

REBUILDING RESILIENCE: HURRICANE KATRINA AND WHAT POPULATION RESEARCH TELLS US



On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levee system resulted in a catastrophic disaster, leaving in its wake at least 986 deaths in Louisiana alone and \$135 billion in damage. The New Orleans metropolitan area and surrounding communities were especially impacted by Katrina and its devastation. Population scientists were eager to understand the short and long-term social, economic, and environmental implications of Katrina and contribute findings that could help communities respond, recover, and prepare for future natural disasters.

To coincide with the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, [The Data Center](#), a New Orleans-based independent research center, issued a report, “[The New Orleans Index at Twenty: Measuring Greater New Orleans’ Progress Towards Resilience](#).” The report was informed by data from many Federal agencies, including the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Federal Emergency Management Administration, Internal Revenue Service, and U.S. Energy Information Administration. It examines more than 20 indicators to provide essential insights into the region’s resilience capacity, highlighting strengths and weaknesses across key contributing factors organized into four categories of housing and infrastructure, economy and workforce, wealth, and people. Key findings include:



MORE INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS ARE NECESSARY

Metro New Orleans has made progress, but will need substantial new investments in stronger housing stock, flood protection, and reliable electric supplies to withstand future shocks.



BUSINESS STARTUP RATES HAVE INCREASED POST-KATRINA

During the 3-year period from 2023 to 2025, 592 out of every 100,000 adults in the region launched new businesses annually—34 percent above the national rate and 29 percent above the average of the other 49 largest U.S. metros.



EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT HAS RISEN

In Metro New Orleans, the educational attainment rate has risen to match the national average with 35 percent of adults holding a bachelor’s degree and 63 percent having some college education. However, the region still trails the other 49 largest metros, where 40 percent hold a bachelor’s degree and 67 percent have some college, as of 2023.



SIGNIFICANT WEALTH GAPS ARE STILL PERSISTENT

In Metro New Orleans, White households hold about 10 times the median wealth of Black households and more than six times that of Hispanic households--even after factoring in education and age.



THE POPULATION IS AGING

In Metro New Orleans, more than 200,000 residents are over 65 years old and will likely need assistance responding to and recovering from disasters.

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Researchers examining disasters over the past century have found that large-scale catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina often reinforce existing trends and deepen inequalities. However, some regions have managed to break from these patterns by using recovery aid to reform and strengthen institutions that reduce inequality and improve social cohesion, while also tapping into new and emerging industries to diversify and bolster their economies.

The Data Center's report documents how the post-Katrina New Orleans region has achieved greater resiliency. It also identifies additional steps that are needed to protect and strengthen the area as well as other communities in the United States at risk of extreme weather events.

OTHER RELATED POPULATION RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

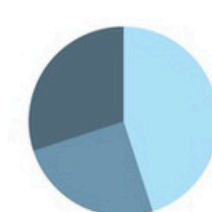
With support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, population scientists at RAND led the Displaced New Orleans Residents Pilot Survey (DNORPS) in the fall of 2006 and the full-scale Displaced New Orleans Residents Survey (DNORS) in 2010. The goal of these representative surveys was to pilot test and then implement the collection of information on the location, health, and well-being of pre-Katrina residents of the city. Some key findings from the surveys suggest that rates of return and mental illness varied by sociodemographic factors, particularly race. The studies also concluded that housing damage was strongly associated with higher levels of mental illness and accounted for ongoing displacement. The surveys filled gaps in existing information on New Orleans residents in the years after Katrina and helped service providers identify and target services for individuals recovering from the disaster.



Population scientists at Tulane University received support from the National

Institutes of Health to study the impact of Katrina on specific populations and identify factors that contributed to their resiliency. One such study, which focused on the recovery of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans, found how important it is for immigrants to not only be well-aculturated to American society but also well-grounded in their traditional Vietnamese culture. The practical implication is that there are likely substantial health benefits for immigrants from investment in their traditional language and culture.

Population scientists at Brown University and other institutions have been tracking migration patterns of Katrina-affected New Orleanians. They found that 33% of people who were living in New Orleans when Katrina hit had not returned to the city by 2006. Of those who had not returned, almost a quarter (21.7%) had resettled in Baton Rouge, while others had settled in Atlanta (14.6%), Houston (11.7%), and Dallas-Fort Worth (5.8%). By 2019, 30.9% of Katrina-affected New Orleanians were still living elsewhere.



THE DATA CENTER

