

In the eye of the storm: Why some people stayed behind

July 2 2009

Hurricane Katrina was the largest natural disaster in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 1,800 victims and causing well over \$100 billion in damage along the Gulf Coast. The 2005 storm breached every levee in New Orleans, flooding almost the entire city as well as the neighboring parishes. Yet a surprising number of people stayed behind and rode out the storm.

The general public, members of the media and government officials made instant analyses and character judgments of the people of New Orleans. But few people asked the residents themselves until recently. Stanford University psychologist Nicole Stephens and her colleagues decided to compare the views of outside observers with the perspectives of the New Orleans residents who actually rode out Katrina.

The researchers conducted two surveys, one of observers and one of survivors. Observers were asked how they perceived survivors who left and those who did not, and survivors were asked to describe their own hurricane-related experiences. The study of observers—including a large group of relief workers, firefighters, and physicians—perceived those who evacuated their homes as more self-reliant and hardworking. Those who stayed, however, were described as careless, passive, depressed and hopeless even though the observers were well aware that these residents lacked the resources to leave (money, transportation, out-of-town relatives).

When the psychologists surveyed actual Katrina survivors, they found

that those who stayed behind did not feel powerless or passive. On the contrary, they saw themselves as connected with their neighbors, more communitarian than independent from others. Their stories emphasized their faith in God and their feelings of caring for others.

The psychologists also took detailed measures of all the survivors' well-being—their mood, [life satisfaction](#), mental health, drug and alcohol use. As they report in a recent issue of [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, there were no significant differences between those who stayed in New Orleans and those who left. It seems their different "choices" did not reflect differences in well-being.

Source: Association for Psychological Science ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: In the eye of the storm: Why some people stayed behind (2009, July 2) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-07-eye-storm-people.html>

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