

“How to Build Community Resilience: Four Case Studies from Post-Katrina Mississippi”

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Summary and Findings: This paper explores resilience on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Comparing data from 2000 and 2010 (five years before and five years after Katrina), communities with high and low levels of resilience were selected for analysis. Based on these data, selected high-resilience communities were Waveland and Ocean Springs, and low-resilience communities were East Biloxi and Pascagoula. All four communities have relatively similar walkable, mixed-use, connected urban forms. Given the importance of social networks in resilience and the influence of the built environment on social networks, the research investigates the possible variables that contribute to the case study communities' relative levels of resilience: social network qualities, related built environment qualities, or other possible explanations. Results indicate that strong local networks of support and a varied built environment tend to be associated with higher community resilience.

Implications for Policy and Practice: This initial research suggests that establishing and maintaining strong, redundant, interconnected local networks that interface with external and national groups will improve future resilience. The Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force (MCIDTF) is an excellent example of this strategy in action. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the MCIDTF had been activated only immediately after a storm. Since Katrina, the organization, which fosters collaboration between public, private, and nonprofit organizations, has remained active, focusing on preparedness and mental health in addition to ongoing recovery. Based on the findings, attention to the needs of elderly residents and other vulnerable populations is necessary, including outreach before and after a disaster. Finally, the results support the notion that a built environment encouraging social gathering, with many amenities and landmark areas, results in personal pride and attachment as well as greater fellowship among residents. Such spaces are already valued by city planners and should be further encouraged as effective resilience planning.