Chapter VIII.

Domestic Violence and Hurricane Katrina

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The city of New Orleans is experiencing the long term aftermath of the most devastating natural and man-made disaster in the history of the United States. Victims and survivors of domestic violence, as well as the personnel and infrastructure developed to protect them, have been seriously affected by this storm.

Domestic Violence and Disasters

The rate of domestic violence nationwide has been established in various research studies. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report of May 2000, using data from the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), predicts 7.5 per 1000 women are victimized by intimate partner violence, and 1.5 per 1000 men. However, the rates rise for urban areas to 10 per 1000 women. A report issued by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) based on the NVAW Survey of November 2000, finds a higher rate of victimization. Further, research from NIJ, “When Violence Hits Home: How Economics and Neighborhood Play a Role” indicates that intimate partner violence is more likely and more severe in households that are economically distressed—a circumstance more likely to be present in post-Katrina New Orleans neighborhoods as even the comfortably middle-class face new economic hardships. Generally, intimate violence victims with the least resources rely most consistently on community services and the justice system for assistance. These numbers reflect non-disaster conditions. However, research shows that an event the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath will increase the rate of violence over time. Specifically, disasters create conditions where violence may emerge as a strategy.

Disasters produce widespread psychological distress, physical health problems, social disruptions among the general population, and psychological disorders among some individuals as reported by Overstreet and Burch in this report. Individuals who had trouble coping before a disaster are more susceptible to stress and maladaptive coping strategies in response to disaster. The pandemic quality of Katrina has the potential to affect a wide-range of individuals and families.

Although the research on the relationship between disasters and domestic violence is limited, there is some indication that domestic violence increases during a disaster. For example, following the Missouri floods of 1993, the average state turn-away rate of domestic violence victims at shelters rose 111 percent over the preceding year. The final report notes that these programs eventually sheltered 400 percent more flood-impacted women and children than anticipated. After Hurricane Andrew in Miami, spousal abuse calls to the local community helpline increased by 50 percent, and over one-third of the 1400 surveyed residents reported that someone in their home had lost verbal or physical control in the two months since the hurricane. What is important to note about these events is that the displacement of individuals and families over a long period of time was limited. While people lost their homes and livelihoods, none of these disasters resulted in the complete displacement of the population or total destruction of an area.

Before the Storm

Before Hurricane Katrina, domestic violence programs and services in New Orleans were enhanced by nearly a decade of federal funding and local organizing.
made possible through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and the supporting Grants to Encourage Arrest Policies and Enforcement of Protective Orders Program. With this support, the community of domestic violence scholars, activists, responders, and providers made significant progress in making social services available for victims and developing a criminal/civil legal system responsive to domestic violence.\(^8\)

Some significant markers included creation of a domestic violence detective unit that placed officers in each of New Orleans’ eight police districts. This contributed to a decrease in the number of domestic violence homicides from 27 in 1997 to 8 in 2003; an increase in the percent of domestic violence arrests resulting from the domestic violence calls for service from 14.7 percent in 1997 to 31.8 percent in the first half of 2005; and to an increase in the number of arrests for violations of protective orders from 4 in 1997 to 150 in 2004. Other efforts led to the successful development, and continuing involvement, of the Domestic Violence Monitoring Court in the magistrate Section of Criminal District Court. In the first six months of 2005, 97 new cases were opened. Finally, there was an increase in Protective Orders across Orleans Parish as the courts worked more closely together. A total of 2,656 orders were sent to the state’s Protective Order Registry in the first six months of 2005.\(^9\)

After the Storm and Changes in Domestic Violence Services

In post-Katrina New Orleans, women’s safety has taken on complex dimensions. Immediately after the storm, victims of domestic violence faced the same issues as many others in the community, including: shortage of housing, and transportation; limited access to health care; loss of neighborhood and community; loss of jobs; loss of informal support systems; isolation in some neighborhoods and crowding in other living situations. But all those concerns were intensified by the threat, and experience of violence. Relief monies, either through federal or other agency sources, often complicated the picture for victims of domestic violence. For some, the funds allowed them to leave their abusive partner and find a new home, away from New Orleans. Others have remained with their partners because they were not considered eligible for funds on their own. Many of the resources were designated for the “head of household,” and assumed the head to be male, thereby placing control and decision-making over funds in men’s hands. As the storm evacuation occurred on a week-end, regularly scheduled weekend visitations of children with non-custodial parents sometimes interfered with custody arrangements. In these instances, victims of domestic violence have had to re-engage communication with their former partners and take part in a complicated legal process to regain custody of their children. These and other factors impacting the lives of domestic violence victims post-Katrina bring focused meaning to Pagelow’s model on women’s safety. Pagelow’s model emphasizes that it is not a woman acting alone that produces her safety, but rather her social context that increases or decreases her safety.\(^10\)

Community Response

At a time when women’s freedom from domestic violence depended most heavily on legal and social services, every aspect of the New Orleans criminal/civil legal system was disrupted and slowed by the displacement of personnel and by damage to the physical structures, courtrooms and offices.\(^11\) Many offices of the criminal justice system were destroyed or temporarily re-located to other buildings, or even other cities. Three years later, some of the physical damage remains and estimates of the time to repair vary greatly. The rebuilding of this system continues as personnel return, courts reopen and police stations undergo repair.
The status of social service agencies reflects much the same pattern. Physical structures were damaged and in some cases destroyed. The Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in New Orleans was completely flooded. The YWCA’s Battered Women’s Program has failed to reopen, and there are no immediate plans for its reestablishment, leaving a tremendous void in services. Catholic Charities’ Crescent House, a domestic violence shelter located in Orleans Parish, lost one building to fire after the flood. Domestic violence service providers as well as survivors evacuated to locations throughout the state and the country. As staff members began to return and programs began to stabilize, new models for contacting and supporting victims were put in place. Throughout the state, domestic violence programs used this opportunity to re-think services and to engage in a different kind of outreach: visiting public emergency shelters, networking with local public resources, and making service information available through a broad array of venues. Crescent House is one of the programs that did extensive outreach into the community. In the early months, FEMA set up a service center at the local FEMA facility and Crescent House staff members were available every day that the facility was open.

Almost immediately after the storm, the New Orleans Mayor’s Domestic Violence Advisory Council (DVAC) resumed meeting. This group of individuals and agency representatives—who had met together for more than 14 years—initiated a needs assessment. At each meeting, reports by members illuminated the changing landscape for survivors of domestic violence. Summaries of those reports attest to the community’s commitment to the restoration of personnel and services; and point to a continuing need for additional services despite a reduction in the population of the city.12

Below is a summary of some of the important work carried out by the non-profit organizations in New Orleans as well as by the city and state governmental offices to assist victims of domestic violence pre- and post-Katrina. Evident in these accounts is the serious disruption in services following the storm at the same time the need for services continued to increase. Also evident is the strong commitment to maintain and further develop resources to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in New Orleans.

**Domestic Violence Detective Unit:**

In August 2005, there were eight domestic violence detectives in the New Orleans Police Department; one housed at each of the police districts. After the storm, the detective unit was reduced to three domestic violence detectives but increased to six in 2007. All were operating out of travel trailers behind Crescent House until early 2008 when they moved to the recently established New Orleans Family Justice Center.

**Protective Orders:**

In 2004, the total number of protective orders issued statewide was at an all time high with 23,255 registered with the Louisiana Protective Order Registry. In 2006, protective orders were down statewide to 18,544. A decrease in the criminal protective order category (mostly in Orleans Parish) from 5,865 to 2,475 was largely accountable for the drop. In 2006-7, Orleans Parish had 3,611 and Jefferson Parish had 3,467 domestic abuse protective orders issued by civil, criminal and juvenile courts received by the Louisiana Protective Order Registry (LPOR).

**Crisis-Lines:**

Crescent House received a total of 1,491 crisis-line calls in fiscal years 2006 and 2007. The Metropolitan Center for Women and Children, located in Jefferson Parish, received 4,570 calls for service in 2007.
**Family Justice Center:**
In the midst of the ongoing crisis of recovery, a collaborative effort involving DVAC, Crescent House, and other local advocates working with the national Office on Violence Against Women, opened a unique Family Justice Center (FJC), a one-stop community program for referral and protection of victims and survivors. A FJC had never before been opened in the midst of a disaster. The advocates working together developed and implemented this concept through a series of remarkable collaborative decisions. Now, three years after Katrina, the New Orleans Family Justice Center celebrated its one year anniversary on August 29, 2008.

**The Continuing Need for Services**
In many disasters, a community will move into a recovery phase relatively quickly. In the aftermath of Katrina, some are beginning to speak of the “long term response and recovery” of New Orleans. As most experts refer to the recovery in years, not months, frustration levels rise and coping strategies diminish. Battered women face difficult conditions: legal issues of custody, separation, and divorce that will become more salient at every juncture of the criminal/civil legal system, and these issues are worsened by the shortage of social services.

There is concern about the tight living conditions in FEMA trailers and other temporary housing in relation to the rates of intimate partner violence. In some cases, this may lead to increased violence. In other situations, the increased surveillance due to closer living quarters and more people present may mean more opportunities for observation and intervention. Often, third parties will call law enforcement because they are more aware of this situation. Other concerns focus on what will happen when the emergency monies have run out and families move out of temporary housing and attempt to start over either in New Orleans or in a new location. Over time, the influx of workers (both immigrants and U.S. citizens) will require services. Many of the immigrants are Spanish-speaking; therefore, bi-lingual services will have to be provided. The longer response and recovery monies take to reach individuals, the greater the opportunity for a variety of reactions, including domestic violence.

**Conclusions**
In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, domestic violence survivors and advocates, ranging from shelter workers to law enforcement personnel, talked and listened to each other. Listening to the voices of victims in a catastrophic, post-disaster context provides new insights into how to make all women safer during and after a disaster. What does safety mean in a post-disaster world? While the patterns of violence may not have changed, the social context has. Both advocates for survivors and the survivors of domestic violence have experienced living and working in crisis. This unique knowledge should be included in any evacuation, shelter, and long term recovery planning.
Endnotes


7 Gender and Disaster Network.

8 Historically, understanding survivors of domestic violence represents one of the most important collaborations among feminist scholarship, activism, and service. This collaboration led to the passage of laws, creation of programs, and a raised awareness of intimate partner violence. In every state and many municipalities, domestic violence is defined as a crime, even though enforcement may remain uneven. In other words, the experiences of women that were documented and analyzed by advocates and scholars made a difference. In many of the stories that we heard in these settings, women were told to go and live with family or friends, but these strategies were not effective. In this day comprise, much of the knowledge we have about domestic violence. (Dobash, Rebecca and Russell Dobash. 1979. Violence against Wives. New York: The Free Press; and Dutton, Mary Ann. 1998. “Battered Women’s Strategic Response to Violence: The Role of Context.” In Future Interventions With Battered Women and Their Families. Jeffrey L. Edleson and Zvi Eisikovits, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 105-124.)

9 Compiled from monthly reports provided to the New Orleans Mayor’s Domestic Violence Advisory Committee.


