

Introduction

Rebecca wasn't thinking about rain as she raced around her home on Memorial Day 2015, putting up decorations for her daughter's very pink first birthday party. In just a couple of hours, more than thirty guests would descend on her modest but stylish three-bedroom ranch in the Bayou Oaks neighborhood in southwest Houston. Her husband Paul was in his usual spot, the kitchen, making food for the party. Her 9-year-old son was staying out of the chaos in his backyard hideout, a playhouse equipped with a sleeping loft and real windows. Her daughter was busy crawling around underfoot and protesting that no one was paying attention to her during the preparations. During the party, some guests mentioned the approaching rainstorm, but mostly, between bites of pink-frosted cake and sips of champagne, they chattered about mutual friends and their elementary school community. This time of year in this affluent neighborhood, the social currency was advice about which teachers to request for next year. Although requesting specific teachers was technically not allowed by the local elementary school, everyone understood

that one should still try to get the best ones, and so the perceived attributes and deficits of each teacher were thoroughly discussed. Hours later, when the last of the guests had left and Rebecca had exchanged her daughter's pink party dress and party hat for pajamas, she and Paul decided to clean up in the morning. After all, it was late, and they were tired; the mess could wait.

As she lay in bed attempting to sleep, Rebecca wondered why some guests had been talking about the weather. It was just a rainstorm, right? But as the rain began to drive against the roof and swoosh rhythmically against the windows, the noise woke her up every hour or so. About 1:30 a.m., she made an annoyed Paul get up and check the house to make sure it was all right; it was. Rebecca got up herself at 3:00 a.m. to check, and everything was still fine. At 5:00 a.m. her phone rang. It was the school district saying that school was canceled. Bleary-eyed, she set her phone back on the nightstand and wondered why they were canceling school. Still confused, she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed—and felt the carpet squelch under her feet. “Paul! Get up! We have water in our house!” In disbelief, she and Paul slogged to the main part of the house. In the dining room, the plantation shutters on the windows were open a crack, letting moonlight in. Rebecca described what they saw:

And so you could see—under the dining room table—the reflection of the table in the water. So it was three standing inches at that point. And as we're looking at it—and I'm kind of trying to wrap my head around this—one, like, solitary pink, Mylar balloon floats by in front of me. And I just looked at my husband and I went “womp-womp.” It was like a scene out of, like, the cheesiest movie of all time. These pathetic little happy birthday streamers everywhere. And these little balloons in the water.

Over the next year, Rebecca and Paul faced trying times as they renovated their home with the help of their flood insurance. Although together the couple earned a middle-class income, it was still difficult

to scrape together the cash reserves they needed for a temporary home, their continuing mortgage payments, and the advances to the contractors as they waited on insurance money. Then, in October, five months after the flood, Paul lost his job. Rebecca's income was not enough to sustain the family's expenses after the flood; as she put it, "He makes the living and I make the lifestyle." So they made careful use of the flood insurance payments to help them survive and get their home frugally finished. They moved back in seven months after the flood, right around Christmas 2015. Paul had trouble finding a new job and ended up being out of work for an entire year.

Throughout this time, Rebecca was determined to stay in Bayou Oaks. She'd selected this neighborhood carefully as the best place to raise her family. The homes were modest, and older, which was important to her as someone who valued style and architecture. The neighborhood was filled with young families. There was a park next to the local elementary school, which was only a few blocks from their home. And most importantly, the local schools, all the way through high school, were excellent. Selling and leaving never crossed her mind, even when the family experienced financial distress. But what would happen if they were flooded again?

Situated along one of the city's glorified drainage ditches that Houstonians call "bayous," the Bayou Oaks neighborhood in southwest Houston has never been a stranger to small-scale flooding. For residents of Bayou Oaks who lived within a block or so of the bayou, occasionally getting water in their sunken living room was just part of life. It was a trade-off they accepted for the chance to live in a coveted neighborhood, with a central location, great schools, and attractive mid-century modern homes. The Memorial Day flood of 2015, however, wasn't like those minor floods. The bayou's reach spread far south of the homes adjacent to its banks. Almost one-third of the Bayou Oaks homes zoned to Bayou Oaks Elementary flooded. The school itself took on a little water in an outlying building but was largely spared. Shaken but determined to persevere, the majority of flooded families in 2015 decided to renovate and stay in Bayou Oaks.

Memorial Day was a fluke, they reasoned. Unprecedented. Unlikely to happen again.

Then came the Tax Day flood of April 2016, which affected a much smaller number of homes but rattled the neighborhood more. What if this was going to keep happening? Some reflooded families had only just completed renovations from the first flood. A few decided they'd had enough. But most stayed.

The neighborhood rebuilt—again.

Then, sixteen months later, came Hurricane Harvey.

THE BOOK

This book tells the story of Bayou Oaks and its repetitive flooding, from the perspective of thirty-six mothers raising young children there. We follow the families across the course of more than a year, starting right after Hurricane Harvey flooded their homes and tracking them across the recovery year and beyond as they worked to restore their community for the third time in three years. Like other upper-middle-class and affluent mothers, this group of women prided themselves on the family lifestyles they managed and sustained. After Harvey, the mothers' roles as household logistics managers were strained to the breaking point as they labored to restore their homes and ensure their children's well-being. After Harvey, seventeen of the mothers, including Rebecca, were restoring their homes for the second or third time after flooding. Rebecca's story may seem like an outlier, but the world is full of Rebeccas, and more are in the making as climate change intensifies flooding events. How neighborhoods like Bayou Oaks respond to chronic flooding has major implications for the future of families and communities around the globe.

In Too Deep is a sociological exploration of what happens when climate change threatens the family life so carefully curated by upper-middle-class mothers. It argues that the careful choice of

neighborhood and school is an overlooked component of the intensive mothering parenting style and demonstrates how mothers fare under the extreme stress of a year of disarray and dislocation, as well as the consequences of maintaining those high parenting standards for the mothers' mental and physical health and marital relationships. Instead of retreating after repeated flooding, the mothers dug in and sustained the community they had purposely chosen and nurtured, trying to keep social, emotional, and economic instability at bay. In the end, twenty-eight of the thirty-six mothers decided to stay in Bayou Oaks. As the "guardians of stability" for their families, the mothers ultimately argued that they were staying in the neighborhood because on balance it was the best environment for their children.

HURRICANE HARVEY

Hurricane Harvey made landfall as a category 4 about 10:00 p.m. on August 25, 2017, near Port Aransas, Texas. Its movement slowed to a crawl, and deadly rain pounded Texas—and especially Houston—for more than three days straight. Especially favorable meteorological conditions for torrential rain prevailed, and the unending downpour ended up dumping more than forty-three inches on Houston, about 85 percent of the average annual rainfall for the city. In some parts of Texas, more than sixty inches of rain fell. Nothing else in the recorded history of the United States comes close to that volume of rainfall, as Harvey was the wettest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, and the National Weather Service had to update its map colors to show the unimaginable deluge.¹ More than half of the homes in Houston sustained damage from the hurricane, and 60 percent of those were not in any kind of floodplain.² Houston is no stranger to flooding. Its bayous snake through the city, mostly serving the purpose of draining the area during Houston's typical rainstorms. Houstonians are accustomed to staying off the roads during rainstorms, as the roads are designed to fill and drain into the bayous.

But the seventy-two-hour deluge during Harvey was like nothing ever witnessed, and the bayous and roadways were not built to withstand forty-plus inches of rain. For days, Houstonians were trapped in their houses—or if their houses were flooded, in neighbors' second stories. Local Houston meteorologist Jeff Linder estimated that 70 percent of Harris County, more than eighteen hundred square miles, was covered at one point by a foot and a half of water.³ Ultimately, Hurricane Harvey's damage estimate of \$125 billion ranked it second in US history in terms of cost, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, according to the National Hurricane Center.⁴

Harvey was an equal-opportunity flood in Houston, at first. Higher- and lower-income neighborhoods were flooded across the city. Those neighborhoods' recoveries, of course, would not be equal opportunity. The higher-income neighborhoods inside floodplains, like Bayou Oaks, were populated by homeowners required to have flood insurance. The flooding's devastation was softened by the knowledge that eventually checks would be received to help make the homes whole again. The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), over time, has become an inefficient way to allow homeowners to purchase heavily subsidized insurance for their homes in floodplains. Although it was established with good intentions, to assist homeowners whose houses traditional insurance companies deemed too risky to insure, the NFIP now effectively encourages building and living in high-risk areas and relies on flood maps "that have only a vague connection to reality."⁵ Higher-income neighborhoods in Houston *outside* of flood zones, where most of the homeowners lacked optional flood insurance, were in worse shape, but the homeowners tended to have more assets they could draw upon to rebuild or move. Lower-income neighborhood residents qualified for more immediate, short-term aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), but renters were largely left out of larger and longer-term recovery resources.⁶ In addition, lower-income Houstonians had more difficulty navigating the vast bureaucratic landscape post-Harvey. All of these factors help to explain why experiencing a disaster, even if it is

felt equally across a community during a storm, may propel residents on vastly diverging trajectories in the days that follow.

Even in this city of flooded neighborhoods, after this unprecedented storm, Bayou Oaks stood out. Unprecedented? In Bayou Oaks, it felt like *deja vu*. While sea-level rises, perhaps a better-understood consequence of climate change, are projected to swamp coasts across the world, less well understood by the general public is how climate change also increases the intensity of rainfall events.⁷ Flooding, now the most common disaster, is one major aspect of climate change that is on the rise in the United States and around the world.⁸ Over time, especially with increased warming, “unprecedented” rainfall events are expected to occur with greater frequency, and floods are expected to become a reality for more and more parts of the world.⁹ In all, more than forty million Americans are estimated to be at risk of catastrophic flooding.¹⁰ But in Bayou Oaks, after two floods in two years, and now the threat of a third, the risk of home flooding from the hurricane was clear. Most of the residents undertook extensive preparations as Harvey approached, because they understood they were likely to be flooded again. Perhaps no other neighborhood in Houston had a clearer understanding of how a hurricane’s flooding might inundate their homes. Those preparations likely saved some possessions and surely saved some lives, but in the end, the residents of Bayou Oaks had to confront yet another recovery process, with their resources depleted from dealing with the floods that had come before. Recovering from one flood is hard enough. But two or three? Bayou Oaks residents faced stark choices as Harvey’s floodwaters started to recede, and this book explores why most of the mothers in the study decided to stay.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In Too Deep is based on seventy-two interviews with thirty-six mothers living in Bayou Oaks in 2017. As residents of a nearby, less

expensive neighborhood, my children had previously attended Bayou Oaks Elementary as magnet students, so I had some familiarity with the neighborhood and both its strengths and troubles. I started by reaching out to the four flooded mothers I had stayed in contact with who still had children attending the school and asked them to refer me to others they believed I would not know, and who would not know each other. I first spoke to these mothers within the first eight weeks after Hurricane Harvey, and then again a year later in the fall of 2018, for a total of seventy-two interviews. This longitudinal approach allowed me to collect the mothers' flood stories while they were fresh, but also to follow up to see how the families fared after a year of regrouping. The Bayou Oaks mothers were an advantaged group. The median household income of the families in the study was \$180,000, about three times the median household income in Houston. All but one mother had at least a college degree, all but two were married, and two-thirds worked outside the home, usually in professional occupations. While the families were affluent based on household income, their access to liquid assets had considerable variation, which would impact their recovery process and decisions about what to do with their homes. Thirty of the thirty-six mothers were White; the others were Black, Latina, and Asian. The mothers had between one and four children, with two children and two parents being the most common family size. In addition to participating in the two interviews spaced a year apart, many mothers wrote me emails or text messages in the intervening months to update me on their progress, and some sent me photos as well. I reached out to those I had not heard from. These efforts allowed me to keep tabs on each family's progress throughout the year. In addition to the interviews, I conducted participant observation at parties, community meetings, religious events, and school functions, which gave me a broader sense of the neighborhood and its social circles.

In the interviews, in addition to collecting the mothers' flood stories, I asked about their approaches to parenting, their relationships with their spouses and extended family, and their relationships

with the local elementary school, and included detailed questions about why they had chosen Bayou Oaks and what they intended to do next. The interviews were semistructured, and there were some topics I made sure to cover; however, I allowed my interviewees to largely dictate the content and direction of the conversation. The stories are often terrifying; they are also heartwarming and funny. They are all gripping. Together, the two rounds of interviews provide an in-depth look at life after a disaster and identify the mechanisms working to hold the mothers to their community, the impact of the disaster on their families, and the strategies and schemas they drew on during the work of recovery and by which they measured success and failure. Additional methodological details are available in the methodological appendix.

CLASS AND DISASTER

Most of the disaster literature, for good reason, focuses on the experiences and responses of low-income communities. There is rich work showing how communities with fewer resources cope and recover (or don't). Lower-income disaster survivors don't just have a harder time with home recovery; their mental and physical health may also be differentially impacted by the disaster.¹¹ The recovery process for low-income people is also complicated by dislocation from local social networks, something that is not as disruptive for higher-income survivors. For example, after Katrina, poor families who relocated to Texas faced major challenges finding new homes and jobs after losing their local networks.¹² Additionally, higher-income and more-educated disaster survivors have an easier time navigating the bureaucratic procedures for postdisaster assistance.¹³ So while there is a rich history of work documenting how less-advantaged communities respond to disaster, there is much less work examining the response of affluent communities. I argue that this is an important and overlooked area for research. While it might seem intuitive

that disasters level social inequality within a community, disrupting everyone's lives equally, there is good community-level evidence that they actually *increase* social inequality.¹⁴ Those who were well off before the disaster are even better off afterward. And those who were less well off before the disaster are worse off afterward. We can understand the latter—a disaster knocks us on our heels and requires resources to recover from. Jobs might be lost. Health problems and medical bills multiply. Evictions may occur. Higher-income people are more protected from these disaster insults. But why would more affluent communities be *better off* after a disaster? Unless we study affluent communities' responses to disaster, we cannot fully understand how a disaster serves to concentrate and amplify financial and social resources, leaving affluent communities better off. As we will see, the Bayou Oaks families received an outpouring of support, adding to their already substantial financial and social assets. This was on top of their substantial flood insurance payouts. Losing a home and most of one's possessions is devastating for any family. But the depth of resources affluent families have access to is understudied and often hidden from public view. Understanding these recovery dynamics may help better target resources after future disasters.

Further, although family and nonfamily households alike are impacted by disaster, studying households with children helps to illuminate inequity in disaster recovery. This is because income inequality in the United States is at its *worst* among families with children.¹⁵ That is, income divides are greatest among American households when they include children. How families with children fare after disaster, particularly how the disaster itself and recovery from it impact parenting and family life, was a neglected area of research for decades.¹⁶ A flurry of research after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 started to bring to light this overlooked component of the disaster experience. In particular, *Children of Katrina* highlighted the divergent recovery processes faced by families of different means, as well as the surprising autonomy and helpfulness of children in the recovery process.¹⁷ In addition, the book, which followed families for seven