Hurricane Katrina: Survivors' Perceptions of a Social Disaster[1]

Author: Sarah Gregory
Faculty Mentor: Nicole Dash, Department of Sociology, College of Public Affairs and Community Service, University of North Texas
Doug Henry, Department of Anthropology, College of Public Affairs and Community Service, University of North Texas
Department and College Affiliation: Department of Anthropology, College of Public Affairs and Community Service, University of North Texas

Bio:

Sarah Gregory is an undergraduate student majoring in anthropology at the University of North Texas. She participates actively in both the Robert E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program and the Honors College. She aspires to attend graduate school in anthropology with a specialization in disaster research.

Abstract:

The purpose of the research was to identify communication gaps between survivors and the response to Hurricane Katrina. The study is a secondary analysis of semi-structured interviews that considered vulnerability of the survivors based on their physical and social environment prior to the storm. Using a system of codes, I looked at how the survivors attributed blame to discern their perception of response. The findings indicated that while black and white respondents and middle and working class respondents had different experiences, blame was ubiquitously attributed to values. According to the interviews and literature review, the attribution of blame was ultimately a question of priorities influenced by the surrounding social context and how one socially identified within that context.

I. *"So how well do you think the city, the mayor, and the state are doing in their response to Katrina?"*
R: "Not well at all. Everybody's, as usual, trying to blame each other."

Introduction

During and after Hurricane Katrina pummeled the Gulf Coast of the United States, the nation looked in horror through the lens of the media at what many described as comparable to a third world disaster. Hurricane Katrina submerged New Orleans in a stewing cauldron of blame. While some blamed government officials, others blamed victims for not evacuating. Local, state, and Federal tiers of government skirmished in turf wars and publicly ridiculed one another. Non-profit organizations, such as the Red Cross, were accused of poor management and fraud. In the private sector, insurance companies went bankrupt augmenting frustrations. Response and recovery efforts and the way the media portrayed the actors involved emphasized the disparity between socioeconomic classes poured salt into existing racial wounds.

The purpose of this research is to unravel how attribution was ascribed to the deficiencies of response efforts during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and to identify the sources of conflict among varying perceptions of the event from the survivors' point of view. The study uses a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with Katrina survivors to examine blame within the context of selected cultural characteristics relevant to social vulnerability. Social vulnerability in this context implies the potential conflict of judgments and values and a lack of communication that created this social disaster. By identifying who the respondents blamed, I hoped to understand more about what caused the conflict and to identify the gaps in communication in order to increase cultural competency between response agencies and disaster survivors.

According to the data and literature on governmental response during Hurricane Katrina, response and reconstruction efforts were criticized for a variety of reasons, in particular, inefficiency in speed and equity. Slow response, disparities in resource distribution, and the lack of attention to long-term recovery evoked a myriad of social issues implying that improvements are needed in public policy regarding response and reconstruction.

Respondents in this study indicated that the weaknesses of governmental response were largely a reflection of values. Many conveyed feelings of frustration, anger, neglect, and harassment, stating that they felt as though they were strangers in their hometown. In order to assess the causes attributed to these perceptions, this study looks at this disaster through an anthropological lens at the individuals on a personal level.

In anthropology, a disaster is defined as an intersection between a hazard and the social environment in which people dwell, resulting in losses of life, property, and social networks (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Using anthropology's holistic, developmental, and comparative approaches, this paper focuses on how social identity, shaped within New Orleans' physical and social environment, created vulnerabilities at a sociological level. These culturally derived vulnerabilities based on human-environmental relations, such as poverty, racial segregation, and political corruption, largely contributed to the effects of this social disaster and to perceptions of blame.

The study considers the political, economic, and environmental conditions that played a role in shaping survivors' perceptions of response. Blame is assessed through survivors' experiences interacting with the systematic mechanisms of organizational response, and how this event has changed their lives. This study was designed to

ascertain what factors contributed to the perceptions survivors formed about governmental response, who they blamed, and why. In addition, the study addresses "victim blame." Literature on blame and Katrina indicates that the general public had contrasting views of Katrina victims, some blaming the victims for not evacuating thereby justifying the lack of assistance.

Understanding how survivors assigned blame and how the general public perceived the survivors' experiences is a touchstone in dismantling the social conflict that surrounded this event. Blame implies responsibility, and in the case of Katrina, these lines of responsibility for individual and public welfare were blurred. Blame is instrumental in how citizens evaluate governmental response and, in turn, how decision-makers form policies.

In order to conduct an analysis of blame, the attribution process must be somehow operationalized. What are the contributing factors to blame? Attribution theory is a theory in social psychology that explains the way individuals attribute causes to behavior. Research on how attribution is ascribed to social problems suggests judgments are based on enculturation rather than on cognitive biases as classic attribution theory asserts (Guimond et al., 1989). Thus, notions of blame are considered within the context surrounding the individual prior to the storm.

This study uses a secondary analysis to identify blame and the context in which it was shaped. The secondary analysis is presented in a general consensus of to whom and to what survivors attribute inefficient response efforts. These accounts are positioned in a theoretical framework used to delineate cultural domains that contributed to perceptions

of blame. The study examines the values that undergird these perceptions and what policy implications can be assumed based on the survivors' experiences.

Methods

Faculty in the departments of sociology and anthropology at the University of North Texas collected the event histories of 42 Hurricane Katrina survivors of which 20 were randomly selected for secondary analysis in this study. I coded the interviews based on the different agencies and reasons the respondents attributed to the deficiencies of response and reconstruction efforts and conducted a qualitative analysis of the data to identify the factors that contributed to perceptions of blame.

I created nine categories for the codes, each designed for the explicit purpose of identifying different aspects of the decision-making process of survivors, and how they perceived the outcomes of the storm after these decisions were made. The first category is "blame." Upon initially reading the data, I created codes for each of the agents and reasons to which respondents could potentially assign blame. This category, developed in an initial inventory of how blame was assigned, was the most commonly attributed.

I developed the rest of the categories to contextualize these perceptions of blame. Conditions that had the potential to influence the perception of blame included sources of support and assistance, circumstances surrounding evacuation decisions, hardships during response and recovery, perceptions of self-efficacy, the protective measures survivors had the foresight and ability to take, and the media's role.

The original design of this study focused on agency in disaster, the capability of survivors to take protective measures during Hurricane Katrina. The interviewers asked respondents to identify their hardships, such as medical disabilities, age, the ability to

evacuate, and how they evaluated governmental response. From this data, attribution of blame emerged in respondents' accounts of agency and the cultural domains that couched their experiences.

The secondary analysis of the interviews examines the external, internal, and unknown factors attributed to blame and the context in which these perceptions were formed. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census, relevant features of the respondents' neighborhoods prior to the storm, and influential social norms are used to contextualize respondents' perceptions of blame.

<center>Background</center>

An analysis conducted by the Congressional Research Service indicated that Hurricane Katrina affected 77% of Orleans Parish. Nearly every household in St. Bernard flooded. Orleans Parish is broken into 8 districts: Gentilly, Mid-City, French Quarter, Lower Ninth Ward, Central City/Garden District, Uptown/Carrollton, Bywater, and Lakeview. St. Bernard is located in Mid-City District and is one of the lowest lying areas in New Orleans. Refer to Figure 1. Orleans Parish is approximately 67% Black, (Figure 2); 27% White (Figure 3); 3% Hispanic; 2% Asian; .2% Native American; and .2% other in its demographic makeup. Orleans Parish makes up close to a tenth of the state of Louisiana's total population with 27.9% living at or below the poverty line compared with the U.S. poverty rate of 12.4%.

New Orleans is characterized by its racially diverse and Creole population. Some families extend back several generations preserving, with its historical legacy, a culture of its own. New Orleans, "The Big Easy," is known for its raucous parties, Mardi Gras, Jazz music, and avant-garde art scene. As one respondent put it,

I loved New Orleans and I loved its charm ... New Orleans is kind of the place to go when you don't want to grow up. You can be 35 and go to the bar and get drunk or be an artist or whatever. And nobody looked down on you for that. (Respondent 120, p. 9; Race: Caucasian, Sex: Male, Age: Mid thirties, Location: French Quarter)

Carole L. Jurkiewicz (2007), of the Public Administration Institute at Louisiana State University, explicates how the culture of Louisiana has established normative values fostering behavior somewhat deviant and in some cases, unethical. She opens with a quote, "Louisiana is no more corrupt than any place else. It's just that Louisianans are proud of it."

Findings

Findings suggest that attributions vary from individuals, such as the mayor of New Orleans, to agencies, such as FEMA. Respondents also noted more structural reasons, such as a history of racism, graft, and political corruption, to more cognitive and internal prescriptions, such as self-blame or God. Attributions were also assigned to this ambiguous group of decision-makers referred to as, "they."

Katrina was a social disaster produced by pre-existing social, political, and economic conditions. The most prevalent attributions of blame focus on external perceptions of blame including:

1. local, state, and Federal entities;

2. corruption, apathy, and racism; and

3. an unidentified elitist group "they."

External Factors Affecting Blame.

Local, state, and federal entities. Many blamed the local, state, and federal government. In particular, respondents blamed New Orleans mayor, Ralph Nagin; Louisiana governor, Kathleen Blanco; U.S. President George W. Bush, and FEMA director, Michael D. Brown, for slow and inefficient responses. Nagin received criticism for calling the mandatory evacuation 12 hours before the storm and not providing adequate transportation. However, other respondents did not blame the mayor. Others thought that, although he did not perform well, no one could have effectively responded to a disaster of this magnitude and scope.

When asked to evaluate the performance of local and state governments, one respondent indicated that the Mayor made the mistake of using an "old template," failing to take into account the special demands a storm of this proportion. The Governor, she said, deserved most of the blame for hindering efforts to administer aid to New Orleans citizens stranded after the storm.

One respondent blamed Michael Brown, arguing he was unqualified for the job: I don't remember his name. But he got another job with the government, he recommended Brown, did anybody bother to read a resume from Brown? No! 'Cause if they had, I don't think they would have given him the job. He was the manager of a horse track or something. So that was government, somebody in the government should have looked at his resume. I guarantee you, if it were you or I, we would not have gotten that job. (Respondent 115 p. 12 ; Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age 64, Location: St. Roch)

Another respondent, a retired homicide detective with the New Orleans Police Department, expressed dissatisfaction with the government at all levels and responded:

The mayor ... there ain't a whole lot he could do anyway. He got notifications in.

As far as I knew, all he could do was notify people that he needs help. He's at the

bottom rung; he knew that. He tells the governor, the governor's a moron anyway,

Kathleen Babbling Blanco ... she dropped the ball, W, he dropped the ball. Little

disappointed in everybody, mostly for W 'cause I voted for him twice. I don't

know, I think I kinda' took it personally from him. The governor of Texas

becomes president then screws me over. What an asshole! The state response

from call time was a joke. The only problem with the mayor that really pissed me

off was that he moved to Dallas; he bought a house and everything ... that's

insane! (Respondent 117 p. 23; Race: Caucasian, Sex: Male, Age: mid thirties,

Location: Lakeview)

In many cases, respondents felt neglected by federal aid, particularly Black

respondents:

I just feel that FEMA [is] not helping. They got a lot of people who never got

money from FEMA at all. (Respondent 101 p. 27; Race: African American, Sex:

Male, Age: 60, Location: Gentilly)

Corruption, apathy, and racism. The response to Hurricane Katrina was, without

a doubt, the best efforts of many. There were heroes and heroines, displays of

compassion, and bravery. However, there were also many reports of looting, violence,

and scams:

And people being ripped off, people coming from all over the places, telling

people they gonna fix their houses and asking them, the money they gotten from

they insurance. Asking them for a few thousand dollars to go and buy the

materials, they'll go and get it and come back that one day. And play around and

don't do anything, and then they leave and then they change they cell phone

numbers. And people are left, you know, worst off. (Respondent 108 p. 11; Race:

African American, Sex: Female, Age: 36, Location: Metairie)

Another posited that:

I ... believe that centuries of graft and political corruption set the stage for this, a

sort of citywide generation of half-assedness led to bad levies, bad planning, and

not caring for anything other than your personal pocketbook. (Respondent 139 p.

4; Race: Caucasian, Sex: Female, Age: Unspecified, Location: Mariginy)

One of the most common attributions of blame focused on values:

They're building the French Quarters, uptown area. You know, those areas is

where they building. But as far as you know, they call us poor people, but those

neighborhoods are not being touched. (Respondent 114 p. 12-13 Race: African

American, Sex: Female, Age: 33, Location: Lower Ninth Ward)

A second respondent said,

... when you grow up low income, low social economic area in New Orleans, no

one cares. The school doesn't care, the police don't care, nobody at all cares. And

your politicians, your clergy, your school, everybody's corrupt, so you're

screwed, you know it. Teach your kids a better life, you want your kids to have it

better than you've ever had, that doesn't exist. 'Cause you have it the same or

worse than your parents had and so on and so on. Look, hey kid, this is it, sell

drugs if you wanna put a dime in your pocket, do what you gotta do. (Respondent

117 p. 25; Race: Caucasian, Sex: Male, Age: mid thirties, Location: Lakeview)

A third respondent observed,

>New Orleans was the money maker for the State of Louisiana, but it was also the
>
>stepchild. You know, it was also the one that they didn't really want to claim
>
>until it was time to get money from the Saints, or get money from the hotel
>
>industry. I heard one man on television; he was, I don't know, one of those
>
>politicians "who would build a city in a bowl?" New Orleans is one of the oldest
>
>cities in the United States. It was built long before he was born and his daddy and
>
>his grandpa too probably. And this is the kind of mentality that we have. If the
>
>flood had not [happened], if they had taken care of [the levees], and the
>
>government has yet to say this is our fault. Because the Army Corps of
>
>Engineers, that was their job and they did not do it. (Respondent 115 p. 18; Race:
>
>African American, Sex: Female, Age 64, Location: St. Roch)

Both Blacks and Whites attributed blame to racism:

>... towards the end, it seemed like someone had came and handpicked all the white
>
>people. I didn't see anymore. This one lady came and said 'we need this man
>
>because he's a doctor.' He wasn't a doctor; he was white. (Respondent 103 p. 7;
>
>Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age: Unspecified, Location: Gentilly)
>
>I'm to the point where I'm breaking. I'm tired of fightin. I shouldn't have to fight
>
>as an American. And if you don't like the color of my skin, don't look at me.
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>(Respondent 108 p. 4; Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age: 36, Location:
>
>Metairie)
>
>I think New Orleans is changing, like how they changed Times Square in New
>
>York. The idea is to run all the riff-raff out and make it a nice, rich, white place

to live. And they don't seem to realize that to have a fully functioning city, you

have to have poor people and rich people and smart people and dumb people and

that kind of thing. (Respondent 120 p. 9; Race: Caucasian, Sex: Male, Age: Mid

thirties, Location: French Quarter)

Other black respondents said that they felt as if they were treated like criminals in

their own town. Several respondents commented on how the National Guard and other

members of law enforcement threatened to shoot anyone on foot that tried to leave the

Superdome and Convention Center. In other cases, the perception was formed on less

substantial and obvious cues. For example, one respondent noted,

... the President was flying around with the Mayor in the helicopter and they were

looking down at us, like we were the criminals. We were the criminals!

(Respondent 103 p. 7; Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age: Unspecified,

Location: Gentilly)

Internal Factors Affecting Blame

Self. In this case, the respondent blamed himself for not evacuating.

... it was a very bad experience, I made a wrong decision that day to stay.

(Respondent 101 p. 5; Race: African American, Sex: Male, Age: 60, Location:

Gentilly)

Although others expressed self doubt, questioning whether their misfortune was caused

by their own neglect and/or lack of knowledge, most attributions of blame found in this

study were external.

Unknown Factors Affecting Blame

They. "They" were responsible for the conditions prior to the hurricane and the priorities during rescue operations and reconstruction, which implied fault on a deeper level in social norms. When describing their frustration dealing with the system, respondents frequently used the word "they" rather than assigning blame to an identified decision-maker. This implies the schism in communication between the response element and the populace it is designed to assist. Respondents' feeling of frustration, and accounts of being denied help amplified the effects of blame. The use of ambiguous pronouns suggests a communication gap between the government and these politically under-represented populations. The use of the word "they" exposes the boundary where respondents look at the system from the perspective of "us and them."

> They didn't, they did not prepare us for this like they were supposed to. They didn't, you know, (and I really really blame them for this) cuz they gave us like, I'm going to say like a couple of hours, maybe a couple of days … telling us it wasn't a mandatory evacuation … when it should have been, cuz that would have given everybody enough time to actually get out. (Respondent 102 p. 5 Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age: 27, Location: Chalmette)-
> 'They want me to go home.' She say 'I don't have nothing to go home to.' Cos people say 'we wish you would go home.' (Respondent 109 p.7; Race: African American, Sex: Female, Age: 52, Location: Ninth Ward)

In many ways these quotes demonstrate a general consensus among respondents that they were out of the communication loop, denied social access, and felt powerless in the reconstruction process. This lack of involvement, expressed in anger and exhaustion in trying to navigate the system, suggests that one of the weaknesses of governmental

response is its lack of personal involvement between Katrina survivors and the mechanisms of governmental response.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Besides property damage and loss of life, Hurricane Katrina instigated a breakdown in communication resulting in a social disaster. Hurricane Katrina opened the forum for opinion, unleashing a cacophony of voices competing for representation. Without political representation within this system where perceptions of fairness of the distribution process are politically charged, competition for funds has the potential to further marginalize and deprive under-represented minorities (Morrow & Peacock, 2000). Atypical of disaster, stakeholders apply pressure to decision-makers who, with vested legal authority, determine when a disaster has occurred, what the priorities are, how much of taxpayers' dollars will be allocated to reconstruct, and who are the beneficiaries. The stakes of this competition for political representation are high in that they ultimately determine how, when, and if communities will be reconstructed (Peacock & Ragsdale, 2000). Thus, the attribution of blame is more than identifying the cause of a problem in order to prescribe solutions; it is an effective weapon among political, social, and historical rivals who have competing agendas.

Criticism surrounding this event and the way the media framed this criticism emulated the dichotomous perspective of government response. These polemical perspectives are significant in that they raise questions as to how capable the government is in its response to disasters and to what degree citizens are responsible for their own welfare. Concomitant with these questions are political ideologies represented by partisanship.

In a study designed to assess American culture's judgments of justice and fairness of variable distributions of wealth, Mitchell, Tetlock, Newman, and Lerner (2003) found that liberals were more inclined to endorse systems of equality and redistribute wealth across lines of socio-economic class and that conservatives were more competitive, fiscally frugal, and less supportive of redistributing wealth equally. Both groups, however, converged in their views of those below the poverty line, and also, to an extent, in systems where economic outcome directly reflected merit. The results of the study imply that judgments of justice are a reflection of values and are founded on the conditions prescribed by the adherent's culture.

Intergroup relation studies assert that the tendency of ingroup members is to identify with other ingroup members and, consequently, this creates a category of "otherness." Perceived as separate from the shared experiences of other ingroup members, outgroup members are more likely to be criticized because members of the ingroup are less likely to identify with them. For example, surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center (2005) indicated that while 66% of African Americans feel that governmental response would have been faster if survivors and victims of the storm had been white, 77% of White respondents felt that governmental response would have been the same regardless of whether the victims were White or Black. Furthermore, research on the racial divide between how African Americans and Whites attributed blame to victims and survivors who did not evacuate before the storm demonstrated how the boundaries in which a social group identifies influences an ingroup's negative assumptions of outgroup members. The results of the study conveyed that how people

identify and socially categorize themselves and others affected how they attributed blame

in the event of Hurricane Katrina (Dach-Gruchow, 2006).

Research on helping behavior supports this assertion demonstrating that people

are more likely to help those with whom they identify, such as family, friends, or

community members, and less likely to help outgroup members (Avdeyeva, Burgetova,

& Welch, 2006). Helping behavior is less likely to occur if the victim is perceived to have

put themselves in harm's way or if the need for help is unclear or perceived as

illegitimate. Thus, victim blame is the more likely the response of members outside of the

social group of the victims and survivors. The need for help may be obscured due to a

lack of awareness or understanding caused by a cultural divide between the victims and

members of the outsider social groups.

This is significant in that it establishes a theoretical basis to describe how the

cultural divide evident between the mainstream and politically under-represented

minority groups, who comprise the majority of the areas of New Orleans most afflicted

by Katrina, are less likely to receive assistance and more likely to be blamed for their

own loss.

In her article on the ethical culture of Louisiana, Jurkiewicz (2007) used Payne's

15 factors of variance between socio-economic classes to delineate the differences in

values among the low, middle, and high socio-economic classes. Payne's model explains

how the values between the three different classes diverge and produce different

motivates of behavior. She demonstrates how the variance in motives manifested in

conflict during Hurricane Katrina. Perceptions of administrative failure and victim blame

were produced by clashing values and conflicting motives. For example, according to

Payne's model, members of lower socio-economic classes perceive time in the moment, and decisions are based on instinct. The middle socioeconomic class concerns itself with the future and bases decisions on future results. Members of higher socio-economic classes base their decisions on values, tradition, and history, and, thus, base their decisions on proper decorum. Jurkiewicz postulates that these varying perceptions of time produce conflicting views of personal and administrative responsibility. The calculating and pragmatic middle-class perceived the decisive decisions typical of the lower class as irresponsible. This may, to some extent, explain victim blame, the perception that victims of Katrina were at fault for not evacuating. Conversely, value of possession among the different socio-economic classes promoted administrative blame among the low socio-economic class. The high class regards money as something to be conserved, and invested, the middle-class is primarily concerned with managing money, and low class values money in terms of its use. Jurkiewicz then explains that this culturally derived perception of money can be used to explain the divergence in priorities considered from the perspective of each class.

Among ideological, socio-economic, and racial clashes, the line dividing the responsibilities to protect and rebuild the government and the individual were unclear in this event. This research found that blame was attributed within this context of a charged political environment, a lack of leadership and coordination, and a lack of cultural competency. Perceptions of governmental and the individual accountability subjectively varied among the various groups. Based on a review of the literature, perceptions of the event appear to be subjective, partly rooted in political partisanship and how one socially categorizes and identifies within the cultural context of New Orleans.

According to the respondents of this study, blame was attributed to a lack of leadership and political representation among marginal communities. The lack of direction and communication was fostered by cultural differences and stimulated agitation across racial and socio-economic boundaries creating social conflict. Challenges of recovery expressed in these interviews with survivors suggest the need for more diversity, partnership, and community involvement in the reconstruction process. Considering the narrow focus of governmental response, community partnership programs may be used to empower citizens, decrease dependency on the government resources more than financial reimbursement, thus allowing citizens to take a more active role in reconstruction.

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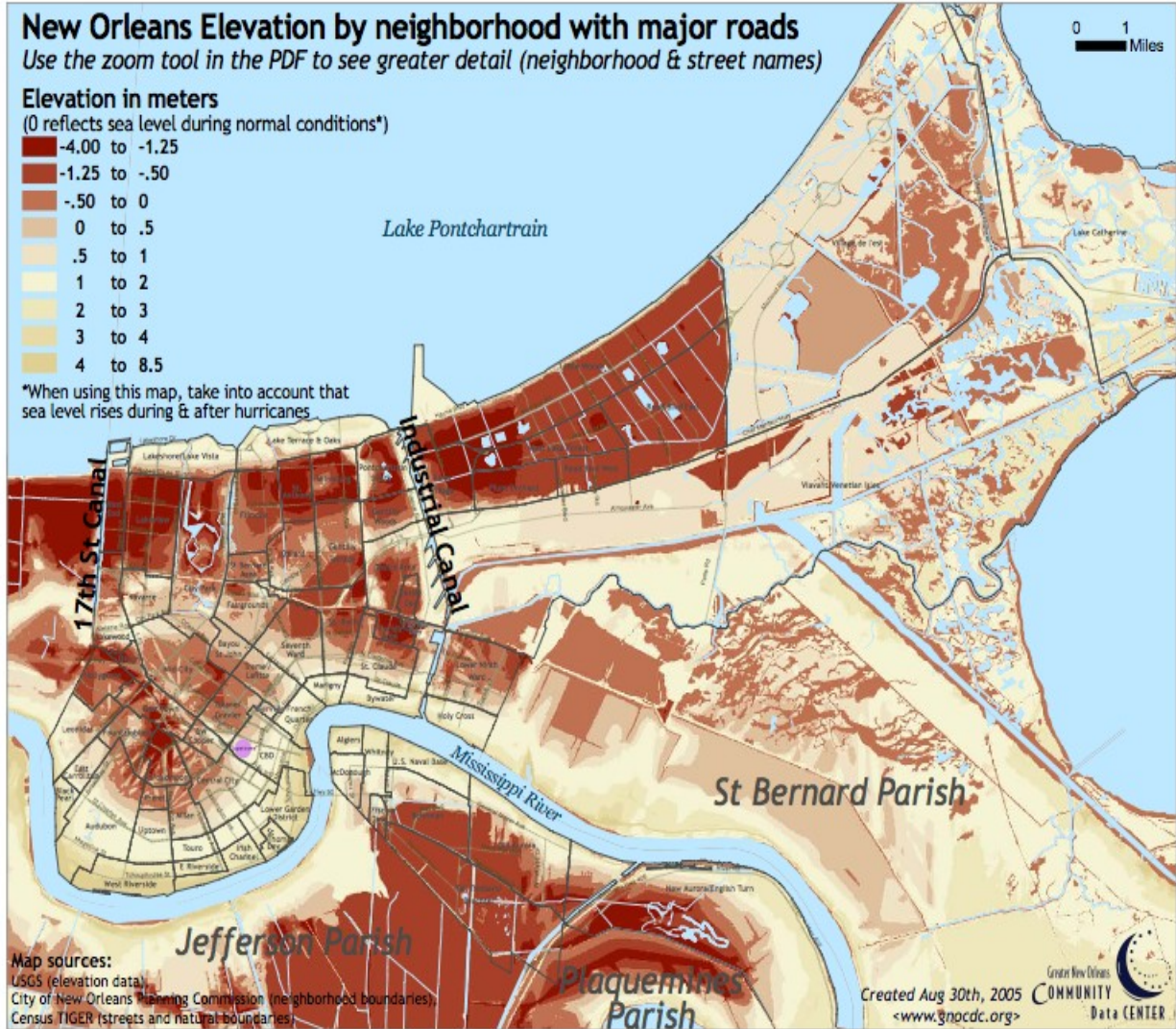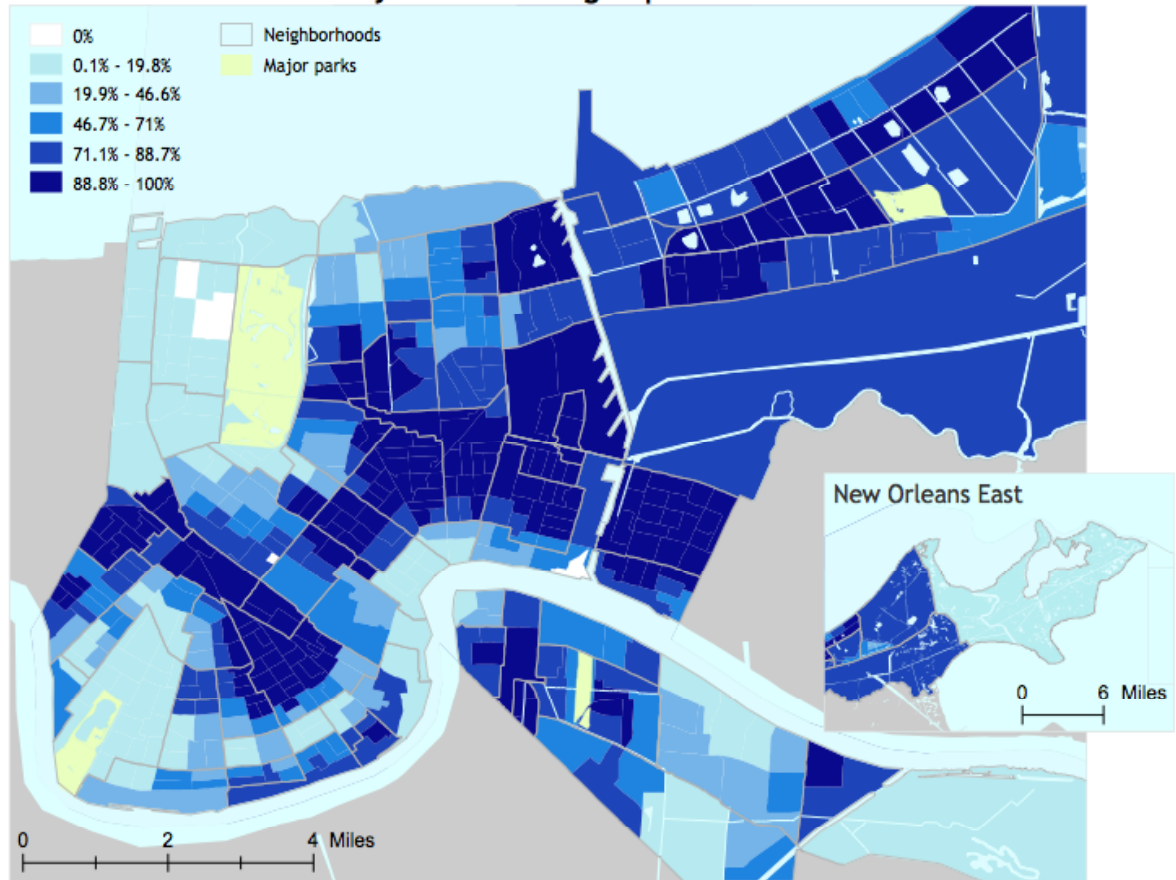
Figure 1. New Orleans Elevation by Neighborhood with Major Roads

Note: Used with permission of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center at www.gnocdc.org

Percent African American by Census block group in Orleans Parish

Legend:
- 0%
- 0.1% - 19.8%
- 19.9% - 46.6%
- 46.7% - 71%
- 71.1% - 88.7%
- 88.8% - 100%
- Neighborhoods
- Major parks

New Orleans East

0   6 Miles

0   2   4 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000 Full-count Characteristics (SF1). From a compilation by the GNO Community Data Center. <http://www.gnocdc.org>
Note: Percent *African American* is based on the number of people who checked *African American*, excluding those who checked the ethnicity *Hispanic*, on their 2000 Census form.

Figure 2. Percent African American by Census Block in Orleans Parish

Note: Used with permission of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center at www.gnocdc.org

Percent White by Census block group in Orleans Parish

Legend:
- 0%
- 0.1% - 8.4%
- 8.5% - 23.7%
- 23.8% - 46.4%
- 46.5% - 73%
- 73.1% - 97.6%
- Neighborhoods
- Major parks

New Orleans East

0   6 Miles

0   2   4 Miles

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Census 2000 Full-count Characteristics (SF1). From a compilation by the GNO Community Data Center. <http://www.gnocdc.org>
Note: Percent *White* is based on the number of people who checked *White*, excluding those who checked the ethnicity *Hispanic*, on their 2000 Census form.
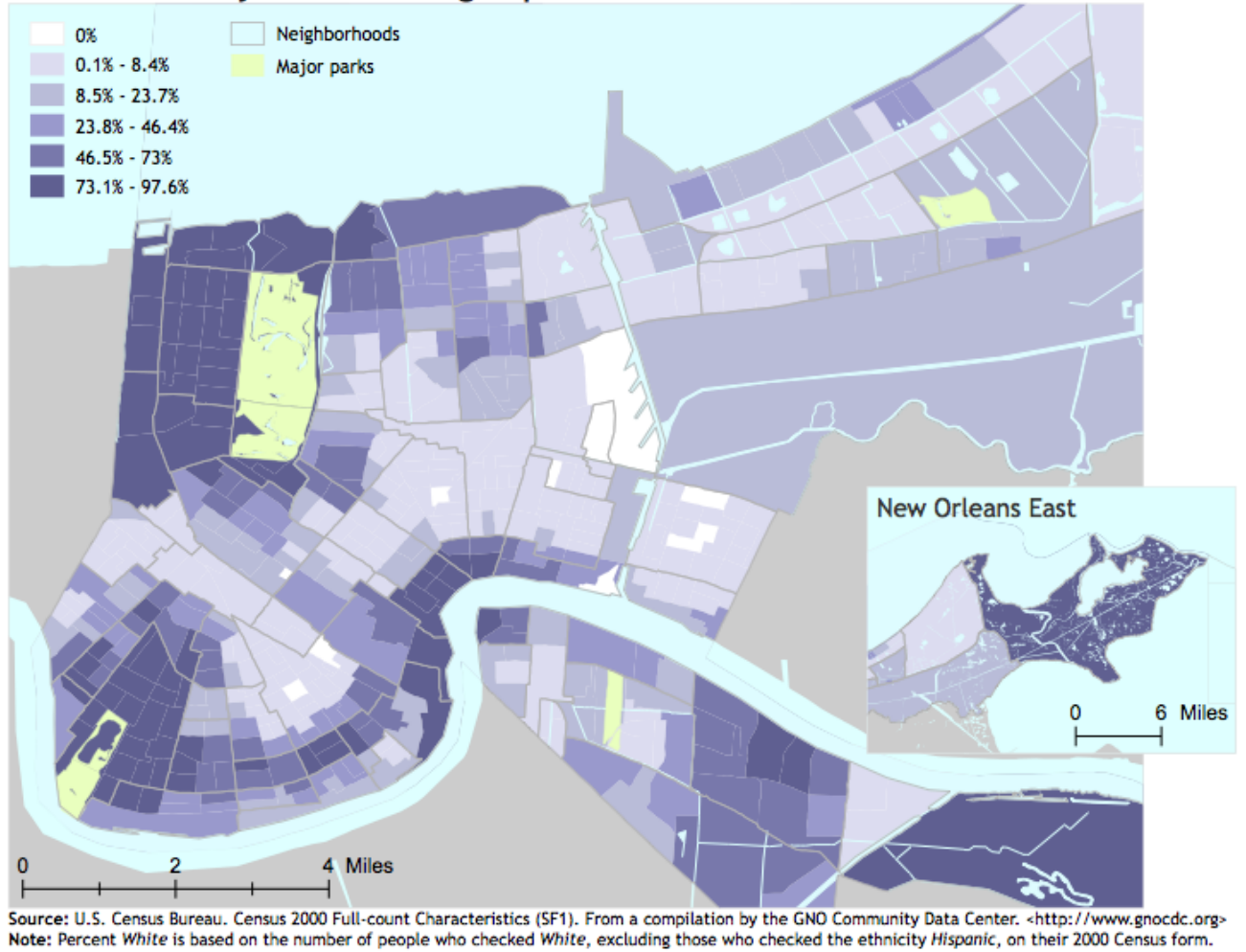
Figure 3. Percent White by Census Black in Orleans Parish

Note: Used with permission of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center at
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