

## LIBRARY EXPERIENCES OF HURRICANE KATRINA AND NEW ORLEANS FLOOD SURVIVORS

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### Abstract

More than one million residents were displaced by Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Flood. Uprooted from their lives and dispersed across the country, survivors found themselves hundreds of miles away from home. Some found comfort and much needed information in public libraries. This article discusses the library experiences of survivors as revealed through an online survey and in-depth interviews. The study, conducted from August to October of 2006, found that nearly one-half of survey respondents and 40% of interviewees used libraries following the disasters. The reasons for their visits included Internet access, information and technology assistance, mental escape, and refuge. Participants also discussed how the destruction of libraries added to their sense of loss and how the restoration of libraries gave them a sense of hope.

**Keywords:** Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Flood, Evacuees, Public Libraries, Information Needs, Disasters, Disaster Communication

### Introduction

Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Flood<sup>1</sup> destroyed more than 200,000 homes and 18,000 businesses, and scattered over a million people throughout the United States (CNN, 2005; Louisiana Recovery Authority, 2006a). Evacuees who thought they would be home within a matter of days instead found themselves in shelters and hotel rooms for months. A year after Hurricane Katrina and the Flood, fifty percent of residents still had not returned home (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2008). These disasters caused the most massive and prolonged displacement of American citizens in recent memory (Nigg, Barnshaw, & Torres, 2006).

For the people living through these catastrophic events, accessing information and communicating with others became difficult. Survivors often could not contact family, friends, neighbors, or employers (LRA, 2006b). Desperate to reach loved ones and find vital information about the status of their hometowns, many people visited the one place that is open to everyone, offers free services, and exists in almost all communities—the public library.

This article reports the library use and library experiences of survivors following the Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Flood (the Flood) disasters as discovered by a study in 2006 comprised of an online survey and in-depth interviews. The study finds that libraries played important roles in assisting survivors find and access information, and in helping to provide a refuge and an escape. The article advocates for librarians to take an active interest in discovering ways to assist in disaster situations. It also suggests that libraries should be considered a vital

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<sup>1</sup> This author refers to the New Orleans Flood in addition to Hurricane Katrina. The author discovered that many survivors view these events as being distinct and separate disasters, the hurricane being natural, the flood being man-made.

source to citizens and the disaster planning community before, during, and after natural and man-made disasters. Several key points regarding how librarians can help disaster survivors are provided.

## **Literature Review**

At the time of this study the library literature contained numerous articles which focused on how librarians provided services during and after Hurricane Katrina and the Flood. Fletcher (2006) discussed how medical librarians quickly organized, sent requests for donations, selected materials, and delivered them to doctors working at shelters in the Baton Rouge area. She found that resources for use in shelter clinics should be print based and portable, brief, prescriptive, and of course current. Librarians in Louisiana and surrounding states reported how they issued library cards, assisted with completion of disaster relief forms, gave referrals to government agencies, and provided books and local information to evacuees (Albanese, Blumenstein, Oder, & Rogers, 2005). Dickerson (2007) discussed how he, as director of the Jefferson Parish Library (JPL), reorganized the library, removed barriers to access, and served thousands of residents from neighboring parishes. In the months following Katrina, JPL distributed more than 3,600 library cards and co-sponsored programming sessions such as chainsaw and mold safety, and medical and psychological awareness.

With assistance from vendors, volunteers, and library school students, librarians established shelter libraries for evacuees. The Houston Public Library established a library with 10,000 books and 28 computers at the Houston Convention Center within a day's time of the two events (Meraz, 2005). In Baton Rouge, librarians and students from the Louisiana State University School of Library and Information Science program created a library using a trailer donated by ProQuest and computers given by IBM (Dawson & de la Peña McCook, 2006). The article goes on to discuss the creation of storm related websites, bibliographies, and other resourceful ways librarians dealt with the onslaught of users. Dempsey (2005) and McKnight (2006) reported that the earlier mentioned ProQuest/IBM library was relocated to Renaissance Village, a large Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailer camp set just outside of Baton Rouge, where volunteer librarians and students not only assisted with forms and finding loved ones, but also listened to those who needed to tell their stories. Block and Kim (2006) provided short descriptions of how forty librarians from different libraries assisted in the post-storm efforts. These articles highlight librarians' hard work and anecdotally document the provision of public library services for survivors throughout the country. By mid-2006, first-hand reports from librarians were plentiful, but the literature lacked research studies on the topic.

To understand the overall information needs and information behaviors of Hurricane Katrina and the Flood survivors, the author developed a study titled, "Hurricane Katrina Survivor Research Study: Information & Communication Before, During, and After Katrina". One component of the study was to investigate survivors' use of libraries following the disasters; the findings are presented in this article. A forthcoming article will discuss the portion of the study related to broad-spectrum information needs and information behaviors. The author feels it was important to survey survivors in order to capture the psychological, emotional, and intellectual aspects of their disaster-related information experiences.

Subsequent to this study being conducted, several articles have published findings related to the roles of libraries following the disasters. A study of Internet use in public libraries illuminates major roles that public libraries played with regard to hurricanes in 2004 and 2005. From librarian responses, the researchers discovered that evacuees used Internet access in public libraries to find and reconnect with friends, family and employers, to complete FEMA and insurance forms, to search for information about their hometowns, and to seek employment and housing information (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006b). Libraries, in fact, played roles within and outside their normal operating parameters by helping communities prepare, providing emergency information, giving shelter, providing physical aid, assisting community members in need, working with relief organizations, and cleaning buildings damaged by the storm. Librarians reported that they helped run shelters, distributed water, ice, tarpaulins, and meals, and staffed Emergency Operation Center phone banks (Jaeger, Langa, McClure & Bertot, 2006). As an outcome of their many studies, McClure et al. have developed a Web portal of roles, responsibilities, and best practices for libraries responding to hurricane situations (McClure, et al., 2009).

Welsh and Higgins (2009) surveyed library school students at the University of Southern Mississippi to document services provided by local public libraries. More than half reported assisting evacuees with finding information and completing forms, while 50% reported listening, providing comfort, volunteering, and donating time and money. Another 2005 preliminary study of 269 librarians found that 25% of respondents added new services after Katrina, while only 14% had planned for such. A follow up study is planned to elicit information on a larger scale, which will be used to prepare evidence based training materials for librarians and library and information students (McKnight & Zach, 2007).

This article remains unique in its approach to understand library use following the disasters because it asked the survivors about their experiences. The author had three main research questions concerning the library component of the study:

- Q1: What was the prevalence of library use among survivors?
- Q2: How did survivors use libraries?
- Q3: What were survivors' thoughts and feelings related to their post-disaster library use?

## **Methodology**

This study sought to discover survivors' information needs and information behaviors immediately prior to the storm, during the disaster, and post-Katrina. The study included an online survey, as well as face-to-face and phone interviews. Approval was granted by the author's Institutional Review Board prior to the start of the study.

The online survey portion of the study was administered from August to October 2006. Invitations to participate in the online survey were posted on New Orleans area newspaper and television news discussion forums (e.g., nola.com, wdsu.com, wwltv.com, etc.), blogs written by local residents (e.g., thinknola.com, thirdbattleofneworleans.blogspot.com, etc.), Katrina-related forums and groups (e.g., Craig's List New Orleans section, Katrina Survivors Yahoo!Group, etc.), and neighborhood discussion lists (e.g., RebuildLakeview, Gentilly After Katrina). Created

using SurveyMonkey®, the online questionnaire provided a way to collect responses from a wide audience, including those who remained displaced.

The questionnaire employed multiple choice and open-ended questions. The first section described the study and provided information required for research using human subjects. A list of mental health resources and hotlines were provided in the event that participants experienced discomfort when recalling the events. A statement informed participants that their consent was implied by submission of the questionnaire. The second section contained questions related to information needs and information behaviors before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. The third section contained questions related to how survivors provided information to others. The fourth section consisted of all open-ended questions that asked survivors to discuss their disaster-related information experiences in detail. The question most pertinent to this paper was located in this fourth section and read, “What role, if any, did libraries play in your experiences related to the storm?” The final section consisted of demographic questions. The option to leave an e-mail address or telephone number was provided for those willing to participate in follow-up interviews.

In an attempt to reach those without Internet access and to understand the complexity of survivors’ experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and by telephone. Interviewees were sought by posting flyers at public sites in the New Orleans area, including grocery stores, coffee shops, bars, telephone poles, FEMA trailer parks, universities, churches, neighborhood bulletin boards, and volunteer camps. The flyers described the study and listed the author’s name, e-mail address, and a local cell phone number.

Twenty-four face-to-face interviews were conducted in the New Orleans area during a two week period in August 2006. A consent form was reviewed and signed by the participant prior to the start of each interview. With the participant’s consent, the interview was audio recorded. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours; a demographic questionnaire form and a list of mental health resources were furnished following the interview.

Telephone interviews were arranged for those who expressed interest on the questionnaire, but did not live in the New Orleans area. Telephone interviews were also offered to individuals unable to meet in person. Prior to a telephone interview, an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a listing of mental health resources were mailed, e-mailed, or faxed to each participant. An interview was scheduled upon receipt of the informed consent form; return of the completed demographic questionnaire was optional. Six telephone interviews lasting from thirty minutes to one hour were conducted throughout September and October 2006.

An overview of the study topic and the research protocol was provided at the beginning of each face-to-face and telephone interview. The author then read from the script:

“Please tell me your story, starting a few days before the storm until now. As you tell your story, tell me about the information you needed, where you looked for it and how you looked for it, during those different time periods. For example, what information did you need that you were able to find and what did you need that you were not able to find? What resources were helpful and which were not? How did you communicate during those different periods?”

During the interviews prompts and follow-up questions were posed:

“So during your evacuation, how were you getting your information?” “After the storm did you use libraries at all?” “What did you do when you visited the library?” “What problems did you have finding the information you wanted?” “How did the lack of information affect you?” “Did this experience change your trust of certain sources?” “How has this experience changed how you look for information on an everyday basis?” “How has it changed how you will seek information during another hurricane?”

The online survey resulted in 314 submitted questionnaires. Seventy percent (219) answered the question, “What role, if any, did libraries play in your experiences related to the storm?” Of those answering this question, 106 (48%) responded by stating that libraries played a role in their disaster-related experiences. A total of 30 interviews were conducted; five of the interviewees also submitted an online questionnaire. The author transcribed the interviews and flagged those that mentioned libraries. Of the 30 interviews, 12 (40%) responded that libraries had played a role in their disaster-related experiences, and 18 (60%) responded that libraries had not played a role. The author coded the survey responses and the interview transcripts for references relating to survivors’ library experiences.

## **Results**

Analysis of survey responses and interview transcripts revealed five major themes related to the roles of libraries in the lives of the survivors: 1) Internet Access 2) Information and Technology Assistance 3) Mental Escape 4) Refuge 5) Symbols of loss and hope. Freely-available Internet access and information and technology assistance provided by libraries were mentioned most frequently by participants. Library resources offered a psychological escape for evacuees and libraries served as a safe haven for those cast away by the hurricane and floodwaters. Survivors showed reverence for libraries when they mentioned the destruction of local libraries adding to their sense of loss and the renovation of libraries giving them hope.

### *Internet Access*

Following the disasters, phone communications were disrupted, more than a million residents were scattered across the country, and 85% of the greater New Orleans area was under water. The Internet allowed people to connect with family, friends, employers, insurance companies and disaster relief agencies (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006b). A 2006 citizen recovery survey found that local television news and newspapers were most helpful to survivors who later returned to the area, while still displaced Louisianans responded that the Internet was the most useful for finding vital recovery information. For those who remained outside the state and did not have Internet access, finding information proved extremely difficult (Collective Strength, 2006). Respondents and interviewees mentioned that Internet access helped them: gain a sense of control over their situation; discover details not offered by traditional media; receive information provided by local residents about the situation ‘on the ground’; watch, read, and listen to local media not available in their primary formats; and continue everyday life activities.

### *Sense of Control*

People are “natural information seekers” and will try to make sense of their own situations by trying to find information and by trying to learn what others think and feel about a shared event (Lachlan, Spence & Eith, 2007; Palen & Lui, 2007, p. 729). Yet, in disaster

situations information availability is scarce and survivors often “experience a severe absence of timely information needed for personal decision-making and peace of mind” (Shklovski, Palen, & Sutton, 2008, p. 127). In this study survivors described the days and weeks following the disasters as “a nightmare” and “chaos.” Many were unable to connect with family and friends. Some did not know if loved ones were alive or dead. Months later, many still did not know the full extent of situation and were unsure about the conditions that awaited them when they returned. Two respondents said, “The lack of information leaves me in a demoralizing quagmire of indecision, leading to depression, anger, resentment, and disgust. I have to make decisions regarding my future and life based on little or half information.” and “Lack of information contributed greatly to the stress and inability to plan. Now, it is very difficult to obtain the most basic information...”

Information can play a double role in an individual’s ability to cope. Information can help people regain a sense of control and finding information can lessen the painful uncertainty usually associated with traumatic events (New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2006). Information also brings with it the ability to take action, thus empowering survivors to move forward (Spence, Lachlan, & Burke, 2008). “Only when I got access to the library computer did I feel like I was getting any real information and subsequently any hint of control over my life,” responded one survivor. Evacuees mentioned that access to the Internet through public libraries helped them cope with the crises, a phenomenon also seen when stranded commuters sought information in libraries on September 11, 2001 (Pierce, 2001). Commenting on her Katrina experience, one evacuee recalled, “I used the library in San Marcos, Texas, daily. I did not ask for help, but the access to the computers was a godsend. To be able to e-mail friends and co-workers kept the panic down.”

### *Alternative to Traditional Media*

For days the world watched continuous loops of a city underwater, a coastline wiped bare, and seas of tired and hungry people waiting for rescue. Undeniably, these horrific sights needed to be aired, but this footage did little to help evacuees obtain information about their hometowns or get facts that they could use to make decisions. The commercialization of news and the consolidation of news organizations, what McChesney and Nichols (2003) call the “Wal-Martization” (p. 12) of the media is partly to blame, where media “brag about profits to Wall Street but cry poor when it comes to covering the news that matters to Main Street” (2003, p.12). The disaster was reported in frames of race, poverty, and violence, where disaster survivors became deserving of their terrible fate (Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi & Wang, 2006). Stock (2007) found that the storyline of anarchy was purposefully spread throughout mainstream media, similar to the “looting vs. finding” narrative used to describe survivors salvaging food and supplies from destroyed storefronts (Ralli, 2005; Tierny, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). An evacuee responded, “Thank Heaven for Public Libraries of Florida and Tennessee, and for their no-charge Internet...Only when we got there (and off CNN) did we feel we were getting real info[rmation].” Survivors reported feeling frustrated with the inaccuracies and lack of detail presented by national and cable television broadcasters. A interviewee became irritated when he recalled, “With access only to national television broadcasts, who were under the impression that New Orleans consisted only of the fourteen block Central Business District, we knew nothing of the status of our hometown of Chalmette until finally people began posting their own photos, and eventually Google, I think, posted satellite imagery of the flooding.”

Survivors wanted to know the status of *their* communities, *their* neighborhoods, *their* schools, *their* utilities, *their* churches, and *their* places of employment. A man who evacuated to Alabama responded, “We wanted to know about specific neighborhoods. News coverage in Mobile was general— aerial shots of a flooded city, never identified areas. They didn't show street signs.” He went on to say, “We heard the 17th Street Canal had broken, but the national news didn't say it was only ONE side. We thought both Orleans [Parish] AND Jefferson Parish were under water.”

### *Citizen Journalism*

The Internet allowed ordinary citizens to circumvent the typical top-down dissemination of disaster information (May, 2006). Citizen reporters, sometimes referred to as citizen journalists (Gillmor, 2006), communicated from within the disaster zone and delivered invaluable first-hand accounts. At times, citizen journalists conveyed information that was contrary to the mainstream media's portrayal, thus challenging the traditional information flow and hierarchy (Robinson, 2009). Palen and Lui (2007) suggest that engagement in this type of communication after disasters stems from ordinary people's need to help and to be helped. Survivors were not only seeking information but were actively providing status reports, damage reports, and recovery and aid information to others. Familiar with southeastern Louisiana's geography and culture, and far less concerned with the sensational storyline of anarchy and looting dominated by national media outlets, citizen reporters became a true link to evacuees. Evacuees told account after account of finding the most desired information not from multi-billion dollar media conglomerates, but from fellow New Orleans residents. One survey respondent wrote, “...I was able to locate information about the water levels in my neighborhood from a blog I found.” In many cases, fellow citizens, not the Media, provided information on the status of institutions and communities in a way that was meaningful. One interviewee discussed using his blog, *Gulf Sails*, to provide information to others. The blog's comments feature allowed evacuees to post requests for needed bits of information. The blogger traveled through neighborhoods on bicycle and by boat to inspect the area and then posted status reports and photos of the requested damage to the blog via his cell phone (Gulf Sails, 2005).

NOLA.com, the web presence of *The Times-Picayune*, reached a staggering 30 million hits per day following Katrina and the Flood, which far surpassed the average 700,000 daily hits prior to the disasters (Sylvester, 2008). NOLA.com's forums were mentioned by nearly all respondents and interviewees as a source to find detailed information. For example, one person responded, “Immediate information concerning my neighborhood and the situation in New Orleans was only found with great difficulty. Rumors were rampant. The best source (really the only local source) was NOLA.com forums.”

The forum messages, which remain archived on the NOLA.com site, reveal the types of information that survivors were desperate to find in the days and months after the disasters. Subject lines of the messages included pleas for information: “Canal Blvd and Fillmore?” “What about Lakeview?” “Please Send Help, Please rescue them!” “Help with NOAA images.” “I need reliable Mid City info!” (Andraedougl, 2005; Cmm, 2005; Jahara, 2005; Jgt, 2005; PualFSPS, 2005). Evacuees mentioned how receiving detailed information from local residents via the Internet was invaluable: “When we could get Internet access, we read forums from NOLA.com

trying to find out about neighbors, etc. and just to catch a picture of our homes. I knew my home had water, but it was not until 9/1 that I finally saw picture showing my home with the water to the rooftop.”

### *Access to Local Media*

Never before in the Information Age have so many Americans been so quickly uprooted from their homes (Egan, 2005). At the time of this study only 50% of New Orleans area residents had returned and great disparities existed in the repopulation rate of the six parishes that comprise the greater New Orleans area (Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, 2008). Many residents who thought they would return after a three day trip were displaced for more than a year. Some evacuees have yet to go back and many will never return home. Culture shock, isolation, and feelings of information poverty were prevalent among evacuees (Avila, 2005; Dugan, 2007; Gill, 2007; Goodwyn, 2007). One evacuee who evacuated to Pensacola, Florida spoke of using what little money she had to print news from the public library workstations, because she is “desperate for information from home.”

Local information sources such as *The Times-Picayune*, WDSU Channel 6 News, WWL Channel 4 News, and WWL-AM Radio were familiar sources with well-known anchors and reporters that provided helpful information and a sense of comfort to evacuees who were situated in unfamiliar places. Local media faced huge communication difficulties in trying to reach their dispersed audience, as described in a report by The Aspen Institute:

Yet even WWL-TV planners did not anticipate what would happen when the storm passed: Its viewers were dispersed outside its market or, for those who stayed, were without electricity to watch the broadcast. In unprecedented ways, the media faced the task of communicating with a city in exile. Like other New Orleans stations, WWL-TV turned to its web site... (May, 2006, p. 14).

Local media were discovered to be the most useful source of information to the evacuees who participated in this study. Although local television, local radio, and local newspapers were not available to evacuees in their primary formats, survivors mentioned visiting libraries that provided live streaming video of WWL-TV’s newscasts for groups of evacuees, while others mentioned using library computers to view photos posted to WDSU.com and NOLA.com. Local and regional newspapers were more likely to focus on the needs of those affected by the disasters, providing information about deaths, injuries, rescue, relief, property, and the long term rebuilding process. National newspapers focused on evacuee distress, criminal activity, and government failure (Dill & Wu, 2009). For evacuees, the Internet provided the only means to access local and regional media.

### *Everyday Information Needs*

In an information-rich society like ours, Americans can easily take for granted information and communication sources that allow them to complete day-to-day activities. Rarely considered are the consequences of being forced away, with little to no warning, from jobs, schools, or everyday routines. Yet, this is exactly what happened to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Flood survivors. Everyday life information needs are still present in times of crisis and are in addition to the disaster-related information needs. Survivors did not have the luxury of putting their lives on hold. The library, one man mentioned, helped him “maintain a life away from work and school.” They needed resources that would enable them to persevere. Several interview participants mentioned major life events that required information and communication



resources: an interviewee's father had passed away one day prior to the mandatory evacuation; another was in the final stages of adopting her foster child; several college students sought information on when, or if, their campuses would reopen, as well as which universities were enrolling Katrina survivors. Lack of information created knowledge gaps that placed survivors in decision-making limbo. Survey respondents and interviewees mentioned information needs related to work, finances, insurance, childcare, housing, medical care, employment, education, and public assistance. Survivors used the library to move forward, with one woman describing the library as "a lifesaver" and another calling it her "information lifeline."

### *Information and Technology Assistance*

The increasing reliance on libraries to support online governmental services, without subsequent funding, has been well documented (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006a, 2006b; Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007; McClure, Jaeger & Bertot, 2007). In a statement to Congress, the American Library Association (2007) spoke of public libraries assisting patrons with a wide variety of government-related online information needs, including job applications, Medicaid registration, and immigration processes, to name a few. The ALA also explained that government agencies intentionally direct citizens to libraries for Internet-based government transactions. The e-government model was tested when hundreds of thousands of survivors were directed to apply online for FEMA assistance, Small Business Association (SBA) loans, and other vital disaster aid. Agency phone numbers were provided, however survivors found this option mostly ineffective due to lost cell phones, scarcity of landline telephones, and excessively long waits in automated queues (Kilday, Bryant, & Guzman, 2005; Murray, 2005; Steinhauer and Lipton, 2005). Palen and Lui (2007) reminds us that many evacuees and shelter residents had never used a computer and required assistance with basic tasks like using a browser and creating an e-mail account. One survivor in her thirties commented on the issues her grandmother encountered while trying to reach FEMA and other agencies for assistance. With a furrowed brow during the interview, she asked, "All the information, all the aid is on the Internet now, and for them [the elderly] it is hard. Who is going to help them? Who is going to help them before [a disaster] and who is going to help them after?"

The ALA reported that 86% of the country's libraries assisted patrons with disaster-related information needs (ALA, 2007). According to the 2006 *Public Libraries and the Internet* report, one Mississippi public library assisted patrons with over 45,000 FEMA applications, insurance forms, and missing family searches (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006b). A survey respondent who used the Lafayette Public Library mentioned that the auditorium was converted into an evacuee help center and commended the "experienced librarians who helped guide the new people" through the difficult FEMA application process.

The trauma of these events and the complexity of reestablishing one's entire life took a toll on survivors. Much of their days were spent looking for permanent housing, waiting in line at assistance centers, moving from hotel to hotel, and trying to familiarize themselves with new surroundings. When other agencies and organizations seemed to flail, several evacuees mentioned that libraries provided good customer service. One woman recalled, "I walked in [to the library], and the librarians said, 'We can help.'" A survey respondent wrote, "Libraries everywhere we stayed were fabulous and helpful places." Librarians provided tailored resources that saved survivors time and made their tasks easier. Some examples include developing critical

lists of websites and creating flyers with information about local shops, restaurants, Red Cross shelters, and schools.

Public libraries are institutions where people can seek the information that they need, and where they can access books, films, newspapers, articles, and the Internet. Yet, public libraries are sometimes overlooked or taken for granted. Library directors are routinely asked to justify funding for personnel, facilities, and collections. The value of a dispersed network of libraries which provides free, public access to the Internet, resources, and assistance in times of crisis is clear. “Bottom line, the libraries played a very strong role in my ability to get information,” one man said firmly.

### *Reading to Escape*

Bayley (1999) states, “books are an escape, certainly; but for that reason they are also therapy for the living” (p. 23). Reading has been used as a means to escape the tedium of everyday life, as well as to escape horrific circumstances. Escape has been reported as a reason for reading by various groups including urban adolescents (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007), black women of South Africa (Nuttall, 1994), British public library patrons (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002), and Canadian college students (Nell, 1988). An article titled, *Reading: Our Wartime Discovery*, describes the reading boom in the United States that was fueled by Americans’ desire to avoid thoughts of World War II (Barclay, 1945). Intrator (2007) discusses Jewish prisoners’ use of the Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library by stating, “Books made it possible to withdraw from an unendurable reality and to take temporary mental refuge in other worlds, past or present, real or fantasy” (p.516). Jackson (2001) suggests that books provide us with “loopholes of retreat” that ease boredom, sorrow, pain, and anxiety (p. 17). Survivors commented that the libraries’ books distracted them “from their troubles” and gave children time away from frightening storm related discussions. An evacuee wrote, “I could not continue watching TV. All of the storm coverage was too depressing. The library books provided me with an escape.”

### *Library as Place*

In December of 2005 more than one million Hurricane Katrina survivors were still homeless (Roman, 2005). Michael Cart (2002) describes the public library as “America’s Front Porch” and goes on to say:

Libraries are a place of light in the darkness, of warmth in the cold, of shelter in the storm, a necessary place of refuge and sanctuary, of a center that holds when things are falling apart, a place of unfettered access to information in its myriad varieties of form and format, a place of equalizing opportunity, a bridge across the digital and other divides, a community, and, yes, a front porch large enough for all Americans, a front porch free to all, a front porch where all can congregate, commune, and discover a common humanity (p. 20).

His words foreshadowed the role that public libraries would play by opening their doors to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Flood. Evacuees mentioned being surprised and delighted to find public libraries in even the smallest of towns. People recognized libraries as trusted public places to find what they need, whether it was information or a place to think. An article discussing the roles of libraries after the 9/11 attacks quotes Monica Lofton, Director of Marketing and Communication for the District of Columbia Public Library System, as stating, “[the library’s] being open gave them a sense of normalcy. They felt that they needed to be

around people, so being able to come to the library helped them begin their healing process” (Pierce, 2001, p.17). One New Orleans evacuee shared that she was living in her car for several weeks and used the library during the day. A woman commented that to her family the library was “a warm comfy place, with a play area for kids, where damaged people could relax and try to piece together their lives.” These examples reinforce the importance of ‘library as place,’ even in the age of digital access and virtual services.

### *Symbols of Loss and of Hope*

In a national survey, 78% of respondents agreed that the shutting of their public library would make them feel that “something essential and important has been lost, affecting the whole community” (Wooden, 2006). Knuth states, “When a library is destroyed, not only is heritage lost, but also the group identifying with the library suffers a blow to its pride” (2003, p.45). New Orleanians and Louisianans are a people rich in culture, heritage, and history. New Orleans is known for having families who live in the same neighborhood for generations and for having residents who develop deep sentimental attachments its landmarks (Goldsmith, 2007; Shrieves, 2006). In a place like New Orleans and the surrounding areas, where distinct neighborhoods had remained intact with their own character and roots, it was not surprising to hear survivors mention how the destruction of their local library and other libraries in the area contributed to their “sense of loss.”

Rostow (1981) writes that a library exists as “connective tissue, tying what has been to what lies ahead” (p. 9). Residents who evacuated the area prior to the flood left vibrant, functioning neighborhoods. An entirely foreign landscape awaited them upon their return. They found a wasteland, a shell of what once existed. Tainted brown watermarks scarred every house and every building. The empty, colorless, completely still streets resembled a post-apocalyptic movie set rather than the neighborhoods that they once knew. The destruction is inconceivable to anyone who did not see it, and yet those who lived through it desperately searched for evidence signifying a return to normalcy, a restoration of what used to be, or at least hope for the future. Responding to a question about her life post-Katrina, an interviewee stated that the “reopening of branch libraries is understood as a sign that a neighborhood is coming back”. A few seconds later she said, “I want my library back”.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One should consider certain limitations of this study when interpreting the results. Survivors completed the surveys and participated in interviews one year after the disasters. This may have resulted in limited recall. The study was conducted at the one year mark to gather data on the variation in information needs and behaviors over a period of time. Internet distribution of a survey which sought to discover the information behaviors of survivors may have resulted in skewing of data concerning information seeking and information use. The author chose to distribute the online survey to afford participation of those who were dispersed throughout the country. To include the perspectives of those without access to the Internet, the author conducted interviews.

The demographic data in Tables 1-10 (see Appendix A) do not represent the racial, ethnic, financial, or educational diversity of residents who resided the New Orleans area prior to the disasters. Some of the most acutely affected by the storm were minorities and financially and

educationally disadvantaged. Lack of Internet access could have limited participation of individuals in these groups. Those who were most disadvantaged prior to the disasters also faced great difficulties in reestablishing households afterwards (Gabe, Falk, McCarty, & Mason, 2005). Following Katrina and the Flood, the residents of New Orleans were less poor, more educated, and less racially and ethnically diverse (Frey, Singer & Park, 2007). This may have contributed to the lack of diversity seen in interviewee demographics. Nearly half of interviewees chose not to complete the optional demographic form. For this reason, generalizations or conclusions regarding demographics are not recommended.

## Discussion

The potential for localized and community-wide disasters is an ongoing threat. Librarians can use the results of this study to realize the impact that libraries can have on survivor resilience and to better prepare for future disasters. Some key points discovered are:

- Survivors want and need information following disasters; your library may be the only agency providing access and assistance.
- Survivors may visit your library to continue their employment, education, and everyday activities.
- Survivors may visit libraries located outside the immediate disaster zone.
- Access to the Internet will be in high demand and will be used to find relatives, request disaster assistance, discover the extent of destruction, and plan for the future.
- Value-added resources, such as web pages listing critical sites, flyers of host community information, and assistance application tutorials can be helpful to survivors.
- Local sources from survivors' hometowns and peer-to-peer information sharing may provide detailed information not found elsewhere and may be the most valuable.
- Survivors may want to use your library to seek physical or psychological refuge.
- Publicity campaigns describing libraries as places to find resources and get assistance in crisis situations may be necessary to reach those unaware or unconvinced of your ability to help.
- Ideally, marketing of libraries to the public and the emergency response community as disaster information partners should be continuous.

This study and others demonstrate that librarians and information professionals can play important roles in the disaster planning and disaster recovery processes (Dickerson, 2007; Jaeger, Langa, McClure, & Bertot, 2006; Magrath & Dowlin, 1987; McKnight & Zach, 2007; Will, 2001). Calls for library and information science professionals to become more involved are increasing. A proposal by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science called for the expanded role of libraries during disasters and described the U.S. library network as "a tremendous national resource for information dissemination and management, especially in times of crisis" (USNCLIS, 2002, p. 2). A statement to the U.S. Senate by the American Library Association (2007) mentions that "the role of libraries in emergency preparedness and response has not been fully recognized, and little has been done to assist public libraries" (p. 3).

In a report citing the work of libraries during Hurricane Katrina, The U.S. National Commission on Library and Information Sciences (2008) suggests, "If organized in advance, and with training in advance, the library can be a center for improving community resilience" (p. 46).

Will (2001) writes that a public library “can be much more than a passive repository of data. It can and should be the community’s center for coordinating and disseminating local information to help all residents” (p. 77). Librarians should become proactive regarding their inclusion in the emergency planning and response process and adds that librarians need to declare themselves to disaster planners as information experts, and promote libraries as primary information centers and information distributors that are integral to community recovery during and after a crisis (Will, 2001; McKnight, 2006).

The author acknowledges, however, that such new initiatives could be seen as a low priority, especially in light of the dire funding constraints that many public library systems are facing during the economic downturn (Eberhart, 2008; Flagg, 2009; Greenwood, 2009; Long, 2005). When struggling to provide basic services, preparing for an uncertain event at an unknown time may seem frivolous. Borden and Cutter’s (2008) hazard mortality map of the United States is a stark visual reminder that disasters affect citizens throughout the country and can occur at any time. When that time comes, Americans will turn to public libraries.

Library and information science research spurred by Hurricane Katrina and recent disasters offers public libraries two strategic paths toward offering disaster related services. The first is the benefit brought to all LIS professionals by the outcomes of ongoing research projects like National Library of Medicine’s Disaster Information Management Research Center, McKnight and Zach’s evidence based research, and the Hurricane Preparedness and Response for Florida Public Libraries out of Florida State University’s Information Use Management & Policy Institute (NLM, 2007; McKnight & Zach, 2007; FSU, 2008). Research and tools such as discussion lists, disaster information specialist programs, workshops, flyer templates, LIS curriculum development, publicity ideas, and toolkits that can benefit all libraries are being produced from these disaster-focused entities. Public libraries may be able to plan for and implement disaster services without having to bare the entire cost and burden of research and development.

Secondly, LIS research that documents the positive impact that public libraries have on individuals and communities during crises and disasters may be of help to libraries, especially during times of budget constraints. Welsh and Higgins (2009) propose that providing services during such high-profile events, like disasters, can help raise the awareness of libraries’ community support roles in normal times and in crisis modes. Libraries’ services and the subsequent research about their responses work in tandem to confirm the library’s integral connection to the community, thus once again, justifying the need for adequate funding and support (Pors, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This study makes a unique contribution to the body of research concerning the roles of public libraries after Hurricane Katrina and the Flood. The study sought to understand the experiences of survivors who used libraries after the disasters and their words are used to illustrate the findings. The study found that information access and information and technology assistance were two key reasons for survivors’ library use. The reading of library materials was discovered to provide a means of escape. Libraries served as physical places where survivors

turned after the disasters, and the destruction and rebuilding of New Orleans area libraries served as symbols of loss and hope.

The study offers first-hand accounts of the impact that libraries can have on the lives of survivors following community-wide disasters. Yet, more than one-half of respondents and interviewees stated that libraries played no role in their disaster-related experience. Additional research is needed to explore how LIS professionals can have a greater impact prior to and following large scale disasters. Further studies should determine the barriers that prevent survivors from using libraries after disasters, identify additional library or information-related services needed by survivors, explore how LIS professionals can collaborate with disaster planning and response professionals, and investigate how librarians can market libraries as information and community centers following disasters.

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## Appendix A: Demographic Information

Female	196	62%
Male	75	24%
No Answer	43	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100%</b>

18-29	16	5%
30-39	66	21%
40-49	91	29%
50-59	80	26%
60-69	16	5%
70+	3	1%
No Answer	42	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100%</b>

African American	13	4%
Asian Pacific Islander	0	0%
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)/Hispanic	4	1%
White or European	238	76%
Native American	0	0%
Middle Eastern	0	0%
South Asian	0	0%
Multi-racial / Multi-Ethnic	15	5%
No Answer	44	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

Junior High	1	<1%
High School	27	9%
Community College/ Associate Degree	27	9%
College	114	36%
Vocational Degree	6	2%
Graduate School / Professional Degree	98	31%
No Answer	41	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100%</b>

Under \$20,000	29	9%
\$20,000 - 39,000	41	13%
\$40,000 - 59,000	39	12%
\$60,000 - 79,000	37	12%
\$80,000 - 99,000	22	7%
\$100,000 +	40	13%
No Answer	106	34%
<b>Total</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>100%</b>

Female	10	33%
Male	6	20%
No Answer	14	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

18-29	2	7%
30-39	7	23%
40-49	5	17%
50-59	2	7%
60-69	0	0%
70+	0	0%
No Answer	14	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

African American	0	0%
Asian Pacific Islander	0	0%
Chicano(a)/Latino(a)/Hispanic	0	0%
White or European	15	50%
Native American	0	0%
Middle Eastern	0	0%
South Asian	1	3%
No Answer	14	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

Junior High	0	0%
High School	0	0%
Community College/ Associate Degree	3	10%
College	7	23%
Vocational Degree	0	0%
Graduate School / Professional Degree	6	20%
No Answer	14	47%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

Under \$20,000	2	7%
\$20,000 - 39,000	5	17%
\$40,000 - 59,000	2	7%
\$60,000 - 79,000	2	7%
\$80,000 - 99,000	4	13%
\$100,000 +	1	3%
No Answer	14	46%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>