**Downward Mobility: Displaced Single Mothers in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina**

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The body of literature focusing on women and disasters has grown significantly over the past two decades. However, there is still a major knowledge gap regarding single mothers and the experiences and difficulties they face before, during, and after a disaster (for exceptions, see Morrow 1997, Griffin 2009; Masai, Kuzunishi, and Kondo 2009; Peek and Fothergill 2008; Reid forthcoming; Tobin-Gurley, Peek, and Loomis 2010). This article examines the experiences of displaced single mothers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, I describe a series of events and challenges that led to the downward mobility of single mothers who relocated to Colorado.

**Gender, Poverty, and Disasters**

One of the main indicators of vulnerability to disasters is poverty (Enarson and Morrow 1998) and the poorest people in the world are disproportionately made up of women and children, particularly women and children of color (Fothergill 1996, Gowens 2006). Single mother families situated below the poverty line are growing steadily in the United States. There was a 77 percent increase in the number of single mothers from 1994 through 2003, and 47 percent of all single mothers were either “near poor” or had incomes below the national poverty level (Women’s Work 2005).

After disaster, people that are living “near” poverty often find themselves unable to recover from the losses sustained. The “near poor” are individuals who live just above the poverty line, struggling to maintain their lifestyles and subsist without government assistance. The near poor may suffer from a lack of assets, long work hours, poor health, little to no health insurance, no means for retirement, poor quality housing, and often, bad credit (Newman and Chen 2007). Although these people live with more stability than those living below the poverty line, their predicament places them in an especially vulnerable position. When they are not fortunate enough to have savings, loans to borrow against from home ownership, adequate earning opportunities, or welfare benefits, one turn for the worse: a failed marriage, being fired or laid off from a job, or an illness in the family can push them over the edge of poverty (Newman and Chen 2007). Access to structural means directly enables or inhibits asset accumulation according to gender, race, class, ability, age, language, etc. This is particularly true in times of disaster (Fothergill 2004).

Given that single mothers tend to earn less than non-mothers and partnered mothers, financial constraints are magnified. In times of disaster, when economic cushions are vitally important, poor women and women of color suffer disproportionately and are at a greater risk to both natural and human-made disasters (Fothergill 1996). The preexisting structural inequalities experienced by women are exacerbated in times of disaster, leaving women and children dependent on limited social capital and differential access to resources (Barnshaw and Trainor 2007). For many people living in poverty, and especially for single mothers, welfare and/or homelessness may only be a paycheck away (Fothergill 2003; Williams, Sorokina, Jones-Deweever, and Hartmann 2006).

Poverty disproportionately affects single mothers and ethnic minorities forcing them to rely on social networks of family and friends to provide childcare and economic assistance (Moller 1999). According to Margolis (1989), the power to pool resources increases the integrity and condition of its least member while strengthening the overall dynamic of the group making it more resistant to outside forces. This social support system has also been found to decrease stress and increase the psychological well being of single mothers (Turner 2006). The ability to access and utilize resources before a disaster directly impacts one’s ability to “bounce back” and recover from extreme events (Bradshaw 2004: 11).

All of these variables influence the abilities of single mothers to recover from disasters and begin to reconstruct their lives. Research shows that the poorest women, and particularly single mothers, may be left out of the recovery and relief process altogether (Scanlon 1998). It has also been shown that disasters generally leave women even more impoverished (Enarson et al. 2006). Although there has been some research done on the recovery process, usually defined as the one year period following a disaster (Mileti 1999), much less is known about the longer-term reconstruction process, particularly for internally displaced populations within the United States.

Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophic event that caused the forced relocation of over one million people. Numerous families, many of whom are headed by a single-mother, were separated from their family members, friends, and social support networks that they once relied on to survive. Social networks and the conversion of social capital into resources was key to survival after Hurricane Katrina. The economically disadvantaged were the least likely to benefit from these networks, making it particularly hard to recover (Barnshaw and Trainor 2007). The literature suggests that, “relocation following a natural disaster contributes to the environmental, social, and psychological stress experienced by disaster victims” (Riad and Norris 1996: 163).

**Downward Mobility**

Many individuals in the U.S. live on the margins of poverty before disaster strikes. In fact, Newman and Chen (2007: 3) report that 57 million people fall into a category labeled the “missing class” or “near-poor” making between $20,000 and $40,000 a year for a family of four. A single mother with two dependent children needs approximately $30,000 to afford basic necessities (Boushey 2001). Between 1996 and 2002, 16 percent of those living on the margins lost a tenth or more of their incomes contributing to the downward mobility of those in this fragile position (Newman and Chen 2007). There are many types of crises that can push someone over the edge of poverty, however, in times of disaster these issues are magnified and individuals on the margins may have little to no chance of regaining economic stability.

The number of Americans experiencing downward mobility has been growing rapidly. Newman and Chen (2007) add that in the 1990’s the number of people who found themselves falling into poverty doubled. With growing economic insecurity and unpredictable labor markets people are more likely to fall farther into debt and eventually become bankrupt. As Newman and Chen argue, this freefall robs hardworking people of their privacy, dignity, and the freedom to manage their lives as adults (p. 179). Given that displaced single mothers from the Gulf Coast were more likely to be African American, this places them in a particularly subjugated position when trying to rebuild their lives.

Fothergill (2004) first introduced the effects of downward mobility after disaster in her study of families who survived the 1997 Grand Forks Flood. Given that there was no prior research on this topic, Fothergill investigated how downward mobility affects victims of disaster, how they cope, who they blame, and how, or if they recover. Although her research focuses primarily on middle-class white women, she posits that downward mobility is even more severe for women who were poor before disaster struck. The loss of housing, employment, savings, credit, and social safety nets pushed these women further into poverty with little to no means for recovery. This article contributes to a gap in the literature on downward mobility, offering an examination of the effects disaster has on women living just above the poverty line before Hurricane Katrina.

**The Study**

In order to understand the social and economic challenges that single mothers faced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how these challenges led to a downward spiral into poverty, I gathered data in the form of in-depth interviews and observations from October 2005 to July 2008. Specifically, I conducted interviews with 30 disaster response professionals and 20 single mothers. I included disaster professionals who were working directly with displaced families to attain a comprehensive understanding of the unique difficulties that were experienced by single mothers as they struggled to rebuild their lives in Colorado.

I conducted the interviews and observations in two cities in Colorado: Denver and Colorado Springs. I chose Denver as the main research site because it was the location that received the largest number of evacuees in Colorado. FEMA records indicate that an estimated 9,500 evacuees arrived to the Denver metropolitan area in the months following Katrina. Given the magnitude of incoming evacuees, many disaster response agencies organized to provide services to persons displaced by Katrina. I chose to conduct interviews in Colorado Springs because it was the city with the second highest number of evacuees, with approximately 4,000 displaced persons.

A network of social workers, mental health experts, pastors, and full-time volunteers assisted families and individuals who evacuated to Colorado after Hurricane Katrina. Four of the primary organizations assigned to coordinating long-term recovery services in Colorado were Catholic Charities, Lutheran Family Services, the Salvation Army, and Volunteers of America. I interviewed case managers from each of these agencies. Every disaster response professional that I contacted readily agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews with disaster response professionals lasted approximately one hour. I followed a semi-structured interview guide in an effort to gather information about the experiences of single mothers in their attempt to access resources and social services, establish stability for their children, and rebuild their lives in Colorado. In addition, I asked questions regarding the specific needs of single mothers and their children and the obstacles that they faced in the pursuit of resources.

The single mothers that I interviewed were either from New Orleans, Louisiana or the nearby parishes. The women’s ages ranged from 23 to 49 years of age. The majority of the interviewees were African-American (n=14), however, I also interviewed white (n=4) and Latina (n=2) single mothers. Prior to Katrina, two of the women were living below the poverty line, while the rest self-identified as working or lower middle class. In addition, information was collected about pre-Katrina savings and income levels that supported these economic designations. The children of the single mothers were between the ages of 1 and 18 years of age and were often present during the interviews.

Conducted in their temporary homes, interviews with the single mothers lasted between one and our hours. I followed an unstructured interview format and asked open-ended questions. I was mindful throughout the interview process to not lead the conversation or make assumptions regarding the women’s experiences. I purposefully chose qualitative methods because they provide a space for disaster survivors to recount their story through their own voices (Phillips 2002).

A clear limitation of this study is that the sample is not representative of all single mothers who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, I have no way of knowing what percentage of the single mother population has experienced the same levels of downward mobility as the women in my study. Given that Katrina evacuees are part of a “hidden population,” based on the fact that there were no publicly available lists of names or databases to locate them, it would have been impossible to draw a probability sample of displaced single mothers. Therefore, the qualitative methods used were appropriate in allowing for an in-depth examination of an issue that had been previously understudied (see Palinkas 2006).

**Transition to Colorado**

In-depth, qualitative interviews with disaster relief professionals and single mothers provided me the unique opportunity to evaluate the experiences of single mothers after displacement to Colorado. After a thorough analysis of the resources that were being provided and those that were obtained, it became clear that the single mothers who were living just above the poverty line pre-Katrina experienced a significant decrease in economic stability after displacement.

**Displacement**

*Self-Evacuation.* The method of evacuation out of New Orleans was a determining factor of one’s ability to access immediate and longer-term life-sustaining resources. All of the New Orleans residents remaining in the hours leading up to the storm received a mandatory order of evacuation. Those people who were unable to evacuate on their own, who were more likely to be low-income and African-American, got flown and bused out of the city in the days following the storm. These individuals stayed in many shelters before relocating permanently (Citation). The people who ended up at the Lowry Air Force Base in Denver and the Colorado Springs Recovery Center were among this population. Due to the convenience of location, all of the participating Colorado disaster relief agencies such as FEMA, Colorado Coalition of Faith, Salvation Army, Lutheran Family Services, Catholic Charities, etc. were able to set up shop at these locations. Any independent donators of services were also directed to the recovery centers to offer their help. These services included: food, clothing, furniture, housing, mental health resources, and medical care. This put the people at these locations in an immediately advantaged position to receive resources. All of the mothers that I interviewed self-evacuated and therefore were not educated regarding the resources being offered at the Colorado shelters until it was too late.

The process of resource distribution in Colorado left one mother, Suzanne, extremely frustrated. She viewed this situation as the government helping people who were “criminals” and hurting people who followed all of the rules and evacuated on their own. For her, the delay of getting resources, because of the bureaucracy, left her and her son alone and without food to eat for some time. When she finally learned about disaster relief organizations, such as Lutheran Family Services, much of the once present funding was already spent:

I got to Lutheran Family Services so late. If I would have had them in the beginning, if I would have known more about the resources in the beginning… Not everyone went through the base. There were lots of people who moved here on their own. Those people who were taken to the bases got assistance faster than those people who were following the law.

Relying on “word of mouth” was not an effective way to gain access to services for a single mother in an unfamiliar place with no family or friends.

The slow response and unorganized distribution of resources made it difficult for single mothers to utilize all of the help that was being offered in Colorado. As these mothers began to apply for assistance, much of what was once available was gone. Unfortunately, those women who had a limited savings either did not seek out assistance immediately or were ineligible for services until their savings were completely exhausted. This placed them in a precarious situation months after the storm.

Sadly, disaster professionals interpreted the above scenarios as successful, because those who had the resources to evacuate were seen as being more equipped to survive and recover. In their view, these women’s’ mental capacity and motivation was already better than those that depend solely on the system to survive. Therefore, they were not on the top of the priority list when it came to reestablishing life for Gulf Coast citizens in Colorado. Andrew, a member of the Colorado Coalition of Faith, mentioned:

I think that those that self-evacuated, in some ways, they are actually better off because they had enough resources to self evacuate anyway… So then they are better equipped. They also come here by themselves and are able to find work a little bit easier and things of that nature because they are already self-driven. They are not relying on any kind of subsidy.

This rationale made it even more difficult for self-evacuated single mothers to acquire disaster assistance.

**Economic Insecurity**

Eighteen of the twenty single mothers in my sample were living near poverty prior to Hurricane Katrina. The other two were already living below the poverty line. Two of the women relied heavily on government assistance to survive prior to Hurricane Katrina and were not able to work due to disability and childcare responsibilities. The other eighteen women worked multiple jobs in order to provide for their families. These women are not classified as the true poor because they were able to subsist without having to access government assistance prior to Hurricane Katrina.

However, living just above the poverty line does not denote economic stability. These women had limited savings, did not own their homes, and struggled to survive pre-Katrina. For instance, one mother explained how quickly her life changed, “My situation made a 365 degree turn. I mean I had a good paying job. I was not wanting for anything. I did not live in a big house on the hill, but I was not suffering either.” After Hurricane Katrina made landfall, those living near poverty quickly realized the vulnerability and fragility of their positions. The loss of housing, employment, savings, credit, and social safety nets pushed these women into poverty with little to no means for recovery.

*Finances.* Most of the mothers had few savings when the storm hit. This was just enough to get them out of danger and pay for a hotel, food, and gas. Veronica, a white, mother of two, explained that her one-time FEMA payment of $5,000 and her limited savings was only enough to get her and her two children to Colorado and to purchase reliable transportation. Exhausting her savings made it difficult to reestablish a safety net. She described how a minor setback depleted her savings:

When I was first getting started, I had to get a new car because that blue

thing [old car] was not running. I had to get a new car and that wiped out my savings account. I am still flying low right now.

After the relocation, many mothers started running out of funds. For example, one mother was devastated that she had to spend the small amount of money that her family had put into a college fund for her son. She said:

I had educational IRA’s for him and I cashed them all in. His college funds are gone. My family would put money in a bank account every holiday for him. What else was I gonna do? The worst part of Katrina was not Katrina. It was the financial stress put on you because of Katrina.

It often takes years for single mothers to build a stable lifestyle for their families. However, in times of disaster, it only takes moments to push them over the edge and jeopardize the security of the next generation making them more susceptible to downward mobility.

For those living near poverty, having available credit is an extremely important resource. With little to no savings, many women relied on their credit to buffer the transition of displacement. However, this credit was not always accessible. Suzanne, a Cuban-American mother of one, remembered:

That’s another thing, the minute there is a disaster they cut off all your bank and credit cards. Once people find out that you are from a disaster area, they will only take cash from you. It does not matter if you have money in the bank or not. Your credit is ruined… I mean I had great credit before, now I have no credit. It is only because my boss lied for me that I was able to get a car.

Tabatha, a 37-year-old African-American mother, was living off of a small savings and unemployment after relocation to Colorado. She explained, “Although the cost of living is high, my thing is to have stability for the kids. I have been paying for it and we have been living off of my savings. Now I am getting unemployment, but that is little or nothing.” Two years after Katrina, she was still fighting to receive FEMA assistance, but had also started researching local shelters to prepare for the possibility of homelessness. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Tabatha had stable employment and a good life. She remembered making long-term goals for her family that included leaving New Orleans. She recounted, “It is like you have this three year, five year plan. Oh, I am leaving this place. In five years, if I make such and such money and things go well, I will be debt free, and five years, I am outta here!” After the storm, those dreams were shattered and Tabatha was forced to start all over, struggling to find stable housing and employment in Colorado.

David and Pamela, two case managers with The Salvation Army, noticed that many single mothers were struggling with the elevated costs of living in Colorado. They described how this was more difficult for women who were living on the margins of poverty prior to Katrina:

I have seen quite a few people who were not well off, but were making ends meet. They were managing. They were working full-time. Things were okay and now they struggle every month. That’s frustrating. When you shift from housing that was $300-$500 per month to housing that is now $600-$1000 per month… Rent has gone up, utilities have gone up, and your salary really has not improved… I would say there has been a lot of downward mobility in the change.

*Government Assistance.* Becausesome of the women in my study arrived to Colorado with a modest savings, they were deemed ineligible for many government assistance programs including FEMA aid, food stamps, Medicaid, TANF, childcare, etc. After their savings were exhausted these women were on their own. They all went through various, trying experiences to gain access to the above programs with minimal success. This greatly affected their ability to recover and “bounce back” to a pre-Katrina lifestyle.

Suzanne explained how frustrated she felt about being denied for Medicaid and receiving little to no help after displacement. For Suzanne, falling into poverty was humiliating:

When I asked what there is for Katrina victims, no one offered me shit. This is when I really started getting pissed off, because you know, I never asked for anything. I always worked two jobs, never even got child support, put my son through Catholic school in New Orleans, paid tuition, paid babysitters and always had a good life. Better than what I would consider low class… I did not even find out about Lutheran Family Services until this past January [2007].

Women who were able to attain some FEMA money found themselves living in housing that was far above their means. After the payments expired, three months in two cases, less in others, they were stuck with leases that they could not afford without government assistance. Single mothers were left to fend for themselves, with no permanent employment, childcare, or familial support to help them get back on their feet. This, combined with the lack of food and healthcare, placed these women in the lowest ranks of poverty.

After displacement, many people were falling quickly from successfully managing their life and finances to facing homelessness. For instance, Tabatha had worked for a five star hotel in New Orleans for 13 years. Despite all of her motivation, she was not able to find work in Lafayette, Colorado or the surrounding area. FEMA had been promising to pay her rent from November 2006 to June 2007 with no actualization of payment. She was devastated and relying on her faith alone to keep going.

The limited government assistance being offered in Colorado made recovering from Hurricane Katrina challenging for single mothers. Although only two mothers were on welfare before Katrina, many quickly found that welfare assistance in Colorado was far different than they expected. For example, Tabatha felt that she could not rely on the social services for any of her needs:

The government support, the local government and city support, they say they have it, but really it is little or none. Whereas back home, if you fell behind, you had agencies that would help you. I do not find that here. I find it really hard to get back on your feet here.

Angela, a Colorado Springs disaster response professional, was shocked at the disorganization of the distribution of resources. She explained how quickly evacuees fell into the depths of poverty:

And these people were coming in and saying they had no food. These were professional people. They had no food; they had no this and that. The food stamp organization had these people go pick up [trash] on the highway. How degrading is that? I don’t know the law for food stamps, but that’s what they did. And that’s why the churches opened up their pantries.

The network of community and government assistance can be confusing and time consuming. A substantial number of hours need to be spent gathering documentation and paperwork, finding transportation to and from offices around the city, and waiting in long lines to receive assistance. Many single mothers were unfamiliar with the process of applying for food stamps and unable to balance the time requirements of welfare related services with daycare, employment, and other responsibilities.

Conversely, women who had previous experience navigating the welfare system found government assistance in Colorado to be quite helpful. Christina, a 22-year-old Latina woman had two children with another one on the way. She had always been on welfare and government assistance and was pleased with the amount of help that she received. FEMA was still paying her rent two years later and they agreed to pay it for at least eight months longer. She relied on Medicaid, food stamps, cash assistance, and other forms of government assistance to survive. She was not working at the time of the interview in August 2007.

As mentioned above, mothers who relied on government assistance prior to Katrina proved to have an easier time accessing help after displacement. Likewise, if a person was eligible for Section 8, low-income housing in New Orleans, they were immediately placed at the top of the waiting list once they arrived to Colorado. However, those who had never been in the system found the transition to be much more complicated. In many cases, social service agencies used pre-Katrina financial records to accept or deny eligibility for assistance. For instance, Natalia, an African-American mother of two, described her frustration with this process:

It is because they were already in the system. You already have their client ID number. They got Section 8 and all of these free benefits. And here you have someone who has always worked. I worked two jobs to maintain… They expected us to bounce back, because if you are a single mother, you are making a decent salary, and you have a nice car and home, you can manage. But I am 38 and starting all over and that was hard.

Case managers also reported that it was easier for evacuees to recover in Colorado if they who had relied on government assistance prior to the storm. Jeff, a Lutheran Family Services disaster response professional, explained how this process ultimately hurt those people living above the poverty line:

If you were on Section 8, you got a big beautiful home in Colorado Springs, some of them. You got a break and the middle class suffered. I really believe that those who were lower class really made out okay. They were able to get back on food stamps and welfare. Whereby someone who never was in the system and never had prior Section 8 housing was totally stuck. Everything was pre-Katrina [incomes]. I think there was no other gauge. It is almost like we are assessing their economic status, and at this point, everyone was on the same plane. There was no lower, middle, or upper class when they came out of Katrina.

While it may be a misnomer that the “lower class really made out okay,” as Jeff stated, his point that they knew how to navigate the system and therefore received benefits more quickly was an accurate representation of the experiences of the twenty women in this study.

*Stigma.* Before disaster strikes, single mothers are commonly in a struggle to survive. Most of the mothers in this study spoke about the empowerment and pride of being able to survive, on their own, without being on welfare. They worked two to three jobs to take care of themselves and their children. After displacement, these mothers had to ask for help and rely on government assistance and community services to get by. For example, Suzanne felt proud that she had maintained a good lifestyle for her and her son without child support or government assistance. She explained, “Until Katrina, I never got food stamps. I never got welfare. I always had two really high paying jobs. And now…”

Similarly, Natalia explained that it hurt her pride to have to apply for government assistance. She grew up in a household that relied on welfare and worked hard so she would not have to follow in her mother’s footsteps. She expressed:

I tried to go through state assistance and I appealed it for a year, food stamps and welfare office, because I have never been on any assistance. Of course it was a hurting thing to your pride, but after a year I just got tired of it. I did not want to be on the benefits because that was my mom’s life and I did not want to repeat that cycle. You know, you are living on the first and fifteenth and looking for your food stamps, your welfare check. I hated that, so I worked two jobs to maintain [pre-Katrina].

Quickly, women began to feel the stigma associated with receiving government assistance. They had to wait in long lines and fill out lengthy application forms. The single mothers explained that they were treated poorly by social workers and did not feel that anyone was there to help. For instance, Ruth, a 47-year-old African-American mother, felt that she was entitled to emergency funds as a tax-paying citizen:

They really failed for us as people who want to work, regardless of race, color, or creed. I am a person that has been working since I was 17 years old. If an emergency comes-that’s due to me, I worked for that. The taxes you took out of my paycheck, that’s mine. So, do not sit here like your giving me something. That just blew me away.

Similarly, Natalia explained how she was treated poorly and humiliated by a woman she encountered while applying for Medicaid and Food Stamps:

Basically, they treated me like a criminal. The welfare workers, they were like, “do you have this, do you have that?” I am like, “Hurricane Katrina ring a bell?” You have to swallow your pride, especially if you have never been on it, and then to be treated like a criminal. It was either walk out of here and not get it [resources], or choke her. I was pissed because I needed it… I do not know how some people do it.

She experienced a double burden of being a single mother and Katrina evacuee. It was commonly expressed that Coloradoans treated these single mothers like they were trying to “mooch” off of the system (Peek 2012).

Kathryn, a Caucasian mother of one, had worked for many years to keep her daughter out of bad neighborhoods and in good schools. She went back to school herself and worked hard so she could provide a better life for her family. After an unfortunate turn of events, she found herself in the position she had worked so hard to stay out of and just wanted to get her life back to normal. She remembered:

Before the hurricane, I was poor, putting myself through school and working and taking care of her [daughter]. Being the soccer mom I had a full schedule. I loved it. It was my life… That is all I want, to get back to a normal life again.

After displacement, Kathryn was diagnosed with cancer. She was unable to work given her medical condition and was ineligible for FEMA assistance and social security because she was a victim of Hurricane Rita, not Katrina. She and her daughter were living off of donations and limited child support at the time of the interview in July 2007. Kathryn felt guilty for having to take donations from strangers. She explained:

I do not want to take advantage. As long as I am making it, I am not going to try and get more. A lot of people are greedy when it comes to things. You know, they feel like they have it coming to them. In the situation I am in, I am just thankful. I just want my health. I do not want to be greedy. I just feel like God will help me and whatever He provides is what I need.

# *Employment.* Stable employment can be a significant determinate of one’s ability to recover from a disaster. For single mothers, this is magnified, given that they have children to feed, shelter, and clothe all on their own. For those living just above the poverty line, the slightest gap or decrease in income can put them over the edge, making it difficult to survive without assistance.

The single mothers in this study found it difficult to find employment upon arriving to Colorado. The stress of the transition paired with extreme loss made searching for employment a daunting task. Natalia described the difficulties she faced finding permanent employment:

I had some [interviewers] who wanted to talk about Hurricane Katrina and I did not want to talk about it because it was still emotional for me and it still is. I had a couple that would say, “Well, there is nothing in New Orleans, how can I check your references?” That was an insult. That was a slap in the face. I probably did not put as much effort in because I was just frustrated with the whole relocation. I had an awesome job and a great house. Everything was pretty much perfect. I had a good life and to start over, it is frustrating.

Another problem that women faced was a decrease in salary. Without the same networks to rely on for childcare and employment, women found themselves working low-paying jobs that could provide flexibility. Suzanne worked as a bar manager on Bourbon Street for many years, leaving her son with a nanny. Once relocated to Colorado, she was not able to find an affordable sitter for him, and therefore was unable to work nights. She explained how this decreased her income potential, “So, now I have this huge loss of income because I cannot work nights.” She now had to rely on only one income from a day job and was struggling to pay her bills.

**Social Insecurity**

The unique culture of New Orleans provided an invisible social safety net and an economic cushion for single mothers living just above the poverty line. Based on financial indicators alone, these women would be considered “near poor,” however; community support, extended family and kin networks, ethnic empowerment, and cultural vitality enhanced their relative quality of life. These invisible buffers were non-transferable and may have masked their economic positions making the downward spiral into poverty even more severe after displacement.

# *Social Networks.* Of the twenty single mothers, Natalia was the only one who received child support for both of her children before and after Hurricane Katrina. Kathryn started receiving child support, for the first time, after she moved to Colorado, was diagnosed with cancer, and could no longer live without the father’s financial support. Veronica was still in contact with the father of her children, but he was not in a position to provide financial support, and the rest of the mothers had little to no contact with the fathers of their children before or after Hurricane Katrina.

For Natalia, losing the physical and emotional support of her ex-husband was more damaging than if she were to simply stop receiving his financial support. Her children had a great relationship with their father and he spent a lot of time with them before the storm. She explained:

Yeah, I went through my divorce with my ex-husband, but even through our marriage did not sustain, he is still an awesome father. It is very different [in Colorado]. Every weekend [before Katrina] he would get the girls, every holiday. But for some women, when daddy is gone, he is not even paying child support or seeing the kids. Sometimes, it is not even about the child support check, it is about seeing your child. And that plays a big part. But you have to be momma, daddy, grandmamma, granddaddy, friend, teacher, doctor, regardless.

The absence of a contributing partner forces single mothers to rely on extended family members for the majority of their childcare needs and emotional support. Prior to Katrina, many of these mothers were able to make it because of the help their families could provide. For instance, Kathryn remembered how much she relied on her mother for assistance. She said, “Even though I did not want to take from them, … after school we would go over there and she would have something cooked.” What seemed to be minimal family assistance was enough to keep them afloat through any rough periods in their lives. Once relocated to Colorado, these networks were shattered.

Craig, a Denver mental health provider, noticed that the greatest mental health impact from Hurricane Katrina was the disruption of social networks. He explained how this was unique to Hurricane Katrina given the permanent mass displacement of individuals:

Well, the thing that highlights Hurricane Katrina is the shattering of social networks. Even as evacuees have come together and created a new community within Colorado, it is not what they had. The shattering of the social network is so devastating, so stressful, and so traumatic that it directly impacts at multiple levels.

# This loss is especially salient for single mothers who rely heavily on family for emotional support, childcare, and material resources.

Although local agencies tried to form support groups and provide places for evacuees to network, their attempts were limited. Tracie, a Lutheran Family Services case manager, recalled the response clients had to these events:

Some of the evacuees were like, ‘Well, why don’t you guys do this more often?’ It is a lot of work for us to do. Really, we just give you a few chances to network. The idea is that then you can do it on your own.

# This quote illustrates the desire of evacuees to connect with one another. This

# was especially limiting for single mothers who self-evacuated and were not connected to the Colorado assistance network from the start. Many of them were unaware of these events and relied on the Internet to connect with other evacuees.

A lack of networking opportunities made living in Colorado difficult for many single mothers. Suzanne described how imperative making new friends was to her recovery and to all Katrina evacuees:

Networking, putting people together, because you know what? Things are just things, but when you ask someone what is the biggest thing they lost, the biggest thing they lost was their friends and family. Because friends and family are scattered all over, so you have to make new friends. You have to make new friends because that is what makes you home. They are not gonna feel like a normal person again until they have roots and friends.

**Conclusion**

Rising out of poverty can be a life long struggle. It is well established that 37 million Americans subsist off of incomes below the poverty line (Newman and Chen 2007). There is a vast body of literature that documents the lives of the poor, dependence on welfare, and success at upward mobility and escape from poverty. On the other hand, little has been written on downward mobility and the experiences of people joining the ranks of the poor after disaster strikes.

This research documents the overlapping experiences of displacement, economic insecurity, and social insecurity that contributed to the downward mobility of single mothers as they attempted to rebuild their lives in Colorado. Specifically, I have outlined how the particular processes of *self-evacuation, financial loss, government assistance, stigma, employment, and social networks* during the long-term recovery period are integral in shaping the lives of displaced single mothers. One missed opportunity or denial for resources left many of the women in this study without the basic necessities to survive. Given that single mothers face everyday challenges in securing economic stability and providing for their families, it is imperative that more attention is given to the unique needs of single women with children in the aftermath of a disaster.

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