (Erikson 1976); (2) feel guilty because they are annoyed by their children's postdisaster behavior (Heft 1993); (3) become irritable with their children (McFarlane 1987); or (4) become over-protective, especially when children display excessive fears of separation or sleeping alone (Garmezy and Rutter 1985).

The research evidence is limited regarding how mothers and fathers actually parent during times of disaster, and we know even less about the lived experiences of those heading up single-parent families and how they cope during times of acute crisis. This represents a major gap in our sociological and applied knowledge, given that single-parent families, which are typically headed by women and are usually poorer than other families, are among those most affected by disaster and may be left out of the recovery and relief process altogether (Morrow 1997; Morrow and Enarson 1996). Moreover, while women are more likely to head up single-parent families and are more likely to be poor, women of color are especially vulnerable to poverty and the deleterious impacts of disaster (Enarson and Fordham 2004; Jones-DeWeever and Hartmann 2006).

The field of gender and disaster research has grown considerably over the last two decades (for an overview, see Enarson, et al. 2006). Scholars in developed and developing nations around the world have documented gender differences and inequalities across the disaster cycle. But there is still much to be learned about those who care for children during times of disaster, women and men as parents, and the ways in which being mothers and fathers are central to their disaster experience. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap.

## Setting and Methods

Soon after Katrina's landfall on August 29, 2005, we applied for and received funding to study children's experiences in the immediate aftermath of the storm. This initial "quick response" (see Michaels 2003; Stallings 2002) research, which was conducted in Louisiana in October 2005, was exploratory and descriptive in nature. The intent of our early work was to obtain a deeper understanding of children's vulnerability, to gain new insights into the things that parents and other adults did to help reduce children's vulnerability, and to understand things children did for themselves to reduce the disaster impacts (see Fothergill and Peek 2006; Peek and Fothergill 2006). We used the findings from this research to lay the groundwork for a larger and longer-term project on children's postdisaster experiences, family recovery, and the roles of mothers and fathers after the disaster. In addition to the first research trip in October 2005,

we traveled to Louisiana in May 2007, February 2008, and April 2008 to conduct follow-up research and to explore additional questions. We relied on three primary fieldwork methods throughout the project: individual in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

Over the two-and-a-half year period of this research, we conducted formal and informal interviews with a total of 96 individuals. Most of these individuals have been interviewed multiple times. The sample includes 32 children and 64 adults. The children in our sample range in age from 3 to 18 years and include 22 African American youth (11 boys, 11 girls), 8 white youth (4 boys, 4 girls), and 2 second-generation South Asian American youth (1 boy, 1 girl). The adult sample is composed of 18 mothers (10 African American, 7 white, 1 South Asian American), 8 fathers (4 African American, 3 white, 1 South Asian American), 4 extended family members (2 African American women, 1 white woman, 1 African American man), 19 teachers and school administrators<sup>1</sup> (11 white women, 6 African American women, 2 white men), and 15 professionals—including mental health experts, religious leaders, and shelter coordinators—who worked closely with families and children after the storm (8 white women, 3 African American women, 2 Lebanese American women, 2 white men). In this article, we draw on data gathered from the adults who participated in the study. Through interviewing mothers, fathers, extended family members, and others who worked closely with families after the hurricane, we attempted to learn as much as possible about the implications of gender and parenting practices in the disaster.

We identified and accessed the sample population through a variety of means. Fothergill had family members who used to live in New Orleans, so we drew on these personal contacts for interviews and assistance with navigating the disaster affected region. These contacts and the subsequent snowball sample led us to six schools (including a temporary school established for Katrina evacuees in New Iberia, a public elementary school in Baton Rouge, a private Catholic school in Metairie, a charter school in New Orleans, and two public schools that reopened in 2005 and 2006 in New Orleans). We also relied on professional colleagues in Louisiana who helped us to gain access to a small Baptist church shelter in Baton Rouge, a large mass shelter in Lafayette, the FEMA Welcome Home Center in New Orleans, and a daycare center in Lafayette. In addition, we identified and contacted several schools, individuals, and agencies without the benefit of a personal or professional referral. In these cases, we were often following up on information we had gleaned from interviews or local newspapers. Once in these various settings, we relied on purposive sampling techniques to ensure that we included African American and white women and men, and boys and girls, in our sample. We also actively sought out persons of different social class backgrounds, and the final sample included poor, low income, and middle class respondents.<sup>2</sup> Our theoretical rationale

for including people of different racial, gender, and class backgrounds and diverse family structures (the sample included single mothers—widowed, divorced, and never married; single fathers; and married couples) was informed by our knowledge of the affected region, which was disproportionately African American and poor when compared to the rest of the United States; and past disaster research, which has clearly demonstrated the central role that race, class, gender, and family structure play in shaping people's experiences before, during, and after disaster events (Enarson, et al. 2006; Peacock, Morrow, and Gladwin 1997).

The process of gaining trust and rapport, which is of vital importance in qualitative research, varied based on a number of factors, including the age, racial identity, professional status, prior familiarity with research itself and us as the researchers, and the postdisaster situation of the respondent. For example, we found that shelter workers were often initially suspicious of us and our research goals, as they had already had several negative encounters with members of the media who were attempting to access shelter residents in ways that they deemed inappropriate and insensitive. African American women whom we met in shelters were willing to share their stories but seemed put off by the long informed consent form required by our universities. We employed a number of strategies to overcome these barriers and to establish trust between ourselves and our respondents. First, we used feminist interviewing methods (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004), where we privileged and respected the voices of the respondents. We asked open-ended questions and allowed the respondents to largely direct the pace of the interview. Second, we kept in touch with respondents through telephone calls, letters, and e-mail between field research visits. Third, we mailed gifts to a number of the respondents. Because we understood the suffering caused by a loss of a lifetime of photographs, we took pictures of our respondents and mailed them along with a thank you note after our data gathering trips. We sent clothing, blankets, and money to some of the participants in our study who were in dire financial situations. Fourth, during our field visits, we often volunteered to take families out to lunch or dinner before conducting interviews. We also ran errands to the grocery store, laundromat, and Wal-Mart. Perhaps most important in terms of establishing trust, we demonstrated a long-term commitment to the people in the study through our ongoing efforts to stay in touch and our return visits to Louisiana. Over time, a number of the participants started introducing us as "our friends from Colorado and Vermont" or as "the people who came here to help us after Katrina."

While we were in the field, we sometimes collected interviews together. However, more often than not, we would split up so that we could talk to more people. In shelters, we attempted to meet as many people as possible. When we were in schools, one of us would often conduct an interview (with a teacher or the principal, for instance), while the other would



observe a classroom. When we visited people's homes, one of us would interview the child(ren), while the other would interview the parent(s). Given our research strategy, which was necessarily flexible and in some cases opportunistic (see Michaels 2003; Phillips 2002), we each took responsibility for conducting interviews with adults and youth, recording jottings while in the field and writing up detailed fieldnotes as soon as possible after exiting the situation, corresponding with participants between visits, and analyzing and writing up the data.

During our first stage of analysis, the empirical material contained in the interviews and field notes were coded at a very general level in order to condense and organize the data into analyzable units. Segments of interviews ranging from a phrase to several paragraphs were assigned codes based on emergent or a priori themes (i.e., based on questions in the interview guide or the existing literature on gender and disasters). In some instances, the same text segment was assigned more than one code. This initial, "open" coding (Rubin and Rubin 2005) resulted in a list of themes, issues, and accounts of behaviors. Second, we began to examine the patterns between different a priori and emergent categories. Third, through the process of constantly comparing these categories with each other, the different categories were further condensed into broad themes associated with parenting strategies, gender, and place.

## **Displacement, Gender, and Parental Challenges**

The findings from our research on parenting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are detailed in the following sections, which explore the experiences of and responsibilities assumed by mothers and fathers in the disaster. Parents—mothers especially—played central roles in protecting and comforting their children as they responded to the disaster, and we specifically focus on four aspects of their experience: (1) parenting strategies and how mothers and fathers handled the numerous challenges of supporting and caring for children and other family members in the crisis; (2) the role of supportive advocates who assisted parents in their work of parenting; (3) the importance of kin networks and how the loss of these networks in Katrina's displacement has affected parenting; and finally (4) the unique place of New Orleans and how parents experienced the loss of raising their children in the city that was central to their families and their identities.

## Parenting Strategies

Parents employed a wide range of strategies to cope with the tremendous challenges imposed by the storm. First, they prioritized the needs of their children and other family members and made keeping their family safe their central concern. In most of these situations, it was mothers who were responsible for vulnerable family members. Second, in the face of a lack of resources, they became resourceful and found assistance in numerous places for their children. Third, parents made important decisions about immediate needs, such as reestablishing routines, and long-term needs, such as housing and schooling in the future.

### *Prioritizing Children*

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on Monday, August 29, 2005. In the days leading up to the storm, as Katrina approached the Gulf Coast, the warnings became more serious. Families subsequently began to gather information and make decisions. Parents—both mothers and fathers—watched the news, called friends and family, and assessed the situation. Many remarked that the storm caught them by surprise, and some were still deciding what to do as late as Sunday morning. All of the mothers and fathers in our study who were able to leave before Katrina struck said that they evacuated because they had children, which confirms earlier quantitative studies that have shown that adults with children are more likely to respond to disaster warning and evacuation messages than people without children (Carter, Kendall, and Clark 1983; Edwards 1993; Fischer, et al. 1995; Houts, et al. 1984; Lindell, Lu, and Prater 2005). Many of the parents remarked that they may not have evacuated at all, or certainly not as early as they did, had they not been so concerned for the safety and well-being of their children. Shashi,<sup>3</sup> a mother originally from India who had lived in New Orleans for several years prior to Katrina, explained how having an infant and a young child factored into her evacuation decision-making:

Because if it was not for the children . . . It's just because of them you suddenly have, you know . . . you become a mama bear and you just do not want anything to happen . . . anything uncertain to happen that you cannot really control.

The “mama bear” analogy underscores how fiercely protective Shashi was of her children in this situation that she perceived placed her family at risk. Another mother, stated simply: “If I didn’t have kids, I would not have left. But being a parent, you have to get the kids out.” One father explained that he talked with his ex-partner, and because of their son, said: “One of us has to go.”

Parents decided on when to leave based on what they felt was best for their children. For some parents, these decisions were made together, but

for many of the families in our study, the mothers had to make decisions about their evacuation with little or no input from the children's fathers. This was true both for mothers who were married as well as those who headed up single-parent households. Prior research on hurricane evacuation has also shown that women are more likely to plan actively for evacuation and to make the final evacuation decision for their household (Bateman and Edwards 2002; Enarson and Morrow 1997; Gladwin and Peacock 1997). For the mothers who were the sole parent responsible for their children, this was in line with how decisions were made on a daily basis. For the couples who were married, there were three primary explanations for why the mothers were the main decision makers in the evacuation. The first explanation is tied to men's employment. Several of the fathers in our study had jobs that kept them in New Orleans as the storm approached (for example, one father was a doctor, another was a small business owner), and thus the mothers were the ones who made the decision to leave town with the children and leave the fathers behind. In other situations, we found that a few of the couples were in "peer marriages" (Schwartz 1994), and thus power and decision-making were shared on a regular basis. In these peer marriages, it appeared that the fathers deferred to the mothers on the timing and the overall planning of the evacuation. Third, while it may seem counterintuitive that married women had so much decision-making power during evacuation, the work of evacuation in many ways represents an extension of their everyday caregiving duties. This is in line with research showing that mothers become assertive when the safety of their children is at risk (Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001).

In addition to deciding to evacuate, parents had to make plans of where to go, determine what to take with them, explain the situation to children, and keep them safe and happy. For the mothers who were the sole or primary caretakers of their children, they fulfilled these responsibilities by themselves. The mothers gathered items such as birth certificates, photos, a child's toy or stuffed animal, and a small supply of clothes, as they assumed the evacuation would last for just a few days. Some moved items, such as photo albums and their children's artwork and school awards, to higher places in their homes in case there was any water damage. All of the parents spoke of how they had to assess quickly how bad the storm would be in order to decide what to bring and what to move to safer areas, so there was a range of responses depending on their views of the storm.

Over half of the married mothers in our sample evacuated with their children while the children's fathers stayed behind, often due to work responsibilities or because the fathers wanted to stay longer at their homes. For instance, Luke, a white, middle-class father, owned his own business in New Orleans. His young son and his son's mother left town on Saturday, and he worked Saturday night, took care of his cat and dog, and waited until Sunday to see if he really needed to leave. Shashi's husband,

a medical doctor, was on call at the hospital where he worked, so she flew to Minneapolis on Saturday morning with their two young children. Tina, an unmarried white mother, left with her toddler while her ex-partner evacuated separately and later, but they tried to communicate throughout the evacuation so that the father knew the child's whereabouts.

Many other mothers evacuated without any coordination with the children's fathers, some of whom had been out of their children's lives for some time. For example, Debra, an African American single mother, evacuated with her 11-year-old daughter to a hospital where she worked because she had no other options. She and her daughter, Cierra, eventually had to be rescued by a helicopter as the floodwaters began to rise in New Orleans. Deidre, an African American widow who was unemployed and homeless prior to the storm, had a dangerous and traumatic evacuation with her 11-year-old son and infant baby girl in the middle of the storm.

Other women were responsible for both their children and their elderly parents, placing an even larger burden on them. For example, a white, middle-class woman, Sharlene, was responsible for four generations; she had to coordinate the evacuation of her elderly parents, her husband, her children, and one young grandchild. They evacuated two days before the storm and stayed in the home of another family member. One young African American mother, Naomi, whom we met at a shelter, had to evacuate with her father, who was an amputee, and her mother, who was blind, and her own newborn daughter, Joy. Because they had no other evacuation options, Naomi and her family members initially went to the Superdome. Shelter workers wanted to place Naomi's parents in a separate area of the shelter that was dedicated to evacuees who were ill or had disabilities, but Naomi refused to part with her parents. They were later evacuated from the Superdome to the Cajundome in Lafayette. Naomi told us that while the entire evacuation experience was frightening, it just represented one of many ongoing struggles in her life.

### ***Locating Resources and Recruiting Assistance***

Another parental strategy that mothers and fathers used was to search for resources for their families and to recruit the help of family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Parents became resourceful as they faced a lack of resources, the loss of home and community, and the separation of family members.

Some mothers relied heavily on friends and neighbors both before and after the storm. Kate and Beth, two white, middle-class, married mothers, each with three children, described how they helped each other to make the evacuation decision, then evacuated together, and then took the offer of assistance from family friends of Beth's to move into their home in a small Louisiana town for 10 weeks. At one point, Kate was going to

relocate her family so they would not impose on their hosts, but Beth needed her and asked Kate to stay:

[Kate said] "I'm going to go find an apartment or house." And I said, "If you go, I'm going with you. We need to be in this together. It's good for me to be with you. It's good for the kids to be together. We need to process this together. If I'm in the house with Amelia and Ben [the hosts], they don't have any idea of what's going on. My kids won't have anybody to play with. The dynamic will just change." And I swear I've been mentally healthy since we've lived together.

After Beth finished saying this, Kate concurred "It's been good for all of us, good for the kids." By recognizing both what they needed and what their children needed, Kate and Beth, whose husbands were often not around during the evacuation, were able to accept the hosts' offer and to express to each other that they needed each other's help as they parented six children through the crisis.

In the shelters, mothers were often able to find assistance from other parents, staff, or volunteers. At the Baptist church shelter we observed in Baton Rouge, congregation members would take children out for various activities, and as one mother said: "It helps to relieve a lot of pressure off the parents. They do an outing with the kids while the parents can have their time to vent, to regroup."

Some mothers had more difficult experiences finding support and assistance for their children and families. For the mothers who were responsible for multiple generations during the evacuation and relocation period, the tasks associated with caring for older parents and children often became stressful and overwhelming. Sharlene, who evacuated with four generations, struggled to find chemotherapy treatments for her sick mother and heart medication for her father during the initial stages of displacement. Beth, who evacuated with another family, her own children, and dogs, realized that she would not be able to take care of her elderly mother who was ill with emphysema and in and out of hospitals. She decided to ask her brother to care for her mother during the relocation.

Like Beth, other interviewees reported that they relied on siblings and extended family members for help after the storm. Mothers also asked their children to take on additional caretaking roles so that they could attend to other issues. For example, in one of the shelters with mostly African American evacuees, a volunteer told us that the girls were "acting like mothers, making sure baby has the appropriate clothes on so they're not too hot or not too cold, feeding the baby for Mom, stuff like that." This volunteer also noted that "older brothers would engage the other kids in active play." Low-income mothers with fewer resources and options tended to need the assistance more from shelter workers, other adults, and older children.

Even long after the storm, low-income mothers were still piecing together resources for their children. In February 2008, we visited Deirdre,

the African American mother who was homeless before the storm, in her FEMA trailer in Baton Rouge. We observed that there was no food in the refrigerator or cupboards, as her food stamps had run out and she had six days until she could receive more assistance. Deirdre's plan to feed her children was to walk several miles to a church that gave out free meals, and also to borrow a small amount of money from another displaced African American single mother in the same FEMA trailer park.

In comparison to low-income, African American respondents, white, middle-class respondents were more likely to receive postdisaster assistance through their former employers. This allowed these individuals to maintain a stronger sense of stability and to begin the process of recovery soon after the disaster. For example, Steven, a white father of three children who lost his home, explained that he found assistance for his children through his employment in the military. Indeed, he felt that the assistance came to him without him having to seek it out: "They took excellent care of our families." For example, the military provided him and his family with a furnished apartment in a newly constructed apartment complex in Texas, so, as he said, "We just walked in the door." His wife, Cindy, a stay-at-home mother, was able to make phone calls and seek out additional information that they needed and also spend time with their children when Steven went back to work soon after the storm hit. These varied stories illustrate how parents of all backgrounds became resourceful in the disaster aftermath and sought out assistance for their families, yet they also highlight some of the race and class differences in that process.

### ***Planning for Immediate and Longer-Term Needs***

A third strategy that we observed among parents was the detailed and painstaking planning done to ensure that children's immediate and long-term needs were met after the disaster. To cope with the uncertainty and their precarious futures, many of the parents tried to devise plans regarding their children's housing, schooling, and everyday routines.

*Shelter and Housing.* Hurricane Katrina caused the most rapid and largest mass displacement of persons in United States history. New Orleans was under a mandatory evacuation order prior to and following the inundation of the city, and hundreds of thousands of residents ended up in mass shelters, smaller makeshift shelters in churches and schools, hotels, and in the homes of family and friends across the United States (Nigg, Barnshaw, and Torres 2006). During the postdisaster relocation, we found that women—of all race and class backgrounds—were primarily responsible for the well-being of children in shelters and in host homes with extended family or friends. Although women of different race and class backgrounds took on these caregiving responsibilities, those who suffered the most losses and

had the fewest resources faced the greatest challenges in providing safe and adequate shelter for their families.

After Katrina made landfall, low-income African Americans were most likely to seek refuge in or to be relocated by the federal government to temporary mass shelters that opened in Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas (Brodie et al. 2006; Nigg et al. 2006). These shelters were generally viewed by mothers as unsafe places for their children, and they expressed worry when their children went to the restrooms or wanted to play without direct supervision. Mothers also struggled to find quiet places to nurse or put young children down for naps, and when their children wet the sheets on their cots they were sometimes informed by rule-following volunteers that they could not have new sheets until the morning. In one shelter, we were told that they would not give parents baby food jars because rumors about crime made the volunteers fear that the glass jars would be used as weapons.

Parents of children with special needs often faced the greatest challenges in the shelters, as described here by a daycare director who worked as a volunteer in the Cajundome in Lafayette:

This one woman had been in the Superdome with her autistic son, who was 18. Big boy, too, tall boy. And she just was so timid and frightened. She would have to feed him by hand, and he was like all over the place. She had been in the Superdome with him. She started telling me about it. She said she had to change his diaper, and the women wouldn't let her in the women's room, 'cause he was older, and she couldn't go in the men's room. And to get a plate of food, you had to stay in line. And you couldn't get two plates. But she couldn't [get him to stay in line]. By this time she was just about crazy. They had put her out of the special needs unit at one place. Then they put 'em in a hospital. Then they sent them to this special needs unit. Then they pulled them again. I don't know where they went. I lost track of them. It was the most horrible thing. I thought she was gonna crack up, I really did. But nobody was helping her.

Displaced families who stayed with relatives or friends in host homes often faced different issues, which emerged from the strain of blending different families into one household. This was a difficult parenting situation for both the evacuee parents and the host family. Indeed, parenting in a house with multiple families, people of all ages, and little space and privacy, was challenging, and evacuee parents often worried that they had overstayed their welcome. Shashi, Kanwal, and their two children stayed for over four weeks with Kanwal's parents and other extended family members in central Louisiana. Shashi was deeply grateful for the care and help that her in-laws offered, but she also commented on the difficulties associated with living in someone else's home for a long period of time:

Yeah. It's hard for me. For the kids, it's fine. I think the hard part was the conflict of parenting styles, just like anybody who goes and lives with their in-laws,

whether it's my parents or his parents. When you become a grandparent, you feel like, "Oh my God, you're being so harsh with the kids. You can't have this crazy schedule. You can't be so overbearing about their eating." While you're thinking as a parent, "I know, but you have to keep up with these things; otherwise, it's just going to all fall apart." You want the control of doing all that. So we had a little bit of those kind of issues. So my husband would tell them, "No, I think we really want it this way and we really need to talk about it." One day we all said, "This is the way it's gonna be." And then everybody kind of redefined their roles and started kind of letting us do the parenting part.

Shashi's comment illustrates the ways that families had to define new roles and set boundaries as they tried to make the temporary living situation work.

Another childcare issue concerns nonevacuee parents in locations with large evacuee populations, many of whom had work responsibilities that forced them to be absent a great deal. For example, mothers in Lafayette—not evacuees—who were nurses, disaster crisis workers, or probation and parole officers, had added responsibilities and were gone for long periods from their children during the evacuation period. Daycare workers explained that they could tell this was difficult for their children and the parents themselves.

Another housing issue for parents was creating a safe and viable life for children in FEMA trailers. While grateful for the trailers, some families dealt with various problems, including insects, sewage backups, headaches from formaldehyde, and crime in the trailer parks. For instance, Deirdre took steps to isolate her young daughter and adolescent son from the drug dealers in her FEMA trailer park. She did not allow her children to play outside during certain hours of the day, nor were they ever to open the door to strangers. Rosier (2000) also found that poor, single mothers intentionally isolate their children from neighbors that they considered dangerous or negative influences. Deirdre was especially concerned about the physical health of her children, as their FEMA trailer had a sewage leak:

They had sewage all underneath this trailer . . . The toilet was drippin' from underneath this trailer. They refused to come and fix it. But after I wrote the governor, Kathleen Blanco's office, and she wrote me back . . . They came out . . . I keep this trailer clean from the front to the back every day with a mop . . . the smell from out of that toilet is gonna come in my trailer and it's gonna go into Alexandria's lungs, or worse Daniel's lungs, because Daniel has asthma. You see what I'm sayin'? I'm a parent first of all. When you have kids, you have to keep it clean.

*Childcare and Schooling.* Childcare was an enormous and visible need in the disaster. Mothers spoke to us about how in their old neighborhoods, family members, close friends, and neighbors formed an informal but reliable childcare system before the storm. This was especially true of



the low-income African American mothers in our sample who were able to survive in large part due to these interdependent support networks (see Underhill 2008). With the separation of these close networks, poststorm childcare became a significant challenge. In addition, daycare centers were destroyed in New Orleans, and centers in evacuation towns were full.

For families in shelters, childcare programs with volunteer caregivers offered free childcare during certain hours of the day. This was a tremendous help to parents, as it gave them a much needed break to meet with disaster recovery officials, shower, or take a quick rest. However, childcare centers in the shelters often only took young children between certain ages, such as 2- to 8-year-olds, and thus those with infants or older children often had fewer options for help with their children.

Families that were out of shelters and in temporary housing had different issues with finding childcare. During nondisaster times, most private daycare is unaffordable and often has long waitlists, and this problem was certainly exacerbated in Louisiana in the aftermath of Katrina (Reckdahl 2007). Even parents with more financial resources lamented the lack of high-quality, available childcare in their new communities, and some received spots in daycare centers or nursery schools only because of the influence of a relative whose child was already in care there. The director of a daycare center in Lafayette explained that the state of Louisiana would not allow them to give childcare assistance funds to displaced families that did not have employment in the city of Lafayette. This rule prohibited many low-income parents who were out of work after Katrina from enrolling their children, which intensified the many financial struggles of evacuees.

During the relocation, mothers also took on the primary responsibility for finding new schools for their children. In one case, a group of mothers who evacuated to a small town in Louisiana worked to establish a temporary school for about 20 displaced children (see Fothergill and Peek 2006). After these families returned to New Orleans in early November 2005, they met with other parents and returning teachers and collectively decided to keep the temporary school running, with upwards of 80 students, until their old elementary school reopened in January 2006.

All of the mothers in our study emphasized the importance of enrolling their children in a good school and having them settled. One white single mother, Tina, decided to prolong her stay in Lafayette (she evacuated there from New Orleans, and eventually planned to move to San Antonio, Texas) in order to ensure that her son would not be forced to transition to another school too soon:

All the kids here were new, which is why I'm waiting until January to move him to another place, because I don't want to take him out in the middle of the semester of his school. I'd actually much rather have moved on by now. I'm not

making money here. My roommates are moving on. I'm gonna be stuck with the rent bill by myself, but it's because of the school decision.

Anne, a white married mother who relocated to Lafayette, also decided to stay put because her son, Jake, was doing well at his new school. It was a difficult decision, as she missed her old job, friends, and life in New Orleans. Others had the opposite experience with schools during displacement. Deirdre, an African American widow, decided to take her adolescent son out of his new school for fear of violence resulting from "turf battles" among students:

They had assaulted him out here . . . [So] he ain't goin'! I ain't gonna let nobody call me and say my child dead on the floor in a pool of blood. No, indeed. He is not goin' until I go back home to New Orleans . . . They want to fight him just because we're from New Orleans . . . I'm not gonna have you-all writin' up in the paper about my child, how he was gunned down or he was hurt in a school in Baton Rouge because they didn't like him because he was from New Orleans.

These parents and others, both African American and white, had to make difficult decisions about their children's schooling—which sometimes meant staying and sometimes meant leaving—based on what they saw as being in their children's best interest.

*Routines and Carework.* Children need routines after a crisis has disrupted their lives, and parents created ways for these routines to be reestablished, even in shelters, host homes, or temporary housing. It often fell to the mothers to ensure that children resumed with their schedules, started going to bed and waking up at their normal hours, and began eating healthier food and less "junk."

Parents recognized that their own mental and emotional states would influence their children's ability to reestablish some sense of routine and normalcy. Although many of these parents had suffered tremendous losses, their children's well-being was their main priority. Karen, a low-income African American mother who lost everything in the storm, explained how she tried to keep her "frame of mind" in order to help her young son settle into his new life in Baton Rouge:

Once I knew that he is adjustin', it makes it much easier, because I'm more concerned about him and tryin' to get him settled. You already know you upset and tryin' to put yourself together, but you also have that little one that you need to get together. So once I got him settled, I know he's looking at me, so if he can see that I'm not totally relaxed, then that's gonna make it uneasy for him. So I have to keep my frame of mind in order to get his mind back on the right track.

Past case studies of disaster have found a clear division of labor between women and men in terms of carework, with women taking responsibility

for reestablishing familial and social life (Enarson 2000; Enarson 2001; Fothergill 2004). Similarly, in our research, we found a division of labor between mothers and fathers in terms of carework. Our data show that postdisaster carework was performed primarily by women, including mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and older sisters. As mentioned before, in two-parent families, often mothers evacuated with children, and therefore they were clearly doing all the carework. Mothers were responsible for feeding children, making sure they had medicine, clothes, and toys, finding safe activities for them, putting them to bed, and generally meeting the needs of children and youths—from newborn infants to teenagers. Beyond basic needs and necessities, they were also providing emotional support, reassurance, entertainment, and comfort. Tina, a white single mother, spoke of how difficult parenting was when her 2-year-old son was “throwing fits” regularly as he tried to readjust to his new surroundings.

For mothers who were self-described “single parents” before the storm, but who maintained contact and relationships with the fathers of their children, mothering became much more difficult and complicated, largely because of the separation from fathers and from extended family networks. While a few of the single mothers spoke of “absent fathers,” most of the single mothers in our study informed us that their children’s fathers had played important roles in their children’s lives before the storm. In fact, many of the single mothers reported that even though they did not live together, these fathers still spent time with their children and shared in at least some parental duties. However, during the evacuation the mothers were the ones who took care of the children, and in the aftermath of the storm, the fathers and other extended family members often ended up in different cities or even different states. This left single mothers in a very difficult situation as they attempted to find adequate shelter, work, and offer more attention to their children after the crisis.

While women were generally the ones responsible for taking care of their children and other family members, there were some clear and important exceptions. In our study, there were some fathers and other men who took care of children. For example, Luke, who was no longer in a relationship with his son’s mother, made arrangements so that he and his ex-partner would each spend equal amounts of time with their son. This meant that they had to drive between New Orleans and Houston twice a week, but they both were committed to ensuring that their son stayed in a more stable and safe environment.

Sometimes, men were doing other work for the family while the women took care of the children. An African American mother, Christie, went with her husband and two young children to their damaged home in New Orleans immediately after the city reopened; while her husband started gutting the inside, she took care of the children outside. Other fathers stayed behind for their jobs or to secure the home, while the women

remained in a different location with the children. One father, Kanwal, asked his wife, Shashi, to stay in Lafayette with their two children so that they would not have to see their flooded home. He returned to New Orleans alone and took care of removing the refrigerator, gutting the house, and working with contractors to rebuild their home. Kanwal told us how much he missed being with his family, and Shashi noted that for their daughter, “it was very hard, because she is very close to her father.” Steven, who had been married for almost 20 years, also felt that it was his job to do the “dirty work.” At the same time, he was learning from his wife about how to be more nurturing with their three daughters after the disaster:

Steven: It seems like it’s naturally the dads who just jump in and do the dirty work. We’ll let the moms try and take care of the kids, ‘cause moms do that better because they can nurture ‘em a little better. Most dads don’t do a lot of nurturing. I’m learnin’ how. We do the dirtiest stuff. We pick up the heavy stuff, throw it away, whatever. We’re the ones who carry the basket of laundry, or the bag of trash.

Lori: When you say you’re learning how to be nurturing, what do you mean?

Steven: With the girls, the wife says, “Hey, you need to chill out a little bit.” When you’ve been in the military for 20 years, it’s, “What I say goes.” Now I have to explain it or be a little softer, I guess.

By examining these different parents’ actions, we can see how the division of labor in the disaster aftermath was highly gendered, with caretaking and everyday routine work being the work of the mothers and the “dirty work” the work of the fathers. As Hochschild (2003) argues, men have more control and flexibility over when they help at home, while women have a more rigid daily schedule, such as feeding and bathing children.

## The Role of Advocates

We noted in our data gathering the ways in which various individuals and agencies were able to care for and advocate on behalf of families that needed community assistance. We observed several individuals—all women—who served as advocates and, with the support of their organizations, were able to make an enormous difference in the lives of evacuated families in the disaster aftermath.

At a Baptist church shelter in Baton Rouge, the pastor’s wife, Mrs. Myers, an African American woman in her 50s, was the director of the shelter and a fierce and protective advocate for every person in her shelter. With the resources of her church and its congregation, her networks in the community, and her hard work and determination, she was able to provide

every adult with a job in the church, every child with free childcare in the church daycare center, and every individual or family with housing in a FEMA mobile home when the shelter closed. Mrs. Myers fought so that the families at the church shelter received the larger, three-bedroom trailers from FEMA, as opposed to the much smaller one-bedroom models. Deirdre, an African American single mother, explained how Mrs. Myers helped her with housing:

So with the help of [the church], I'm in this trailer. Because if it wasn't for Mrs. Myers, I don't care what anybody says, if it wasn't for Mrs. Myers . . . that woman has helped a lot of people out. We wouldn't even be in this trailer. We wouldn't have no housin'. And that's the most important thing, you know?

Valerie, an African American evacuee who also lived in the Baptist church shelter for several months with her husband and their two young nephews, described the things Mrs. Myers did to ensure evacuees had access to necessary resources:

Sister Myers, the pastor's wife, was just the . . . I mean, a mother hen. She protected everybody. And anywhere she heard that there was support for Katrina victims, she found it. Anywhere she found it. We didn't have to go to Red Cross, we didn't have to go to FEMA. She brought 'em all there. She brought the doctors there for us to have examinations. She brought the eye doctors there.

The families in the shelter, all African American, spoke repeatedly of the help Mrs. Myers gave them and of how she would not tolerate any criticism of the evacuees by the members of her congregation. Mrs. Myers was well aware of the stigma attached to being a Katrina evacuee, and she was incredibly sympathetic to the losses and humiliations the families in her shelter, "her people," had endured. Valerie explained how Mrs. Myers responded to the evacuees:

Sister Myers, her main thing was, "They have nowhere to go. They have nothin'. I don't want anybody sayin' anything rude. I don't want anybody accusin' them of anything. I don't want anybody lookin' at them any kind of way." We all had to wear these bracelets. One day she said, "Take 'em off, or when you go places everybody gonna know you're from a shelter. Take 'em off." She did not want . . . I mean, we were her babies, everybody in that shelter. One of the ladies who serviced the candy machines or whatever, it was an outside agency, and she left the machine open or somethin' and one little boy found it open and he told somebody it was left open, and the lady came and accused him, and Mrs. Myers said, "Take the machine out. 'Cause if you didn't see anybody take anything, I'm not gonna let you accuse them of doin' anything."

The work of Mrs. Myers continued, as she helped parents enroll their children in local schools. She also secured phone cards so individuals could get in touch with family members who had been displaced to other

regions. Deirdre, who was able to use the phone cards to call her teenage son in California, was appreciative of all that Mrs. Myers did for her:

Mrs. Myers provided, I think out of her expense, cell phone cards. I think it was from AT&T. I don't know where she bought 'em. She donated a lot, I think out of her own pocket. She gave too much and then some . . . She would cook. She used to cook for us. She did a lot. I think she knew a lot of people . . . I think she was familiar with a lot of different organizations that she called on the phone . . . And the fact of her getting Daniel in school so fast. I thought I was gonna have to go to the school board. No. Mrs. Myers got on the phone.

At the Cajundome, two Lebanese American employees, Renee and Sue, served as advocates for families who were relocated to the shelter in Lafayette. At one point, the Cajundome housed well over 10,000 evacuees, who Renee and Sue referred to as "guests" at their events center. Several mothers spoke of the warmth, support, and practical assistance they received from these two women, both of whom worked long hours and took on new responsibilities in the months following Katrina. We observed Renee and Sue at the shelter as numerous families, almost all African American, came in seeking information about employment, transportation, and housing. We also witnessed the women's protectiveness of these families—again, many African American single mothers with children—and their efforts to shield them from what they perceived as mistreatment by Red Cross personnel. Debra, an African American single mother, explained how Renee and Sue continued to help her with childcare a year after they had moved out of the shelter:

So, if I have to stop and drop off [my daughter, Cierra], the Cajundome is still open to us. If I really have to be away from her in the daytime like that, I can just call Miss Sue, Miss Renee and say—and it's just like, "Oh yeah, let her just stay and do some office work," or something like that. "Days off from school, she could be helping me in the office." So the Cajundome is still like, if we need to use the facility to help ourselves get better, [they] are still tremendously in our lives. If we call and say something like that, they'll find any way necessary. Not just me, anybody, to see how could they help us out.

In addition to helping with childcare, the advocates at the shelter also helped to transport Cierra to her new school when Debra and Cierra moved into a FEMA trailer park that was in a different school district. Debra explained that Miss Sue and Miss Renee would be out at their FEMA trailer as early as 5:00 A.M. to pick up Cierra and get her to school. Several years after the storm, when Renee's husband was ill, some of the displaced women visited her and provided her with support, illustrating how strong and long-lasting the connection was between these women.

The director of a daycare center in Lafayette, Beverly, a white woman in her 50s, also filled an advocate role during the disaster aftermath. First,

she welcomed displaced children into her center and made sure they were well cared for. Second, she volunteered hundreds of hours in the Cajundome, located in Lafayette, assisting families. In the shelter she became the spokesperson for families who were being mistreated or were running into irrational Red Cross rules. After a shift in the shelter, she would return to the daycare center and post a simple note on the front desk, such as “men’s white undershirts, size XL and XXL.” This would alert local families who attended the center of a need in the shelter, and they would bring that item in the next day and Beverly would deliver it to the shelter. This link brought the goods needed to the displaced families and it allowed the daycare families, most of whom were working and middle class, to play an important role in the disaster response efforts.

Finally, a pastor we met in Baton Rouge, the Reverend Kimberly Morris, an African American woman in her late 40s, ran a large interfaith network of churches and organizations and dedicated herself to providing assistance to the displaced families who came to Baton Rouge. The advocates we mentioned here, all women, showed tremendous leadership skills, resolve, and determination. It is important to note that these women were of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, yet for the most part, the women they were advocating for were women of color with fewer resources. There was a strong sense of solidarity among these women and an understanding that some women and their children were falling through the cracks. The advocates seemed to understand that it required a strong woman with resources—not simply money but perhaps access to organizations, church members, information, connections, or families that wanted to help—to stand up for the evacuees and to help them begin the long process of recovery. We should also point out that in addition to these more central advocates, we met countless volunteers who worked to assist displaced families. While all the advocates we met were women, we encountered several volunteers who were men. For example, at a church in Lafayette, we met an African American man in his early 30s who had worked daily, despite his own everyday family and work responsibilities, in the Cajundome with children organizing basketball games. In New Orleans, we met a father who “adopted” a New Orleans recovery school and subsequently used his business connections to help find resources (such as paper and other necessary school supplies) for the children at the school.

## **Kin Networks**

Families in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast endured immense and debilitating material and financial loss in Hurricane Katrina, such as the loss of homes, jobs, furniture, clothing, cars, and other belongings. Many also lost long-established networks of family, neighbors, and friends.

Families were often separated during the evacuation and relocation, and many were not able to reestablish contact for weeks or even months after the storm. Families that had lived near each other for generations were now scattered in cities and states across the country. This loss, above and beyond the material and financial loss, was acutely painful for the participants in our study, and they spoke frequently of the loneliness and sadness of family members being far away. Parents had to soothe young children who desperately wished to see beloved grandparents, cousins, or aunts and uncles.

The separation of family in evacuation and relocation was an emotional loss, but it was also a larger support system loss, such as sharing and exchanging services, childcare, transportation, and other necessary resources. Thus, these families had many needs as disaster survivors and evacuees that could no longer be met by family. Before the storm, Anne, a white, middle-class, married mother had relied on her brother, David, to help care for her young son. David was her son's favorite uncle, and according to Anne, he spent "five hours every day" with her son from the time he was four months old. After Katrina, David's apartment was destroyed and so he decided to move to Florida to start anew. This meant that Anne lost her brother and a reliable source of childcare, and that she now had to explain to her son why his favorite uncle was gone:

Anne: I'm freaking out. I'm trying to think of how to talk to Jake [Anne's son] about this without bursting into tears while I'm talking to him. Or like, crying while I'm thinking about how I'm gonna talk to him about this . . . So I don't really know how much of that Jake got, but he is obsessed with Uncle David. He's obsessed with, "Back to New Orleans."

Alice: He says that?

Anne: All the time.

In addition to extended family members being divided, mothers and fathers were also often separated in evacuation and relocation, and children typically lived with their mothers. As mentioned previously, for several of the women in our study, the fathers of their children did not live with them before the storm but were still very much part of their children's lives. Some commented that their children saw their fathers frequently, even if the fathers had been estranged from the children's mothers for a long time and even if they did not provide much or any financial support. Tina, a white working class mother, reported that her ex-partner cared for their son at least "five or six days a month" before Katrina. After the storm, Tina evacuated to Lafayette so she could be with her family, while her ex-partner headed to the Pacific Northwest with his friend. When we spoke with Tina she expressed disappointment in the lack of financial support her son's father had offered as well as his lack of effort to maintain contact with their child:



After the situation where his father hadn't been trying to keep in touch with him [their son] as much as I thought he would, and he hasn't given me any . . . I know he got the same amount of money I got from FEMA, and he hasn't given me anything . . . so he hasn't really helped out too much. He told me, he was like, "I really want to keep in touch, I want to talk to him all the time." There was one week in the middle of it, it wasn't at the beginning and it wasn't at the end, he called, I think he called three times in one week to talk to him. Then it went like two weeks and I called him. I was like, "I thought you might want to talk to him." He was like, "Yeah." The only time he talks to him is when I call him to talk to him . . . He's too irresponsible, too busy for him.

Unlike Tina's ex-partner, some of the fathers in our study struggled to maintain contact with their children, even in the face of significant obstacles. Robbie, an African American divorced father, returned to New Orleans after Katrina, but his son remained with his mother in Lafayette. Since Katrina, both parents have worked together to ensure that Robbie visits his son about once every other month, including some holidays. Given that Robbie saw his son almost every day before the storm, the infrequent visits have been difficult for the entire family. However, Robbie's work schedule with two jobs and the two-hour drive between New Orleans and Lafayette have made it almost impossible for Robbie to see his son more often. Chris, another African American father, also separated from his son after the storm, tries to see him on occasion. When we first met Chris, for example, he was in Baton Rouge getting ready to take a redeye flight to Atlanta to visit his son.

Karen, an African American mother of two grown children and a six-year-old boy, became separated from her youngest son's father during the evacuation. She explained that even though she did not live with her son's father, they would "see him every day" because he picked up their son, Clinton, after school. After the storm, Karen and Clinton were evacuated to Baton Rouge, while Clinton's father and his family left for Texas. Karen was unable to maintain contact with Clinton's father or his family after the storm, and she described how difficult it was to adjust to life without the additional support of these kin networks:

Karen: It's just you and him. And that's hard. 'Cause then you have to . . . I have to do things in a timely manner. I can't say, like, when he get out from school, that I can tell his dad or his cousin or my nephew or somebody to pick him up. I have to get him.

Alice: Who here can help you with him?

Karen: I have a couple of church members that can. So I do . . . God has put other people in place to have another outside family. So that I am glad for.

Like Karen, other low-income mothers who lost extensive kin networks after the storm turned to new friends and acquaintances, such as fellow church members, FEMA trailer park residents, and co-workers, for support

and assistance. As mentioned earlier, Debra often relied on the staff at the Cajundome for help with childcare since she lost her extended family network. She noted that while the shelter offered formal support groups, her daughter was more comfortable talking informally to the advocates for support. Shaundra, a single African American mother of two young children, felt fortunate that her mother and aunt evacuated with her, as she still had two key family members for support, assistance, and companionship. In addition, Shaundra had one cousin in another part of Lafayette who would watch her son until she could get home from work. Even so, she felt the loss of the larger kin network, especially her son's father.

## **New Orleans, Parenting, and Prospects for Recovery**

New Orleans is a culturally unique and special place in the United States. The participants of our study spoke to us about why they were attached to the city—including the music, food, social climate, demographic makeup, history, and their own extended families—and how these factors influenced their decision whether to return. In addition to the positive aspects, New Orleans is also a place known for crime, poverty, corrupt political leaders, inferior public schools, and environmental degradation. These were all concerns of the parents in our study. They agonized over their social, economic, familial, and cultural attachment to the city as well as the best interests of their children in the short and long term. Just over half of the families in our study returned to New Orleans in the months following Hurricane Katrina. The other half still remain in Baton Rouge and Lafayette.

Parents who returned to New Orleans in the months following the storm had to prepare their children for a very different life. Mothers were especially concerned about how they would answer their children's questions about what happened to their homes, schools, neighborhoods, friends, and family members. Christie, an African American married mother of two young children, described her anxiety of returning to her home and how she should explain it to her 8-year-old daughter:

But even though I have a home to go back to, things are not the same. Because now, all my family members are spreaded out. So in a sense, I'm fighting with, "I don't want to go home. It's not home no more." You're talking about my mama, who lived there sixty years, my aunt, who lived there seventy-something, it's like not home any more. So I'm really uncomfortable with going to that house. It's like, everything is so different. So even when they get back, I have to deal with that. Things are different now. You know, we don't have the family, we don't have the same neighbors . . . We got to go far now and travel to see everybody. So it's an emotional thing. I think I'm not really ready to deal with it.

Mothers, in particular, expressed concerns related to health issues, contaminated and toxic environments, safe and adequate schools, job prospects, and the work opportunities for their partners or ex-partners. Shashi worried about what New Orleans would be like for her children:

But is our little park going to survive? City Park is a disaster. City Park is gone. The carousel is a disaster. Everything's a disaster over there. How is that going to survive? Is the aquarium going to survive? Is the children's museum going to be there? And all those places may physically be there, but is the funding for those places gonna be there? Because if all this population is gone, how are they gonna keep up? So that's my concern. Because we use all of that, those places. And then in our own house, I'm so afraid to even touch the soil. I don't know what's been seeping into it. Like in our backyard, we just decided we're just gonna deck the whole yard or just brick the whole yard and just leave a landscaping border around the edges, because I don't want the kids to be digging in the dirt and playing in the soil. We'll just have to do hard landscaping and just leave it at that. I'm very concerned about the contamination. Kanwal said when you went there you did feel a little difficulty breathing because you did think there was something weird in the air, either contaminants or dust. You just kind of felt strange. There was something strange. So I'm just hoping that by December all that would have settled down. Health-wise, we're worried, of course, about toxins in the air and how can I let my kids play in it?

In addition to the health concerns, parents noted that many neighborhood parks had not been rebuilt or were lined with trailers, which resulted in limited space for children to play or run. This affected the ability of mothers and fathers to parent in the ways that they wanted—such as going outside with their children and providing them with fresh air and exercise.

Even with all the concerns and worries associated with returning to New Orleans, the pull of the city was strong for the families who had the financial means and chose to move back after the storm. Two of the mothers in our study, Kate and Beth, talked at length about their fears of crime, the difficulty of shielding their children from the devastation caused by the disaster, the hassle of dealing with insurance companies and contractors, and their apprehension regarding the environment and future disasters. But when asked why they wanted to stay, they responded:

Kate: We know there's no other place like this. We have some friends now who moved down . . . They had been in Boston and were sort of sick of Boston and felt called home, and so they've moved here. I think they've made friends faster and better here than anywhere else. He said, "You just don't get this kind of friendship thing and this community feeling in other places this quickly." Just that sort of casual pickup. "Hey, come over!"

Beth: And that's the reason we're here, aside from the fact that we have a school that we love. That is part of the community as well, that's a huge part of it. And the friends. A lot of cities have great culture, great music, great food, great art. But there's something more here.

Many others agreed with them. Deirdre, an African American single mother, expressed similar concerns about crime in New Orleans, and noted that there are “children in New Orleans that are walkin’ around with guns and knives in their backpacks.” But in the FEMA trailer park in Baton Rouge she encountered violence, drugs, and a hostile school setting for her son. Deirdre wanted to return to New Orleans to raise her children, and she said: “There is a lot there. That’s where [my son] was born and raised, and don’t let nobody turn you from New Orleans.” In our time with Deirdre over several years, we noticed a longing—and at times desperation—to get back home to the familiar surroundings of New Orleans, yet she lacked the financial resources to return.

The decision of whether to return to New Orleans caused some tensions for both married and separated parents. In some cases, one parent returned to the Gulf Coast and the other did not, a situation that created numerous conflicts and serious problems with child custody. Thus, many parents with stable, mutually acceptable custody arrangements before the storm found themselves having to renegotiate arrangements, often with conflict and painful outcomes. This issue has been widespread in the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina and the courts are often at a loss regarding how to settle these custody conflicts (Clemetson 2006).

It has not been well documented how many families who returned to the city after Katrina have since decided to leave. However, speaking to this issue, Claudia, a counselor at an elite private school for girls, expressed how difficult it has been for even high income parents and children who returned:

It’s been really interesting to see a lot of the families I’ve been dealing with . . . It doesn’t matter socioeconomically. They’re dealing with stuff. Some of the most messed-up kids and families I know right now are actually some upper-income folks. There’s been suicide in the families [from my school] . . . I’ve never referred kids out more in my life, for depression and anxiety, primarily . . . [to a] psychologist for evaluation.

As a result, Claudia remarked, during our interview with her in May 2007, that families in her school are leaving the city:

People gave it a go and they can’t do it . . . That has to do with “I can’t make as much money as I used to,” or “This isn’t a city I want to raise my family in.” A lot of good families are leaving, and for those of us that are staying, that’s really hard . . . I mean, there must be twelve families we’re losing this year. It’s pretty substantial.

Later in our conversation, Claudia returned to the issue of crime in the city, and pointed out that crime has significantly affected the girls at her school. The girls asked to talk about the shootings at Virginia Tech in a support group, but, as Claudia found:

That's not what we ended up talking about. We ended up talking about crime in New Orleans and how unsafe these girls feel . . . One of the girls had five things that happened to her in the past year crimewise . . . holdups, car getting broken into, house getting broken into, mom getting held up twice. They're moving. Those are one of the families that are moving, and that's why they're moving.

But for Claudia and many others, the city remains home and when we asked if she, her husband, and two elementary school age children will stay, she replied:

We are, you know? And part of it is, there is, I don't even know what word to use, a sense of commitment. We really love New Orleans, and we're committed. It needs young families to stay and make it thrive. So part of that is it. Part of that is, we really like it. We both have good jobs. We're just happy. It fits us well.

Some parents were glad to be out of New Orleans for good. Shaundra, a single African American mother of two young children, expressed this sentiment: "I always wanted to get out of New Orleans, and I felt that Katrina was my way out." Part of this was related to her recent divorce and her desire to start over in a new place, but part of it was the poor quality of the public schools. Shaundra relocated to Lafayette, secured a good job, bought a house with the help of Habitat for Humanity, and was impressed by the schools. Yet even though she was pleased, almost two years after the storm, she acknowledged how painful the move was for her 9-year-old son, Jerron:

Shaundra: Just Saturday he told my aunt that he miss New Orleans. He was in tears and he told my aunt that he wanted to go back to New Orleans. And that's kind of hard for me, because I don't want to go back. But it's kind of hard to see him go through that. I just thought he wouldn't express those types of feelings because he was in New Orleans for such a short period of his life.

Lori: What do you think that was about?

Shaundra: It's probably family, missin' family . . . He saw his grandmother every day, and then he went to school with her every day. So I believe it's family. That's what he really miss.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined the strategies that mothers and fathers used to deal with the challenges of parenting in the aftermath of Katrina, the role of advocates who worked on behalf of families, the importance of kin networks, and the uniqueness of New Orleans and what the city means for families. Given the magnitude of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, the scale of loss for families, and the significant race, class, and gender inequalities that marked the region before the storm, many parents

have had an especially difficult time dealing with the immediate and ongoing impacts of the disaster.

Parents faced the challenges of parenting by prioritizing their children in the evacuation and relocation, locating vital resources and assistance, and arranging the care of their everyday life, including shelter, school, and reestablishing daily routines. This work of parenting, by and large, was done by women. Mothers, regardless of their marital status, social class, race, or ethnicity, were often the sole decision-makers when it came to deciding if and when to evacuate, where to go, and how long to stay. Gender and disaster scholars have long recognized the central role that women play in disaster preparedness and response efforts (Enarson et al. 2006; Enarson and Morrow 1997; Fothergill 1996), and our work further supports this contention, although we note that there are exceptions.

Our study shows women were primarily responsible for caregiving activities. At the same time, men were not simply "absent," and some took on important parenting responsibilities. This is similar to Newman's (1999) work, who finds in Harlem that men are involved in the daily lives of working poor families, but perhaps not in a traditional breadwinner role, thereby appearing "absent" in survey or census data. Our work, like Newman's, shows that men's roles in parenting may be nontraditional but that kinship is important, and they often maintain ties with children even if they are not living with them. For many of the fathers in our study, African American and white, lower income and middle class, the emphasis was on responsibility to family. It is important that we acknowledge the fathers who took on important parental roles, as they were an important part of their children's lives before and after the storm, even though they were not the primary caregivers. In some cases, men made no concerted effort to contact or care for their children after Katrina, and they also did not offer to provide financial or emotional support for their children's mothers. More often, however, we found that when fathers were physically absent, they were separated from their families because of forced evacuations, employment responsibilities, or the decision that they should return to New Orleans to do the "dirty work," while women cared for the children.

While we found that mothers of all race and class backgrounds took on caregiving responsibilities, their experiences were certainly not the same. Low-income African American women faced different, and often more, challenges because they were more likely to be displaced to unfamiliar places, to lack agency in that decision, and to have fewer resources. Some middle-class mothers were able to transform evacuation into a kind of vacation for their children, with trips to see grandparents and friends, which allowed them to shield their children from many of the most dangerous and devastating aspects of the disaster. For the low-income families, primarily African American, staying in a shelter was difficult

and stressful. We also found that families with more resources were able to return to New Orleans if they chose to do so, while the low-income families more often did not have that choice. Other resources, such as cars, jobs, housing, and good schools, were also more available to those in higher income families. Several of the African American single mothers in our study, for example, did not own a working car and that affected all aspects of their daily lives, such as seeing a doctor, buying groceries, or applying for jobs or assistance.

Despite the enormous differences in resources, we discovered that parents had similar priorities, strategies, and childrearing values. Like Lareau (2003), we observed that social class had powerful impacts on children's experiences. However, some of the daily parenting differences by class that Lareau identified, such as limiting television time, reasoning with children, and intervening with institutions were not found in such pronounced ways in our study. While we did see some examples of different childrearing practices, we did not observe clear patterns across class and race lines. Indeed, mothers of all class and race backgrounds attempted to limit television time and felt it was their parenting responsibility to sit and talk and listen to the opinions of their children. Perhaps because of the disaster—and the perceived threats to children's physical safety and emotional well-being—our data illustrated more strongly that parents of varied class backgrounds shared similar principles of childrearing. For example, unlike Lareau's study, we found that mothers, regardless of class status, intervened on their children's behalf with institutions. In addition, we saw evidence of "concerted cultivation," including organized activities designed to help children develop skills, and the "accomplishment of natural growth," which includes more kin time, child-initiated play, and clear boundaries between adults and children, in all classes and races (Lareau 2003).

We also found in our research that parents need extended kin networks to help raise healthy children, and the loss of those networks was financially and emotionally challenging for both the parents and the children. Indeed, perhaps the most critical loss for the majority of parents and children in our study was the loss of these networks. Hansen (2005) found that the white families in her study were bound together in webs of interdependence and working parents had to use elaborate "networks of care" for school-age children. African American families, in particular, have been found to have large kin networks who support each other financially and emotionally, and may even include "fictive kin" (Stack 1974). Our study demonstrates that both white and African American families tended to rely on kin networks for resource sharing and assistance with childcare and care for the elderly. However, the networks of white, middle-class families tended to be much smaller and more compressed (e.g., an uncle, a set of grandparents, etc.) and were less vital to the economic survival

of the family. In contrast, African Americans were more likely to have extensive kin networks rooted in New Orleans that they relied on for resource-sharing and other forms of care. Thus, the disruption of these networks and the subsequent long-term displacement of family members were more problematic in many ways for the African American families in our study.

In addition to kin networks, we found that “advocates”—including community volunteers, disaster recovery coordinators, and religious leaders—were crucial in providing care and support for evacuees and their children. This was particularly true in the case of low-income, African American single mothers who occupied disadvantaged positions in society before the storm and were figuratively and literally “left behind” in the floodwaters. These parents needed assistance in the aftermath of Katrina that extended far beyond the emergency response phase of the disaster. Advocates were able to assist low-income mothers with securing shelter and housing, finding employment, and establishing childcare networks. The involvement of advocates who were willing to listen to and respect evacuees, and who had resources and community connections to assist parents, made a tremendous difference as disaster survivors began to rebuild their lives in new environments. Indeed, with the material support and encouragement of these advocates, we observed mothers begin the process of recovery.

Finally, we found that for the parents in our study, New Orleans was a unique place that was part of their families’ heritage and identity. The city was a place that they felt a connection to, and yet, the relationship they had with their “home” became more complicated after Hurricane Katrina. To not return meant saying a tragic goodbye to a city they loved, and yet, to return meant coming back to a transformed city that did not resemble the place they knew. We contend that parents and children who returned are in many ways still “displaced” and are facing some of the same difficult adjustments as parents and children in Lafayette or Baton Rouge, such as new schools, new teachers, new friends, and the loss of family members. As the mother’s quote at the beginning of this article states, “*My heart goes out to those who can’t go back. My heart goes out to me because I can go back.*” Thus, either option is heartbreaking. The parents who have returned have had to come to terms with raising their children in a changed city that may never quite feel as it did. Moreover, some of the aspects of the old New Orleans that made parenting easier, such as extended family networks, do not exist anymore. Some aspects of the city that made parenting more difficult, such as inadequate schools and crime, are now seen as even worse. Yet for those still displaced, the tugs of home are strong, and parents have had to prepare themselves and their children for a new life in an unfamiliar environment. The relationship to the city is obviously a complex one, and while families have many



compelling reasons to return, they also have seemingly just as many reasons to stay in new places. As the slow recovery process moves forward, parents, and mothers especially, will undoubtedly continue to face myriad new challenges as they struggle to care and provide for their children and families.

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## Notes

1. Almost all of the teachers and school administrators in our study were also parents. We classify them here based on their professional status, as we initially interviewed them to learn about how Katrina had affected children's school experiences. However, we also gathered data from these individuals regarding their family situations.
2. These social class categorizations emerged from our interviews and observations. As time passed, and as we developed deeper relationships with our respondents, we were able to ask more personal questions regarding social class standing both before and after Katrina. Specifically, we obtained information regarding pre- and post-storm income, savings, employment, living conditions, possessions, and insurance. From this information, we were able to infer general class standing.

3. We have assigned pseudonyms to all individuals and changed some identifying features to keep the identities of participants confidential.

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