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## Rural Communities and Disasters: Research from the Southern United States

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**RURAL COMMUNITIES AND DISASTERS:  
RESEARCH FROM THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* brings together a diverse array of theoretical and empirical explorations on the rural community context of disaster in the Southern United States. As the Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 made abundantly clear, natural and other disasters present a host of unique problems for rural areas. In many cases, rural communities are often left on their own to meet the emergency needs of local residents. While both urban and rural communities found themselves grappling with inexplicable turmoil in the midst and wake of recent hurricane disasters, rural communities were often at the periphery of the focus of media attention and large-scale emergency response. Similarly, recent disasters brought to focus the stark reality that local community residents are often the front lines of disaster response. In this setting, rural communities find themselves shouldering responsibility for meeting the immediate emergency needs of local residents. Under such conditions, threats to rural social solidarity, community, local cohesion, and well-being are significant. The articles in this special issue attempt to capture the dynamic nature of community and regional interaction and highlight the unique experiences and needs of rural communities in the context of disasters.

This special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* brings together a diverse array of theoretical and empirical explorations on the rural community context of disaster in the Southern United States. Despite differences in methodological approaches and theoretical viewpoints, the authors of this special issue are unified in their focus on local level catalysts as the basis for effective disaster response, recovery, and social change. Their beliefs are supported by recent disasters across the Southern region which have highlighted that focusing on structural solutions to disaster mitigation and response are only part of the solution. These efforts must also go hand in hand with local community capacity building as well.

The impetus for this special issue emerged out of a series of debates within our field following Hurricane Katrina and the other major hurricanes of 2004 and 2005. In December 2005, the Southern Rural Development Center and Rural Sociological Society brought together a diverse group of subject matter experts in Nashville, Tennessee to explore responses to these unprecedented national disasters. This summit was followed by a variety of activities, including the 2006 Rural Sociological Society special paper session

“Rural Communities and Disaster: Research from the US Gulf States and Beyond” and the roundtable discussion session “Rural Communities and Disaster: Future Research, Program, and Policy Directions” in Louisville, Kentucky. Through all of these meetings, it was increasingly evident that rural sociologists would be called upon to play a vital role in helping communities prepare for future disasters, and to tell the story of their impacts on rural life.

As the Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 made abundantly clear, natural and other disasters present a host of unique problems for rural areas. In many cases, rural communities are often left on their own to meet the emergency needs of local residents. While both urban and rural communities found themselves grappling with inexplicable turmoil in the midst and wake of recent hurricane disasters, rural communities were often at the periphery of the focus of media attention and large-scale emergency response. Under such conditions, threats to rural social solidarity, community, local cohesion, and well-being are significant.

Similarly, recent disasters brought to focus the stark reality that local community residents are often the front lines of disaster response. In this setting, rural communities find themselves shouldering responsibility for meeting the immediate emergency needs of local residents. This occurs in an environment where the growing trend toward devolution of governmental responsibility means a shift in obligations from federal to state, and state to local jurisdictions. Not all communities, however, have the capacity to fulfill these new obligations and this imbalance can result in dire consequences in times of disaster.

### **Critiquing the Standard Disaster Management Cycle**

Typically, phases of disaster management are delineated as occurring in a circular pattern with disaster events followed by response, recovery, preparedness, and mitigation of the next disaster event (Wisner and Adams 2003). Though this disaster management cycle is commonly used, a certain unfortunate inevitability of disaster is implied by the cyclic nature of this schematic planning framework. Ilan Kelman (2004) referred to this as the “disaster management rut.” To avoid a sense of helplessness and a downward spiral toward inevitable chaos, it is clear that various aspects of managing disasters should be linked together and anticipated in order to reduce vulnerabilities and build local capacities. This special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* provides conceptual and applied examples of such efforts.

The papers in this issue focus largely on response to, and recovery from, disaster. In doing so, they clearly articulate the logical flaw of waiting for a disaster to occur in order to initiate preparedness and mitigation. In the case of regional and community response to the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes (Green et al., Tootle, Parisi et al., and Miller) and the

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Appalachian coal waste impoundment disaster (McSpirit et al.), the authors make clear that the gravity of disasters would likely have been mitigated by reducing vulnerabilities prior to the event. Brennan and Flint explore the potential of Community Emergency Response Teams for linking preparedness with disaster response, while at the same time building broader community capacity and reducing social vulnerabilities.

Our disaster response history clearly shows that focusing energy and resources solely on response to, and recovery from, disaster is most often ineffective and inadequate. While effective response and recovery are essential in the event of a disaster, concerted effort at reducing risks and vulnerability in general is likely more effective in reducing the impacts and tragedy of disasters. Building community capacity and reducing socioeconomic vulnerabilities across the board before a disaster event is essential. Specific preparative objectives such as supporting employment security (Parisi et al.), coordinating volunteer services (Green et al.), building trust between citizens, government and industry (McSpirit et al.), organizing response systems across regions (Miller), creating effective policy support (Tootle) and promoting local volunteer efforts through training and interaction (Brennan and Flint) are presented in the papers of this special issue.

In addition to sharing insights from a number of different theoretical perspectives and places across the Southern United States, the papers in this issue also show the value of multiple methodological approaches. A blend of qualitative and quantitative methods are employed in these papers including key informant interviews, media analysis, experiential or participant observation, survey data analysis, and secondary data analysis.

Deborah Tootle relies upon her extensive participatory experience in Southwest Louisiana after Hurricane Rita to illuminate the clash between top-down and bottom-up approaches in the aftermath of devolution of disaster management responsibility. She also stresses the value of practical responses at the community level that can have substantial immediate and long term effects locally. She calls for improving the policy relevance of rural community and disaster research.

John Green, Anna Kleiner, and Jolynn Montgomery give voice to local service providers using qualitative interviews and a livelihoods theoretical framework to inform practice, theory and research. They draw attention to the challenges to adequate response created by too few resources, a lack of coordination, ineffective bureaucracy, and damaged infrastructure. They recommend improving conditions on the ground, emphasizing cooperation and sharing resources, and connecting response efforts with local planning.

Lee Miller expands a conceptual framework of disaster by extrapolating response and preparedness issues to communities involved in accepting evacuees from nearby disaster-stricken areas. By taking a regional scale and theoretical approach, she pushes the frame of reference beyond classic perspectives on therapeutic community responses to disaster. Using a social capital approach, she emphasizes the importance of regional organization

prior to disaster as a way to link preparedness and response to reduce the inevitability of disaster consequences.

Domenico Parisi, Steven Grice, and Jed Pressgrove show the critical role played by applied research in disaster response and recovery and the value of government-academia relationships in informing decision making. Focusing on an assessment of post-disaster employment data in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, these authors stress the importance of situating disaster recovery in a broader state and regional context. Returning people to work after disasters is a critical action for restoring economic viability of a disaster area. Parisi et al. show the value of applied, policy relevant research emerging out of critical needs and flexible relationships.

Stephanie McSpirit, Shaunna Scott, Duane Gill, Sharon Hardesty, and Dewayne Sims examine public reaction to a coal waste impoundment failure in Kentucky. This theoretically informed empirical study underscores the significance of risk perception and the importance of building relationships and trust between citizens and institutions. The authors draw attention to the interaction between disaster events, risk perception, quality of life, and the importance of incorporating subjectivity into frameworks for understanding community disaster contexts before and after disasters.

Mark Brennan and Courtney Flint shed light on a valuable mechanism for building community capacity in the context of preparing for and recovering from disaster. Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) have the capacity to build community through full representation, broad community-based disaster training, and efforts to keep local volunteer response going beyond immediate disaster contexts. Data from the Southern region show that rural counties have been more likely than their urban counterparts to experience disaster declarations, but they are less likely to have active CERT teams. In other words, they draw attention to the underutilization of a valuable disaster mitigation tool.

Community building to reduce vulnerability is a process, not a cycle of independent stages. The articles in this special issue attempt to capture the dynamic nature of community and regional interaction, and highlight the unique experiences and needs of rural communities in the context of disasters. From these, it is hoped that better informed community disaster research, policy, and management can emerge.

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