

# **The Effects of Hurricane Sandy on the Homeless in New Jersey**

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## **Introduction**

Overwhelmingly, disaster research has emphasized studying the effects of disasters on housed individuals and families. While important, it leaves homeless victims largely out of the picture. This has resulted in a body of literature that presents housed individuals as the hegemonic disaster victim. Aside from Drabek's (1999) study of tourists and other transients and passing mentions of conflicts over whether or not homeless persons should be admitted to disaster shelters (see Yelvington, 1997) or should be given relief funds, existing disaster research has overlooked the homeless entirely. We do not know how being homeless affects one's perception of vulnerability to natural hazards or disasters. Similarly, it is unknown how disasters affect the daily lives of homeless individuals and families, particularly periods immediately following a disaster when services and organizations they depend on regularly may be unable to offer them assistance. Hurricane Sandy's impact on the Mid-Atlantic provided an immediate opportunity to address these questions.

The present study examines the experiences of homeless men and women, as well as shelter service providers, during and in the months following Sandy's landfall. Specifically, this study examines the experiences of the homeless in Hoboken and Atlantic City, New Jersey and seeks to understand: (1) how the homeless learned about Hurricane Sandy, (2) how Sandy affected the daily lives of the homeless, (3) if and how services were disrupted, and (4) what steps service providers have taken to recover from Sandy's impact. The preliminary findings presented in this report demonstrate the experiences of homeless clients and service providers during Sandy's landfall and in the response and recovery periods.

## **Methodology**

This study utilized a variety of ethnographic and qualitative methods including: observations at shelter facilities and in the surrounding communities, group interviews with homeless clients and shelter staff and volunteers, and informal conversations with shelter workers. Group interviews are group discussions organized to explore a specific set of issues (Kitzinger, 1994). They offer some benefits over traditional one-on-one interviewing because they elicit multiple perspectives around the issues (Brotherson, 1994). Furthermore, Wilkinson (1994) argued that group interviews allow researchers to examine individuals within a social context. Furthermore, according to Berg (2009) group interviews allow the researcher to collect large amounts of information about a subject with more efficiency than individual interviews. Moreover, group interviews allow for flexibility and can allow the researcher to explore unexpected topics that might arise during group conversations (Berg, 2009). Thus, group interviews were an important component of the research strategy in this study to understand the experiences of homeless men and women.

Data collection took place in Hoboken and Atlantic City, NJ. These cities were selected because of their sizeable pre-Sandy homeless populations and their proximity to the devastation left by Sandy. According to a report by the Corporation for Supportive Housing (2011), 10% of New Jersey's homeless lived in either Hudson (Hoboken) or Atlantic (Atlantic City) Counties. Thus, Hoboken and Atlantic City offered the greatest potential to recruit participants. Research in Hoboken was conducted at the Hoboken Shelter, located in the heart of downtown Hoboken. While at the Hoboken Shelter, I conducted interviews with the shelter director and several staff members and community volunteers. Upon my arrival to the shelter, I was informed that I would be the facilitator for the shelter's daily discussion group. Thus, I facilitated a conversation about Hurricane Sandy's impact on the shelter and its guests. Roughly 30 guests were present for the discussion group, however only about seven were active participants. Due to shelter policies, I was unable to digitally record the interview, however I took detailed notes during the interview and later constructed detailed field notes documenting my experience and interactions at the shelter.

Research in Atlantic City was conducted at the Atlantic City Rescue Mission. While at the Mission, I conducted a formal interview with the Mission's public relations officer, as well as several informal interviews with other staff members. These informal interviews took place while I was given tours of the facility and during a tour of Atlantic City by one of the Mission's outreach workers. These tours included visits of various "hot spots" where the homeless gather. I conducted two group interviews with Mission guests: the first with twelve women currently residing at the Mission and the second with a group of seven men participating in the Mission's work readiness program. These interviews were digitally recorded and have been partially transcribed.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The following preliminary findings are presented in three sections: experiencing Sandy, responding to Sandy, and recovering from Sandy. In the first section, I describe the experiences of homeless shelter guests and staff during Sandy's landfall. The second, I describe the events and experiences which took place in the days immediately following Sandy's impacts. Finally, in the third section I discuss some of the long-term effects of Sandy on the homeless and shelter services.

#### *Experiencing Sandy*

Upon learning of Sandy's trajectory, both the Hoboken Shelter and Atlantic City Rescue Mission began implementing their emergency plans. The Hoboken Shelter is located in the old basement of a Lutheran church on Bloomfield and 3<sup>rd</sup> street in Hoboken. The shelter is located one block from Washington Street, Hoboken's "main street". As Sandy approached, the city ordered everyone living in ground floor and basement apartments to evacuate because of flood risks. Although the shelter is located in a basement the city allowed the shelter to remain open provided that they relocate to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the building. In the 48 hours leading up to Sandy's landfall, shelter staff, guests and volunteers, began prepping for the storm. They already had supplies on hand, but needed to relocate the materials to higher floors. Additionally, they initiated an aggressive outreach campaign to reach the unsheltered homeless. This campaign was especially focused on unsheltered men and women living at the Hoboken train station. Furthermore, the shelter suspended their "banned list" to allow anyone needing shelter to have a safe place during the storm. In total, the shelter had about 100 homeless men and women taking shelter from Sandy, nearly double their average nightly guest count of about 50.

According to the shelter director, many of the unsheltered homeless at the train station either made their way to the Hoboken Shelter or other emergency shelters in the area. The director was proud to report that two unsheltered men who were previously staying at the train station became regular shelter guests following Sandy and now have their own apartments. Although the Hoboken Shelter opened their doors to anyone, I learned from my group interview with shelter guests that some unsheltered homeless decided not to go to the shelter. For example, one man reported that two of his friends were sleeping near the station when they were woken up by floodwaters entering the station. The man felt like although an effort had been made by the HS to create a safe space for everyone, not enough was done in general to get the word out and the homeless off the street. In addition to the Hoboken Shelter, the city of Hoboken also operated an emergency evacuation shelter. Two women participating in the group interviewed stated that they went to the city emergency shelter. When asked how their experience was, they described it as "nice" noting that they had a place to sleep and food to eat. They explained that they were at the city shelter until it was evacuated and they were sent to another location. They claim that in the event of another hurricane they would go to the shelter again.

During Sandy's landfall the Hoboken Shelter lost power. They had flashlights on hand but did not have any other light sources. After the storm passed their "Hurricane Hero" also made his way from Jersey City to Hoboken so see how he could help. The Hurricane Hero is a former shelter guest who has transitioned to living in his own apartment. He found the shelter guests and staff on the 2nd floor of the shelter building in the dark with flashlights. According to the shelter director, he thought this was unacceptable and left the shelter and began looking for a better source of lighting. He went to the Yankee Candle shop located a few blocks from the shelter. He explained the shelter's circumstances to the proprietor who then donated several cases of candles to the shelter so they could have lighting. Still, according to the shelter director, the Hurricane Hero was not satisfied. He continued searching the streets until he found a construction worker who agreed to lend a generator the shelter until their power was restored.

In Atlantic City, the Rescue Mission evacuated roughly 200 homeless men and women to a church several miles inland. Before evacuating, several of the shelter guests helped to secure the property. Furthermore, shelter outreach workers canvassed the city to encourage unsheltered homeless men and women to find a safe place to stay. As in Hoboken, the Rescue Mission staff reported opening their doors to anyone who needed shelter during Sandy. Interestingly, although the evacuation was a disruption of their normal routines and shelter operations, the Rescue Mission's guests spoke of the six-day evacuation positively. In fact, some even described it as a "vacation". While evacuated, shelter guests explained that they were allowed to sleep-in and watch television, and did not have to complete their regular shelter chores. Additionally, the church's worship band held a special concert for the evacuees.

While the Rescue Mission evacuated their guest and many of Atlantic Cities unsheltered homeless, some homeless men and women stayed behind. I learned from the shelter's outreach coordinator, Kyle, that unsheltered homeless that did not evacuate with the Rescue Mission might have utilize the city emergency shelter or found other temporary shelter. While touring the city, I met one Rita, an unsheltered homeless woman who was eating lunch at a soup kitchen. She explained that she took shelter in an "abandonment", an abandoned home during Sandy. She described her experience as "fine" and "uneventful". I asked her why she chose the abandoned home over going to an official shelter, to which she responded, "I didn't want to have alcohol withdrawals". Later Kyle explained that following Hurricane Irene in 2011, the city has taken steps to make their emergency shelter more "comfortable" for substance abusing evacuees.

According to Kyle, during Sandy, the city evacuation shelter had nurses available to assist evacuees experiencing withdrawal symptoms, and even had representatives from a local methadone clinic to allow patients to continue receiving their daily treatments.

### *Responding to Sandy*

Neither the Hoboken Shelter nor Atlantic City Rescue Mission reported major damage from Sandy's impact. Workers in Hoboken indicated that the facility did not receive any damage and did not experience any flooding. The shelter director described this as a miracle, and referring to the basement entrance and accessibility ramp explained, "we flood whenever somebody sneezes." The Atlantic City Rescue Mission however, did report minor flooding in an auxiliary building used primarily for storage and meeting spaces. The flooding required the carpets to be removed and some repairs to dry wall. At the time of my visit in March, the carpets had been removed, however damage to interior walls had not yet been fully repaired.

Following Sandy's impact, the Hoboken Shelter and Atlantic City Rescue Mission and their guests filled critical roles in response efforts. Homeless men and women report volunteering with Red Cross and FEMA relief efforts. Furthermore, both shelters report becoming donation distribution sites in the days and weeks following Sandy's landfall. The shelters regularly receive donations in the form of furniture, household goods, food and clothing. Thus, they are experienced in sorting and distributing goods. The Hoboken Shelter reported that although they were happy to receive donations to assist disaster victims, they were not fully prepared to manage the volume of donations they received. The shelter director explained that they received several truckloads of household goods and clothing, but did not have adequate space to store the items. Initially, they attempted to keep the items in their common areas but this quickly became a hazard and they decided to rent additional storage space off-site. The Atlantic City Rescue Mission has an on-site warehouse that afforded them the capacity to receive donations for disaster victims.

In addition to sorting and distributing donated goods, Hoboken and Atlantic City, the While visiting the Hoboken Shelter, I met Sam, a former shelter guest who was living in Jersey City at the time of Sandy's landfall. After seeing news reports of the damage Sandy inflicted on Hoboken, Sam, like the Hurricane Hero, decided to travel into Hoboken to check on his friends at the shelter. He explained that he did not have a car and that all the roads and public transportation into Hoboken were closed. He decided to walk along the train tracks, which he claims helped him to avoid flooded streets in the city. When he got to the shelter he, he found that his friends and the shelter staff were safe. He and several of the shelter guests began walking through the city, trying to find ways they could help. Eventually the group made it to the Red Cross shelter, where they began volunteering in the kitchen. They're experience working in the homeless shelter's kitchen serving an average of 400 meals a day was a valuable asset at the emergency shelter. Sam claims that he became the *de facto* "chef" and was involved in planning and preparing all meals that were served in the emergency shelter.

Sam spoke at length about the sense of community that he found following the storm, especially when working with victims displaced by Sandy. During the group interview, Sam proudly stated, "people never thought they'd be homeless or need a free meal and I was able to help them." Other shelter guests echoed Sam's reflections on the sense of community that formed in Sandy's wake. For these shelter guest volunteering to help Sandy's victims allowed them to feel like vital members of the community, and they expressed great pride in being able to help during a time of need.

Upon returning to Atlantic City, shelter guests also began volunteering to assist disaster victims. The FEMA shelter was located in the Atlantic City convention center, which is directly across the street from the Rescue Mission. This location made it convenient for shelter guests to offer their assistance. Several of the Rescue Mission guests I interviewed explained that they were trained by FEMA to assist victims in filling out claims forms and worked in various other capacities at the FEMA shelter. Similar to the accounts provided in Hoboken, Atlantic City Rescue Mission guests reflected positively on their experiences volunteering with FEMA. They too described their work as rewarding. Although, many of the Rescues Mission's guests were satisfied volunteering their time, one male guest was disappointed that he was unable to find paid work following Sandy's landfall. He believes that city officials should have worked with the Rescue Mission to find men willing to work helping clear debris and making repairs.

### *Recovering from Sandy*

Although Sandy disrupted the routines of the homeless shelters and their guests, she had little impact on the shelter facilities and the lives of shelter guests. Thus, her long-term effects are not necessarily visible from the surface. This became especially apparent when I met with shelter guests. Because they were safe and did not receive injuries during the storm, many of the homeless men and women I met discussed Sandy's impact as an inconvenience. However, below the surface there may be some long-term emotional effects related to the storm and its destruction. For example, during my group interview with women living at the Atlantic City Rescue Mission, one woman became emotional and began crying as she talked about a news story of a woman whose child was swept out of her arms by flood waters. Clearly, such stories can be traumatic where one is homeless or not. In Hoboken, the shelter director explained that shelter guests are allowed to watch television or movies in the common room for about two hours each day. She reflected that following Sandy's impact in the region, she's notice that the guest have been watch less news on the television and have been primarily watching movies. She attributes this to news coverage of Sandy's destruction that may have "hit too close to home" for some of the shelters guests. Sandy's destruction also created a regional housing shortage. In April, the Associate Press reported that six-months after Sandy's impact, roughly 39,000 New Jersey families remained displaced, and according to staff at both shelters visited, Sandy's impact has had dramatic consequences on their ability to place shelter guests into affordable permanent housing. Interestingly, none of the shelter guests I interviewed expressed concerns about Sandy's effect on their ability to find permanent housing.

### **Conclusions**

This study examined the experiences of the homeless during Sandy's landfall and in the months following her impact. The Hoboken Shelter and Atlantic City Rescue Mission were able to execute their emergency plans and provide shelter to their regular guests. Moreover, both shelters reached out to the unsheltered homeless living on the streets of their respective cities. Although Hurricane Sandy was a major disruption to their services, it appears that after the storm passed the shelters and their guests were able to get back to their regular routines.

The homeless shelters and their guests became strong assets to their communities following Sandy's impact. The shelters began collecting, sorting, and distributing donations for Sandy's victims. It appears that the shelters' experience in receiving and distributing similar donations for needy families in their communities allowed the Hoboken Shelter and Atlantic City Rescue Mission to efficiently manage the donations they received. Furthermore, homeless shelter guests in both Atlantic City and Hoboken volunteered with disaster relief efforts, volunteering at

Red Cross shelters and with FEMA. The homeless men and women I interviewed reflected positively on their experiences working with Sandy's victims. Many felt that they were able to give back to the community and were proud to be able to help others in their time of need. Moreover, some homeless men and women that I interviewed felt that it brought a greater sense of empathy to the community because Sandy's destruction demonstrated that anyone could become homeless.

Nearly all of the homeless I encountered during this study were sheltered at the time of Sandy's landfall. This means that they were regularly sleeping at a homeless shelter, or in the case of a few of my participants were staying with friends or family. Therefore, they did not experience Sandy while living on the streets. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that many participants described Sandy as a disruption to their daily routines, but did not report that Sandy had a significant effect on their lives. However, a few homeless participants did have emotional reactions to Sandy's destruction and subsequent news reporting. Furthermore, Sandy's biggest impact in New Jersey may have been her effects on the housing market. Because thousands of previously housed families were displaced after Sandy's landfall, it has been difficult for homeless services to place homeless men and women in affordable permanent housing.

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**Appendix A**  
Homeless Services Staff Group Interview Script

*A. Opening*

- 1) Introduction of interviewer and purpose of interview. Conversational.
- 2) Explanation of informed consent procedures and consent form.

*B. General Issues*

Could you tell me a little bit about the homeless population here? Where do they tend to live/stay?

What needs do they have?

What services are provided? Are there differences for families and single individuals?

How many shelters are there? How many people can be housed?

What challenges do homeless people in your community face?

*C. Hurricane Sandy*

Can you tell me about how Hurricane Sandy affected the services your provide? How did this affect your clients?

Did you have an emergency plan in place before Sandy? How was it implemented? Were there any unforeseen challenges?

Thinking more about your clients, how did Hurricane Sandy affect them? What challenges have they faced? How have they managed these challenges?

*D. Conclusion*

Is there anything else you think I should know about the affects of Hurricane Sandy in your community?

## **Appendix B**

### Homeless Individuals - Group Interview Script

#### *A. Opening*

- 1) Introduction of interviewer and purpose of interview. Conversational.
- 2) Explanation of informed consent procedures and consent form.

#### *B. Background*

Could you tell me a little bit about where you are currently living? How long have you lived there? Were you staying there when Hurricane Sandy struck?

Can you tell me about your daily routine? What are some of the challenges you face in your day-to-day life?

Could you tell me a little bit about how Hurricane Sandy affected daily life?

#### *D. Hazards, Risk, and Mitigation*

Where did you go during Hurricane Sandy? What was your experience there?

How do you get news or information about the weather?

What do you think can be done to insure the safety of homeless people during future Hurricanes??