

# MERCATUS POLICY SERIES

POLICY COMMENT No. 22

## FILLING THE CIVIL-SOCIETY VACUUM: POST-DISASTER POLICY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

EMILY CHAMLEE-WRIGHT

*Senior Research Scholar*

*Elbert H. Neese Professor of Economics, Beloit College*

VIRGIL HENRY STORR

*Senior Research Fellow and*

*Director of Graduate Student Programs*

JANUARY 2009

MERCATUS CENTER  
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY



---

### **Emily Chamlee-Wright, Author**

A Mercatus senior research scholar and the Elbert H. Neese Professor of Economics at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin, Emily Chamlee-Wright earned her PhD from George Mason University. Professor Chamlee-Wright's research interests include development economics, cultural economics, and the way in which cultural and market processes affect one another. She is the lead researcher for phase I of the Mercatus Center's Katrina Project and the socio-cultural category of research. She is also currently working on her third book *The Learning Society*, which examines how communities deploy social capital resources in the face of poverty and devastation. Professor Chamlee-Wright is a former W.K. Kellogg National Leadership Fellow.

---

### **Virgil Henry Storr, Author**

Virgil Henry Storr is a senior research fellow and director of graduate student programs at the Mercatus Center. Prior to joining Mercatus, he was the Don C. Lavoie Research Fellow in the Program in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, Department of Economics, George Mason University.

Born and raised in the Bahamas, Dr. Storr earned a PhD in economics from George Mason University. Dr. Storr's writings in political economy have been published or are forthcoming in *The Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, *The Review of Austrian Economics*, and several other scholarly publications. He has also written a book on Bahamas' economic culture, *Enterprising Slaves & Master Pirates*.

Senior Editor: Frederic Sautet  
Managing Editor: Kyle McKenzie  
Assistant Editor: Heather Hambleton  
Publications Manager: Jennifer Zambone  
Design: Joanna Andreasson  
ISSN: 1943-6793

Cover photo: Carrie Conko

MERCATUS CENTER  

---

---

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

**FILLING THE CIVIL-SOCIETY VACUUM:  
POST-DISASTER POLICY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

EMILY CHAMLEE-WRIGHT AND VIRGIL HENRY STORR

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the aftermath of a major disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, the presense of civil-society within communities is temporarily disable and dispersed. How this "civil-society vacuum" is filled in the post-disaster moment is critical to the prospects for long-term recovery. Following Hurricane Katrina, government policy threw into doubt the future viability of many communities, particularly in New Orleans. Some communities responded to these threats by swiftly reoccupying the civil-society vacuum with private stakeholders, effectively resisting the threats emanating from the public sphere. Other communities had a much more difficult time responding in this way.

The longer residents and other members of civil society waited, the greater the influence of government decisionmaking. The dominance of government control rendered the future of the community even more uncertain and the prospects of a robust recovery less likely. In this policy comment, we discuss the social dynamics created by the civil-society vacuum and how three New Orleans neighborhoods responded in the face of threats emanating from the public sphere. We discuss the policy implications these dynamics suggest for governments and members of civil society who hope to foster a robust recovery in the post-disaster moment.



# FILLING THE CIVIL-SOCIETY VACUUM: POST-DISASTER POLICY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE<sup>1</sup>

## I Introduction

ON AUGUST 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, flooding 80 percent of the City of New Orleans and causing more than \$125 billion in property damage across the region.<sup>2</sup> In the three years that have passed since the storm, community rebound in New Orleans has ranged from swift and successful to frustratingly slow. This variation across communities has a great deal to teach us about the unintended consequences of post-disaster policy.

Following a disaster, much of the focus is on the challenges of rebuilding the physical buildings and public infrastructure that have been damaged or destroyed. In addition to these challenges are the coordination problems facing communities. Individuals wishing to return often wait for signs that others are returning before taking on the difficult tasks associated with rebuilding. But if everyone waits for others to “move first” the result can be a stalled rebound and recovery. This is a classic case of what economists call a “collective-action problem.”<sup>3</sup>

Expectations play a critical role in overcoming collective-action problems. In particular, if residents, business owners, religious leaders, and other community members “anchor” or fix their expectations around the optimistic outcome—that the community is likely to rebound—this expectation has a self-fulfilling quality. Confident that others will be returning, residents and other stakeholders begin to orient their individual behavior in the direction of an eventual return. And yet, the

converse also holds. If there is a great deal of uncertainty as to whether others will return, people are likely to wait on the sidelines for clear signals that others are in fact moving back. This waiting tends to anchor expectations around the pessimistic outcome and people begin to orient their individual behavior in other directions, such as buying property, signing a long-term lease, or securing employment in another city.

In the aftermath of Katrina, public policy was often the source of this kind of uncertainty and exacerbated the problem associated with pessimistic expectations anchoring. This effect was particularly pronounced in communities where local, state, and federal government policies inhibited private stakeholders from serving as early pioneers in the recovery process. As will be discussed below, the absence of private stakeholders creates a “civil-society vacuum” in which the role of government tends to expand. The dominance of government decision making within a community, in turn, tends to reinforce pessimistic expectations regarding the prospects of community rebound, making the collective-action problem worse.

In this policy comment, we describe the social dynamics that emerge when a catastrophic disaster creates a civil-society vacuum. After a general discussion, the experiences of three New Orleans communities affected by post-Katrina flooding will illustrate the particular ways in which communities can either succeed or fail in overcoming the challenges these dynamics pose.<sup>4</sup> These experiences provide lessons for how we might improve post-disaster policy. These policy implications will be discussed in section 4.

1. The authors would like to thank the members of the interview and field research team, including Erin Agemy, Heather Allen, Lenore Ealy, Rosemarie Fike, Laura Grube, Adam Martin, Nona Martin, Ellenor O’Byrne, Brian Pitt, Daniel Rothschild, Emily Schaeffer, Andrew Serwadda, Anthony Skriba, Skyler Treat, and Mario Villareal. We also would like to thank the Mercatus Center for their generous financial support. The usual caveat applies.

2. Associated Press, “Katrina Damage Estimate Hits \$125 Billion,” September 5, 2005, [http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2005-09-09-katrina-damage\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2005-09-09-katrina-damage_x.htm).

3. See Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: NW Norton, 1978); and Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

4. These case studies are part of a larger five-year study of post-Katrina recovery in the Gulf Coast. As part of this project, research teams have conducted more than 300 in-depth interviews in Harrison and Hancock Counties in Mississippi and Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes in Louisiana.

## The Effects of Disaster on Civil Society

IN 1835, ALEXIS de Tocqueville famously observed,

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations . . . . Whenever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.<sup>5</sup>

The habit of association that defined civic life in America, Tocqueville argued, was essential not only to fostering social cooperation but also in keeping the powers of government in check.<sup>6</sup>

If Tocqueville was right—that these voluntary associations are essential to the social order and to constraining government from encroaching too far into the private sphere—then the post-disaster moment presents an interesting challenge. Following a catastrophic disaster such as the flooding of New Orleans, communities are virtually emptied out. Evacuees are scattered across evacuation sites, often unable to communicate with one another. The physical devastation makes it impossible for members of the community to return immediately.

In other words, in the post-disaster moment, a civil-society vacuum is created. The physical and social infrastructures that support associative life in ordinary times are (at least temporarily) torn apart. The local religious and voluntary organizations that people ordinarily might turn to in times of need are unable to provide support as the physical buildings that house such services are often destroyed and the people who drive such organizations are themselves victims of the same disaster. Property and business owners who would normally occupy the community are absent, often disconnected and unable to coordinate their individual activities with one another.

But as with a vacuum in the physical environment, a civil-society vacuum will not remain empty for long. What fills

this vacuum is critical to the recovery process. If community members quickly begin the process of rebuilding, this acts as a signal to others waiting on the sidelines that the future of the community is assured. Even if those waiting cannot return immediately, the return of some early pioneers anchors the expectations of those waiting to return around the optimistic outcome. This is particularly true if key service providers (a grocery store, a restaurant, a school, or a church, for example) are among those who return. These early pioneers can inspire those waiting on the sidelines to take a “leap of faith” that their decision to return will be a wise one. Even if many still have to delay their return until logistical matters can be sorted out, because expectations are anchored around the likelihood of community rebound, individuals tend to direct their energy and effort in the direction of an eventual return.

If, on the other hand, community members do not begin the rebuilding process right away; if businesses do not open their doors at the earliest point that it is physically possible to do so; if religious and non-profit organizations delay the return of services, government tends to occupy the space instead. This occupation can come in the form of a physical presence of government, as with the long-term presence of National Guard troops. The occupation can also come in the form of policy, in which government actors increasingly determine the fate of the community rather than residents, business owners, local religious leaders, and other private stakeholders.

As the presence of government increases and the decision-making authority generally afforded stakeholders in private civil society is diminished, the expectations of those waiting on the sidelines will tend to anchor around the pessimistic outcome. To those waiting on the sidelines, the prospects of community rebound become increasingly dim. Though many may still wish to return, displaced residents and business owners understandably adopt a “wait-and-see” posture. While they are waiting for further signals to emerge, they must get on with their own lives. Instead of directing the bulk of their energy and effort in the direction of returning and rebuilding, many begin making financial and social

5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited and abridged by Richard D. Heffner (1835; repr., Greenrock, Scotland: Signet Press, 1956), 198.

6. As Tocqueville wrote, “No sooner does a government attempt to go beyond its political sphere and to enter upon this new track than it exercises, even unintentionally, an insupportable tyranny; for a government can only dictate strict rules, the opinions which it favors are rigidly enforced, and it is never easy to discriminate between its advice and its commands . . . . Governments, therefore, should not be the only active powers; associations ought, in democratic nations, to stand in lieu of those powerful private individuals whom the equality of conditions has swept away.” Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 200.

investments elsewhere, generating a “path dependence” that will make it that much more difficult to return to their home communities even if positive signals emerge at some later point.

Post-disaster policy can play a pivotal role in how this dynamic unfolds; whether the civil-society vacuum is reoccupied by private members of civil society or whether the path is created such that it is more likely that government will fill the vacuum instead. Wherever post-disaster policy generates (rather than reduces) uncertainty and imposes delays upon private decision making (rather than fostering swift and informed private decision making), the greater the likelihood that those waiting on the sidelines will anchor their expectations around the pessimistic outcome.

In the context of Orleans Parish, the citywide redevelopment planning process has been a principal source of the problem.<sup>7</sup> The Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission assembled in the immediate aftermath of the storm proposed the widespread use of eminent domain to dramatically shrink the size of the city’s “footprint” and a moratorium on the issue of rebuilding permits until extensive “viability studies” could be completed.<sup>8</sup> Understandably, many residents read this as a sign that they might not be allowed to rebuild their homes. Though the BNOB process was abandoned in May 2006, the redevelopment planning processes that emerged in its wake did not eliminate the uncertainty or delays. In all, there have been five distinct planning initiatives to emerge since the storm. While each of these planning processes has been underway, debated, scrapped, and started anew, residents and business owners have had no way of knowing what rules will govern the rebuilding process, or in some cases, whether they will be able to rebuild at all.

In some communities, residents were effectively banned from reoccupying the civil-society vacuum for many months following the storm because of access restrictions. The slow return of basic municipal services further delayed the return of those who might otherwise take on the difficult challenge of returning early. The frustratingly slow pace of the Road Home assistance grants introduced still more delays.

The effect of all these delays is not merely the passing of time followed by a robust recovery that simply begins later. The passing of time has a corrosive effect on the way in which people form and adhere to expectations. As each day with no significant rebuilding goes by, the stronger the expectation will be that the community will not rebound. As the chances of community rebound fade, displaced residents travel further down the path that leads them away from their original community and the more vulnerable that community becomes in the struggle to keep key decisions in the hands of private stakeholders.

## 3 Community Response

WHILE POST-DISASTER POLICY has the potential to undermine the swift return of a community, the corrosive effects are not inevitable. In the face of the political barriers erected during the redevelopment planning process, some communities were able to reestablish a robust civil-society presence and ward off the encroaching presence of government authority. Other communities have been less successful. By describing the experiences of three different communities that were under threat of elimination by the redevelopment planning process, we learn a great deal about the dynamic between government and private civil society in the wake of disaster. We learn not only the role post-disaster policy can play in threatening the formation of positive expectations, but also how communities might proactively respond in the face of these threats.

### 3.1 The Mary Queen of Vietnam Community

We didn’t wait for the city to decide what [was] going to happen to our community. We decided to take it in our own hands of what will happen . . . We didn’t have to wait for FEMA to give us money . . . And we didn’t rely on the city to tell us

7. Because it enjoys political independence from the New Orleans redevelopment planning process, St. Bernard Parish was able to bypass this particular source of uncertainty and delay.

8. In the face of considerable community opposition, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin eventually rejected the proposed moratorium, but the recommendation nonetheless created considerable uncertainty about the fate of many New Orleans neighborhoods.

[if we could] come back; . . . [if] we can start doing repairs . . . We just came back, did repairs and you know, got on with our lives.

—Thau Vu,<sup>19</sup>

New Orleans East Resident

Approximately 15 miles northeast of downtown New Orleans rests a small Vietnamese-American community in the Village de l'Est neighborhood of New Orleans East. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, an initial wave of migrants from the South Vietnamese fishing village of Vung Tao settled in Village de l'Est with the help of Catholic Charities.<sup>10</sup> Soon after, others from Vung Tao followed. In the ensuing years, this tightly woven residential community has fostered a distinct sense of place, with many residents referring to their neighborhood as a “second homeland.” The Mary Queen of Vietnam (MQVN) Catholic Church is both the physical and spiritual center of the community. Almost all of the 4,000 residents who lived within a one-mile radius of the church are members of the congregation. Though he has no formal political status, neighborhood residents consider senior pastor Father Vien Nguyen to be the uncontested leader and spokesperson of the community.<sup>11</sup>

According to the consultants advising the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, the New Orleans East area in which the MQVN community is located “experienced some of the city’s most severe flooding, with flood depths ranging from five to more than twelve feet.”<sup>12</sup> The BNOB suggested that this community’s proximity to the Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge made it a good candidate for conversion to open space.<sup>13</sup>

But within weeks of the storm and months before BNOB consultants recommended New Orleans East be converted to open space, the community surrounding the MQVN church was already showing signs of recovery.

On October 9th, just five weeks following the storm, Father Vien held Mass for the 300 residents who had returned home. At this stage in the recovery process, New Orleans was a veritable ghost town. The presence of 300 people in one place was astonishing. By October 23rd, more than 2,000 parishioners were in attendance. Not all had returned permanently, but their presence was a bellwether of what would come. By April 2006, 1,200 of the 4,000 residents in the community had returned. Within a year of the storm, more than 3,000 residents had returned. By Katrina’s second anniversary, nearly 90 percent of the residents in the community surrounding the church had returned, while only 45 percent of residents had returned to New Orleans overall.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of areas like the French Quarter and Garden District that incurred very little flooding, the Vietnamese-American community in New Orleans East rebounded faster than any other part of New Orleans, even those that had similar levels of flood damage and were considerably more affluent.

Pre-Katrina, virtually every aspect of community life radiated out from the church. Catholic Mass was held twice a day in Vietnamese. The church facilities were host to Vietnamese classes and study groups for the neighborhood youth and daily lunch gatherings for elders in the community. The neighborhood grid system of pastoral care directly linked neighborhood leadership to the lay leadership within the church. Business networks also developed within the church community and provided professional services in Vietnamese within walking distance of the church.

The social cohesion and capacity for coordination that the church provided this community pre-Katrina was vital to the rebuilding efforts post-Katrina. After the storm, everyone was scattered among the various evacuation sites in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Atlanta, and

9. Whenever possible, we protect the identity of interview subjects by assigning pseudonyms. Names denoted with a “†” are pseudonyms. When the profile of an interview subject is such that it is impossible to protect their identity, we have gained permission to use their name and affiliation and to attribute quotes to them.

10. For more detail on the history of this community, see Min Zhou and Carl Bankston, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998).

11. Father Vien’s role as community leader stems primarily from the authority he holds within the hierarchical church structure, but his personal charisma and his willingness to face and speak defiantly to city officials have reinforced his prominence within the community.

12. Urban Land Institute, *New Orleans, Louisiana: A Strategy for Rebuilding* (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 2006), 43, [http://www.uli.org/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/~/\\_/media/Documents/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/AdvisoryServicePanelReports/NewOrleans05%20pdf.ashx](http://www.uli.org/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/~/_/media/Documents/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/AdvisoryServicePanelReports/NewOrleans05%20pdf.ashx).

13. Ibid.

14. See *Dateline*, “Postcard from New Orleans,” aired June 15, 2007, <http://video.msn.com/v/us/fv/msnbc/fv.htm??g=a379983e-f187-4b40-af48-77178f4330a4&f=00&fg=email>. Also see Karen Leong, Christopher Airriess, Wei Li, Angela Chia-Chen Chen, and Verna Keith, “Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East,” *Journal of American History* 94 (December): 770–779.



so on. Father Vien traveled from site to site in an effort to connect with members of his congregation. At each site he met with community leaders to help orchestrate the return as soon as they were allowed back.

But the residents and church leadership did not perceive this coordination effort as a mere logistical matter—it was a matter of political survival. The recommendations made by the BNOB were seen as a direct political threat to the ability of their community to rebuild. The decision to hold Mass immediately upon their return was in part spiritual, but it was also a form of political resistance, as Father Luke Nguyen of the MQVN church describes.

First, my priority was to bring the people back. And how we're going to do that? By way of fixing the church. The church is the center. The church is the anchor. The church is the center stage of communication. The church is where people find comfort news and everything, updated news from the city. Because during that time, there was mixed messages from the city. [Were] they going to bulldoze this? . . . What if we come back, we build, and they bulldoze it? What's the benefit of it? . . . And so we decided to fix the church and set the church as the center stage of meetings, of uniting the people and so we fix up the church . . . And when we came back and rebuild, pulling our people in, people increased [from] 200, 500, 800, 1,000, they *won't* force us out. So right now their plan is *gone*. Their plan is gone and they can't do anything about us. Other places, if they don't come back they going to bulldoze. But not this place.

The church leaders understood the importance of restoring the church and resuming services in getting people to return. In particular, the well-publicized and high profile celebration of Mass on October 23rd sent a clear signal to those waiting in evacuation sites that the community would rebound. As one parishioner observed, “After that Mass . . . we all [went] home and we started to contact each other from Houston, and all over the place. So it all got solved.” In essence, Father Vien’s decision to hold this Mass solved the collective-action problem by anchoring people’s expectations around the optimistic outcome.

The return of the church and a significant number of residents was a clear sign that private stakeholders (not government planners) were determining the community’s course and let people know with relative certainty that this community would rebound. As such, people could be

reasonably confident that as they directed their energy and effort to returning, others were doing the same.

The church leadership also knew the symbolic power a repaired church filled with peaceful parishioners would have in their political fight to ward off attempts to close down the community. By photographing the assembled parishioners attending Mass and granting requests for interviews with the media, the MQVN priests believed that they could, in essence, shame city officials into leaving them alone.

Further, the photographs and ability of the church to organize people who had returned gave the church leadership the ability to bypass the municipal authority and deal with service providers directly. City officials rebuffed requests from Father Vien to restore electrical service to the community, so he contacted the local power company, Entergy, directly.

[I]n order to justify [and] divert power out here, we must justify that there are people here planning to receive it . . . [T]hey needed paying customers . . . I gave him pictures that we took of our people in Mass, first Mass. First Mass was 300 [people], second Mass was 800, third Mass we invited all the people from New Orleans, and we had more than 2,000. So I had those pictures to show him. He said, “Those I get. But now we need a list.” And so we went and got what he asked. We called our people to put their names down and their addresses . . . So within one week, I went back to Lafayette, we went back to his office, I said, “Well, the city has 500 petitioners.” So, the first week of November, we had power. And we were the only people with power.

Father Vien and Father Luke helped to facilitate the swift delivery of FEMA trailers to an area of land owned by the archdiocese that had been slated for a senior housing project. The church had permission from the archdiocese to use the land for the trailer park and negotiations with FEMA had gone smoothly. Gaining the permit from the city to open the site was another matter, as Father Vien explains.

[We acquired permission from FEMA] on the 19th of October. We got the legal [documentation], and then we did the paperwork and brought it to the mayor’s office. We had our people call . . . the mayor. We had the archdiocese in the discussion. The mayor refused to sign it. He refused to sign it

and I was so . . . [gesture indicating anger]. [T]hey had to bring it up at the [Bring New Orleans Back] commission's meeting on . . . Monday [November 21st]. And so I called the archbishop, because he was on the commission. So I called the archbishop and told him that unless the mayor signed it on that day, we will set up a tent city because my people are living in moldy homes waiting for that. And so . . . that evening, the archbishop called me and said, he said that he did it. [The mayor] signed it. [But FEMA never received the signed documentation from the mayor's office.] . . . So I called the archbishop and asked him to contact the mayor and have the mayor fax it to his office . . . . But nothing moved for a whole week. And so I . . . finally when I realized what they were doing, I called them again and I said that Monday, "if it doesn't happen, that [tent] city's going up."

Hoping to avoid the bad press a tent city would generate as the winter months approached, the city eventually granted the permit.

This neighborhood's experience illustrates the importance of filling the civil-society vacuum with private stakeholders, including residents, business owners, and the leadership and membership within the MQVN church. Though the threats emanating from the city were formidable, the presence of private stakeholders and the effective resistance they were able to mount rendered the city's plan to expand its authority over the community politically infeasible.

Had Father Vien waited for the green light from the city before returning and holding Mass, the dynamic would have been very different. Without a clear sign that the church was returning, residents and other members of civil society would have likely delayed their own return and the political resistance their physical presence posed to the city administration would have been absent.

Other communities that did not return as quickly demonstrate how, in the absence of a robust civil society presence immediately following the disaster, the role of

government tends to expand. The Broadmoor community provides an example of this effect. As will be discussed, however, the threat government expansion poses to a community can serve as a trigger for a robust community response. The Broadmoor community illustrates how a robust civil society response can stem the tide of an encroaching government presence.

### 3.2 The Broadmoor Community

Government can get their boots on the ground and still never have a grassroots level [perspective] . . . Government cannot rebuild the social capacity of the community. The people do that.

—Latoya Cantrell, President  
The Broadmoor Improvement Association

Situated in central New Orleans, Broadmoor is often referred to as a microcosm of the city.<sup>15</sup> Within an area no greater than a square mile, this neighborhood spans the socio-economic spectrum. On one side of Napoleon Avenue were households earning \$200,000/year; on the other side were households earning less than \$10,000/year.<sup>16</sup> The neighborhood had a history of being racially and ethnically diverse. In the 1950s, the Chevra Thilim Synagogue drew Jewish residents to the neighborhood. Before Katrina, 68 percent of the residents in Broadmoor were African-American, 26 percent white, and 4 percent Latino. Prior to the storm, the community was home to some of New Orleans most-established social elite as well as many financially struggling single-parent households.<sup>17</sup>

Katrina hit Broadmoor hard with average flood depths of eight feet. Unlike the MQVN neighborhood which boasted high rates of return in the months that followed the storm, by the end of 2005, relatively few residents had returned to the Broadmoor neighborhood. This less-dramatic repopulation was in keeping with other New Orleans neighborhoods (excepting the MQVN neighborhood) that received significant flooding.

15. This neighborhood of 2,915 households covers a densely packed triangular area of approximately 130 blocks carved out by Jefferson Ave., Nashville Ave., and Octavia St. to the west, Eve St. to the north, Washington Toledano St. to the east, and S. Claiborne Ave. to the south.

16. Pre-Katrina, 22 percent of households in the Broadmoor community earned less than \$10,000 per year, with 13 percent earning more than \$75,000 per year. See the Greater New Orleans Data Center, <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/3/63/index.html>.

17. Pre-Katrina, 64 percent of households with children were single-parent households. See the Greater New Orleans Data Center, <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/3/63/index.html>.

Unlike the MQVN community, which could rely on the cohesion and coordinating capacity the church provided, there was no single unifying force in Broadmoor. Further, unlike the New Orleans East neighborhoods that had been publicly targeted as an area that would not be allowed to rebuild, the specific neighborhood of Broadmoor had not entered into the public discussion in the early months following the storm.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps because they were so centrally located, or perhaps because it was a historically significant and well-established community, Broadmoor residents did not have any particular concern that their community would be under threat from the redevelopment planning authority.

All that changed in January 2006 when the Bring New Orleans Back Commission publicized the maps it proposed for how the future of New Orleans would look. Broadmoor residents who had returned and those who were still living in evacuation cities were astonished to see that their neighborhood would no longer exist. The maps the BNOB issued placed a green dot where their neighborhood had been, indicating that Broadmoor would be turned into green space. The “green dot” captured the community’s attention. It was now clear that if it were to effectively resist the encroaching government control over the future of its neighborhood, it would have to respond. In other words, in the months following the storm, government had begun to occupy the civil-society vacuum. If private citizens were going to reoccupy their community’s physical, social, and political space, they would have to orchestrate a robust civil-society response.

Exactly how the community would go about doing this was not obvious, however. Unlike the MQVN community, Broadmoor had no clear spokesperson to negotiate with government and service providers on the community’s behalf. The socio-economic diversity in Broadmoor also meant that the community was not nearly as socially cohesive. As one resident remarked, though she now knows the vast majority of residents in her neighborhood, before Katrina, she knew only five of her neighbors. Unlike the Vietnamese-American evacuees who remained in contact with one another within and across evacuation sites, Broadmoor residents were typically

not in regular contact with each other during their prolonged period of evacuation. Orchestrating a response to the threat posed by the redevelopment planning process would be a difficult challenge.

In the absence of a single civil-society leader, a mosaic of civil-society partners emerged instead. The Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA) provided many of the pieces that would make up this mosaic. Established in 1930,<sup>19</sup> the BIA had a long history in the community. In the 1970s, the organization fought against “blockbusting” tactics within the real-estate industry that encouraged white flight from the neighborhood. As the years went by, the BIA played a less-prominent role in neighborhood politics. But by 2004, new leadership inspired a shift in priorities to develop greater social cohesion between the relatively poor and relatively affluent sections of the community. As BIA President, Latoya Cantrell guided the organization in a direction that would ensure the interests of poorer residents were represented in the BIA’s initiatives, such as building a partnership between the BIA and the Andrew H. Wilson Elementary School. These attempts to weave together the economically diverse segments of Broadmoor proved to be a fortuitous change when it came to addressing the challenges of rebuilding, as communication and cooperation across the demographic divide was a critical part of the strategy to respond to the city’s recommendation to close the community down.

Churches provided other critical pieces to the emerging mosaic of civil-society response. The Episcopal Church of the Annunciation, the Broadmoor Presbyterian Church, and Saint Matthias Catholic Church responded by providing meeting space and organizational capacity to host and direct volunteers coming in from the outside. Pastor Jerry Kraemer of the Church of the Annunciation offered office space and critical administrative support to the BIA. Pastor Kraemer and the leaders of the BIA understood that in order to resist the threats they faced in the redevelopment planning process, they would need to present a united front and clear message to the city. As Pastor Kraemer recalled in the early days of planning the church’s association with the BIA, “I didn’t want to date. I wanted a marriage,” as this would ensure that the city

18. Broadmoor never appears in Urban Land Institute, *New Orleans, Louisiana: A Strategy for Rebuilding* (Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute, 2006), 43, [http://www.uli.org/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/~/\\_media/Documents/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/AdvisoryServicePanelReports/NewOrleans05%20pdf.ashx](http://www.uli.org/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/~/_media/Documents/ResearchAndPublications/Reports/AdvisoryServicePanelReports/NewOrleans05%20pdf.ashx).

19. Originally the Broadmoor Civic Improvement Association, the organization was incorporated as the Broadmoor Improvement Association in 1970.

understood that there was a clear center of coordination and communication within the community.

The strategy of the BIA, church leaders, and residents who had become involved in the fight with the city was to tap the resources that were embedded within the community. These resources included skills related to the physical challenges of rebuilding, but also skills usually associated with marketing, communications, and professional grant writing. BIA board member Virginia Saussy drew from her years of experience in the jewelry industry to help develop a marketing campaign to promote the image of Broadmoor as a community on the road to recovery. Digitas Media, Inc., a Boston-based advertising agency, took on the BIA as a client pro-bono to develop attractive signage reading “Broadmoor Lives—In the Heart of New Orleans.” The signage was prominently displayed throughout the community.<sup>20</sup> As Saussy observed, “If Broadmoor is going to succeed in this restoration process [and] repopulation [effort], we need to market it like it’s a brand-new subdivision. You need *that* level of marketing.”

But marketing a particular image would not be enough. The leadership understood that in order to make an effective case against the “green dot,” they would need to prove their viability. The BNOB proposed that flooded neighborhoods be required to prove that at least half the pre-Katrina residents had returned or were planning to return if they were to avoid the threat of widespread eminent domain proceedings and win the return of municipal services. The BIA’s outreach efforts would have to inspire a significant percentage of people to come home and become publicly involved. Like the well-attended celebrations of Mass at MQVN, well-attended rallies and community meetings in Broadmoor would signal the city’s political leadership that residents and other private stakeholders were willing and able to mount an effective opposition.

In order to attract people back to the neighborhood and involve them in community organization efforts, the BIA developed a system of reliable and broad communication, both with those who had returned and those who were still scattered across the country. The high rate of

computer literacy and access among professionals within the community was a clear advantage. Resident and BIA board member Maggie Carroll designed a website that allowed residents to exchange information about the basics of mold remediation and construction, resources residents needed and what they could offer in return, and other practical information. More important, in the campaign to resist the threats emanating from the redevelopment planning process, the online community also provided a means for surveying residents still living in distant cities. By documenting their plans to return, the BIA could make a more compelling case against plans that would prohibit rebuilding.

Communications with the people who did not have easy access to the Internet proved to be much more of a challenge. To respond to this challenge, the BIA began an outreach process through flyers, lawn signs, and door-knob hangers asking residents who had returned to share information on those who still had not been able to return and repair their properties. The BIA used the property-tax assessors rolls and the National Change of Address Registry to target displaced residents in a direct-mail campaign designed to entice residents back home and declare their intentions in a mail-in survey.

As Father Vien had learned, Broadmoor community organizers realized the media, hungry for stories of resilience in the face of a threatening government planning process, could be used to good effect. Broadmoor’s story was told in a diverse variety of media outlets, including the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, National Public Radio programs, and the Delta Airlines in-flight magazine *Delta Sky*.<sup>21</sup>

Fundraising was yet another element within this emerging mosaic of civil-society response. Significant resources coming in from private foundations could provide the material means needed to reestablish key community resources, such as a charter school designation for the Wilson Elementary School, a renovation of the Rosa F. Keller Library into a state-of-the-art library and community center, and newly equipped playground space. The return and improvement of anchor institutions such as the school and library were central messages in the campaign to “rebrand” Broadmoor to residents who were still

20. The founder and former owner of Digitas, Inc., Doug Ahlers, is a fellow at the Belfer Center’s Kennedy School of Government. As a part-time resident of New Orleans, it was Ahlers’s idea to develop a partnership between the Belfer Center and a particular New Orleans neighborhood.

21. See Latoya Cantrell, “Don’t Sacrifice Our Homes to Flooding,” *New Orleans Times Picayune*, March 30, 2006, <http://www.nola.com/archives/t-p/index.ssf?/base/news-0/114370250458250.xml&coll=1>, Larry Abramson, “For One New Orleans School, an Uncertain Future,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, May 17, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10228892>, Staff Writer, “Life in the New Normal,” *Delta Sky*, January 2008.

waiting on the sidelines. Further, by gaining the attention and resources of prominent outside organizations such as Mercy Corps, the Clinton Global Initiative, the Surdna Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Broadmoor community sent a powerful signal to the city that they had influential allies in their effort to rebuild. To shut down a community that had gained the sanction of such prestigious organizations would have been an embarrassment to city officials.

But in order to gain legitimacy with the city and potential donors, the community had to make the case that it had a viable redevelopment plan of its own and that the community had the capacity to use donor funds wisely and effectively. The community launched its own planning process, but in contrast to the top-down paradigm of redevelopment planning adopted by the BNOB Commission, Broadmoor's approach was highly participatory and community driven.<sup>22</sup> But in order to be taken seriously and to achieve the level of organization and participation they hoped, they would need help.

Enter Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (KSG). The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at KSG was looking to partner with a New Orleans neighborhood to engage in a community-based urban-planning initiative. Broadmoor represented an ideal candidate, as it had already initiated a participatory planning process. The Belfer Center provided the manpower (such as volunteer interns from Bard College), expertise, and equipment needed to design and implement a housing survey project that assessed the condition of each building in the community. Armed with these data and the expertise of the Belfer Center consultants, the BIA was able to ramp up the community-based planning process to a level that made it clear to Broadmoorians and city officials that the community was on its way back. In addition to the detailed community plan, the name recognition and high profile of Harvard's Kennedy School signaled to donor organizations that this was a community worth supporting.

Partly out of fortuitous timing and partly because the BNOB recommendations inspired such a vigorous political backlash, the community-based planning initiative in Broadmoor was gaining momentum right at the time

when the citywide planning initiative was floundering. This meant that by the time the next round of citywide planning was under deliberation in the summer of 2006, Broadmoor had already adopted its own plan. Broadmoor's plan was accepted as written into both the Lambert planning process that was presented in September 2006 and the subsequent Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) that was presented in January 2007.

Since that time, Broadmoor has shown significant signs of resilience and has clearly reoccupied the civil-society space of the community. In 2007, the Clinton Global Initiative and the Carnegie Corporation of New York made commitments totaling \$5 million to help rebuild key institutions like the Keller Library. In 2007, the community's charter school application was approved and renovations on the Wilson School began in 2008. In 2007 and 2008, the Surdna Foundation provided a total of \$175,000 to support the development and operations of the Broadmoor Development Corporation, which in addition to carrying through the initiatives set out in the neighborhood plan, also provides case-management support for people hoping to restore their homes. In June 2008, 72 percent of the properties in Broadmoor were either livable or under repair.

To be sure, not all the challenges facing Broadmoor have been resolved. Twenty-eight percent of Broadmoor's residents still have yet to return, and for many of them it is unclear whether they ever will. Many residents who have returned have found it difficult to meet the financial challenges of the rebuilding process. Though BIA seeks to help property owners find the resources they need to redevelop their properties, contacting property owners who have never returned remains an elusive challenge. Frustrations with the city remain. The \$2 million grant for the Keller Library has been held up because of complications created by using private monies to redevelop a public building. And yet, Broadmoor stands as an example of how it is possible for a community to counteract the uncertainty and negative anchoring effects an expanding government presence tends to create. Broadmoor residents were able to effectively resist this expanding presence even though it had gained considerable momentum in the first five months following the storm. Because this community was able to resist

22. Broadmoor's planning process was far superior to the citywide redevelopment planning process because it built off of the local knowledge embedded within the community. That said, such planning efforts come at a significant cost, particularly in terms of time from residents and community organizers. In the course of developing their neighborhood plan, for example, 119 planning meetings were held over the course of 23 weeks during a critical time when the tasks associated with the physical rebuilding effort were most acute.

this encroachment with a robust civil-society response, redevelopment was possible.

Such an outcome was not inevitable, however. The Ninth Ward community discussed below faced even greater obstacles when it came to filling the civil-society vacuum with private stakeholders. As is seen, particularly in parts of the Lower Ninth Ward, the inability to fill the vacuum with private stakeholders early on is continuing to have lasting effects on a frustrated rebuilding process.

### 3.3 The Lower Ninth Ward Community

We're waiting for the powers that be to give a deep sense of okay—that it's alright to build because they're not going to turn this into a green space or Donald Trump Land.

—Angela Gray, Ninth Ward Resident

People want to know if it's okay to build back home.

—James Gray, Ninth Ward Resident

Though the popular press often characterized life in the Lower Ninth Ward prior to the storm as rife with social problems, residents we interviewed who had returned following the storm described their community in very different terms. Though residents acknowledge that there were problems, they also described the Ninth Ward as possessing a unique and richly endowed sense of place. Ninth Ward neighborhoods serve as a hub of extended family connections and are the site for frequent neighborhood gatherings. Despite their deep desire to return and the rich sense of place residents attribute to their neighborhoods, the process of rebuilding in this community has been frustratingly slow. Though the lack of material resources needed for rebuilding are no doubt partly to blame for the slow pace of recovery, post-disaster policy has also been a significant source of delay and frustration.

As has already been discussed, the first few weeks following a disaster represents a critical moment when members of private civil society might have an opportunity to re-establish itself as the driving force in the recovery effort. But this cannot happen if people are physically banned from gaining access to their property. While most New Orleans residents were allowed to return to their homes by the first week of October 2005, Lower Ninth

Ward residents were not permitted access, even to *see* their homes, until December 1st, and it wasn't until May 15, 2006 that the first Lower Ninth Ward residents were permitted to begin the rebuilding process.

Safety concerns were among the reasons officials gave for limiting access to the Lower Ninth Ward. The Industrial Canal levee breach above N. Claiborne Avenue swept away or rendered structurally unsound many of the homes near the breach. The continued effort to recover the bodies of storm victims and the discouragement of looting were provided as further rationale for access restrictions.

Though there may have been legitimate public safety concerns, the full costs of these policies were likely never taken into consideration. By delaying access to residents' homes, property owners were prohibited from beginning the process of negotiating with insurance adjusters. The policy of "look and leave" that remained in effect until the spring of the following year meant that cash-strapped evacuees still living in distant cities were prohibited from making any significant progress in home repairs.

By keeping people away from their homes, the local and federal government eliminated the ability of property owners to protect the remaining value in their homes. Those who were able to return quickly could abate the damage caused by festering contents and advancing mold. But homes that remained untouched continued to decay at an astonishing pace. Further, access restrictions likely did more harm than good in warding off looters. By removing the "eyes on the street," such policies made vacant neighborhoods easy prey for thieves cutting out copper plumbing from beneath houses and stealing any valuable property that remained inside them.

But the most devastating effect of access restrictions was not the continuation of the damage, but the corrosive effects the delays had on expectations. As each day passed that residents were not allowed to return, the prospect of an eventual rebound seemed less likely, and the more expectations anchored around the pessimistic outcome—that the community would not return. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to expect displaced residents to sink deeper roots in other places, which in turn makes it increasingly difficult to change course and return, even if more positive signals emerge later.

The slow provision of municipal services was part of this dynamic. While residents within some parts of the Lower Ninth Ward were officially allowed to move back in the

spring of 2006, the de facto reality was that most people would have to wait many months more. Because much of the Lower Ninth Ward still had no electricity, water, or gas service, FEMA would not deliver trailers until such services had been restored.<sup>23</sup> But this decision placed the community in a precarious “Catch-22” situation.

The lack of basic services to some neighborhoods meant that the city could not guarantee residents’ safety, thereby justifying access restrictions. At the same time, the city pointed to the lack of any substantial repopulation as justification for not restoring municipal services. This caught neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward in a vicious logic in which community redevelopment became an increasingly dim hope. As interview subject Robert Jackson<sup>†</sup> observed,

Here in the city in particular, it seems to me that they purposely make it hard for people to be here. I mean it’s crazy . . . Because [the neighborhood] was not officially open, there was no electricity, no services. They didn’t want you to drink the water and all kinds of stuff. So they selectively allowed people back into certain areas only. That kept a lot of people away . . . [The city] said if you come don’t call the police. If there’s a fire, we don’t have fire protection for you. We don’t have police protection for you.<sup>24</sup> The water is not safe to drink and so forth and so on and all that. So *that* kept a lot of people away. Well the longer they stay away the harder it is to come back.

Jackson<sup>†</sup> makes an important point, not only about the Catch-22 dynamic in play between the slow rate of repopulation and the return of municipal services, but also the effects these delays have on those waiting on the sidelines. As he suggests, each day that passed made it less likely that evacuees would return. Researchers who have conducted studies among evacuees in other locations affirm that this is indeed the case—that the longer evacuees stay away, the less likely they are to make plans to return.<sup>25</sup>

The negative anchoring effect which began with policies restricting access and delaying municipal services was exacerbated further by the uncertainties generated in the redevelopment planning process. Because of the devastating effects of the Industrial Canal levee breach, the Lower Ninth Ward was frequently held up by public officials and members of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission as a neighborhood that should be subject to eminent domain proceedings.

While communities like the MQVN neighborhood and Broadmoor had a fighting chance to avert the threat posed by the redevelopment planning process, the Lower Ninth Ward was in a far more vulnerable position. Access restrictions prevented private stakeholders from filling the civil-society vacuum and allowed the government presence to grow, not only in terms of its physical occupation of the neighborhood but also in terms of its political dominance in directing the fate of the community.

The demise of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission was not the end of the uncertainty created by the redevelopment planning process. The BNOB was followed by the Louisiana Speaks Long-Term Community Recovery Plan, the Lambert Plan (New Orleans Neighborhood Rebuilding Plan), the City of New Orleans Office of Recovery Management Plan, and the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP). But rather than providing answers to residents’ most basic questions, the ongoing planning process prolonged the period of uncertainty as to which rules would apply. As frustrated community organizer Renee Lewis<sup>†</sup> pointed out,

The plan we had was the framework for the plan that would be the plan to shape the plan that was going to allow us to plan for the plan that would be our instrument implementation plan and then we would plan on how to get the money in order to get the plan moved from plan to adoption to—and we haven’t laid one damn brick. We haven’t turned on one streetlight. We don’t have a single book in the whole library.

23. See Cheryl Corley, “Some Ninth Ward Families Allowed to Return,” *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, May 19, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5417125>.

24. Many interview subjects were quick to point out that though they were told not to expect these services, they were still being assessed taxes to pay for them.

25. See Rick Wilson and Robert M. Stein, “Katrina Evacuees in Houston: One-year Out” (white paper, National Science Foundation, 2006), [http://brl.rice.edu/katrina/White\\_Papers/White\\_Paper\\_9\\_8\\_06.pdf](http://brl.rice.edu/katrina/White_Papers/White_Paper_9_8_06.pdf).

One of the purported improvements in these later redevelopment plans was the degree members of the community would be included in the planning process. But interview subjects from the Ninth Ward pointed out that people who were the most constrained financially could not afford to return to the city to attend neighborhood meetings and planning events. Low turnout at these meetings was problematic, not so much because an opportunity to plan was missed, but because low attendance was an indication that the community was vulnerable to those who had an interest in seeing the community taken over in the redevelopment planning process. The BIA in Broadmoor and the MQVN church in New Orleans East used their large numbers of early returnees as leverage in their political battles with the city. Policies that delayed the return of residents reduced the Ninth Ward's ability to establish such a presence, rendering them more vulnerable in the redevelopment planning process.<sup>26</sup>

For all its flaws, one might argue that by aiming to build a better New Orleans (complete with a light rail system, high-tech industries, and a new theater arts district) the intent behind the development planning process was well meaning. But many residents pointed out that the grandiosity of the plans being proposed missed the essential thing that government ought to be doing in the post-disaster context: get basic services back on line. According to resident Kenneth Stewart<sup>†</sup>,

If there were effective planning, what we would have already been seeing is the basic necessities taken care of. Infrastructure, roads, lights, all of the basic necessities would have been provided, and these are not being taken care of. [We don't need] light rail or a Katrina memorial or a New Urbanist business district design. [Just] get the lights turned on. Get the sewers hooked up. Get the basic stuff done. Just get it done.

Rather than moving the recovery process forward, grand plans that aim to radically redesign the city have had the opposite effect by delaying the day when the rules of the game are clear and people can move forward with confidence.<sup>27</sup>

The February 2006 announcement that generous Road Home rebuilding assistance grants would be coming soon gave many people hope that the fate of communities like the Lower Ninth Ward would be reversed. As announced, the \$10.4 billion program would award homeowners up to \$150,000 in recovery assistance. In order to entice the 300,000 Louisianans who had left the state back home, the highest awards were given to residents who repaired their damaged homes or who sold their home to the state and relocated within Louisiana.<sup>28</sup> This meant that administration of the Road Home Program was complicated, not only to residents applying for assistance, but also apparently to Road Home Administrators. By February 2007, a full year after the program had been announced, only 400 of the 180,000 applications had closed. Though the pace quickened once some of the more onerous rules restricting the flow of resources eased, by February 2008, only 54 percent of applications had closed.<sup>29</sup>

Again, all this waiting had a corrosive effect. Those who had been sitting on the fence regarding their decision to return now faced a new calculation. A homeowner could return immediately and incur the hardships of rebuilding without Road Home assistance in the short term, or they could wait a bit longer and return once they had received a grant. Not surprisingly, many people waited. This waiting is not neutral, particularly for poorer residents who had limited means of finding financing that could bridge the time between beginning repairs and receiving the Road Home grant. With each month that passed, expectations further anchored around the pessimistic outcome. Thus, not only did the Road Home Program fail to help many people, by creating an incentive to put off their eventual

26. Founders of the non-profit relief organization Common Ground recognized the importance of establishing such a presence. Common Ground set up a distribution site in a brightly painted house in the Lower Ninth Ward, long before residents had returned or water and electrical service had been restored. Volunteers posted hand-painted signs that read "People Live Here," and "Eminent Domain for Who [sic]?" But without the presence of residents themselves, such efforts did not achieve the early political resistance observed in neighborhoods like Broadmoor and New Orleans East.

27. Further, many interview subjects complained that the 394 page plan that emerged under UNOP is so confusing that it fails to provide answers to their most basic questions about which rules apply to their situation.

28. They received the highest reward provided they retained their property as their primary residence for three years after repairs had been completed.

29. For a comparative analysis between Louisiana's and Mississippi's recovery-assistance programs, see Eileen Norcross and Anthony Skriba, *Road Home: Helping Homeowners in the Gulf After Katrina*, Mercatus Policy Series, Policy Comment no. 19 (Arlington, VA: Mercatus Center, 2008), <http://www.mercatus.org/PublicationDetails.aspx?id=16050>.



return, the program actually made matters worse. Longer delays left the community empty of private stakeholders and reinforced pessimistic expectations.

Access restrictions, the delay in providing basic municipal services, the uncertainties of the redevelopment planning process, and the delays in administering the Road Home Program provided a near-perfect recipe for inhibiting the return of private stakeholders to the Lower Ninth Ward and frustrating the process of long-term recovery.

## 4 Policy Discussion

THE EXPERIENCES BORN out by various communities in the three years since Katrina suggest that post-disaster policy ought to be designed according to the following principles: 1) allow private stakeholders to fill the civil-society vacuum, 2) focus government response on what is essential and on what can be done swiftly, and 3) promise relatively little in the way of recovery assistance, but then deliver on those promises swiftly.

### **Let private stakeholders fill the civil-society vacuum.**

The most important lesson to be learned from the communities discussed here is that governments do not rebuild neighborhoods. Residents, business people, and other private stakeholders do. Surely government plays a critical role by getting basic municipal services back on line, but the rebuilding effort is largely accomplished within civil society. Understanding this point is critical. If policy makers have the wrong paradigm in mind—if they believe that it is primarily government that rebuilds communities—our post-disaster policy reflects it. We end up fostering an environment in which private decision makers have less and less ability to tap their capacity as property owners, service providers, and community leaders.

In practical terms, this means that access restrictions should be imposed in only the most extreme circumstances. Public-safety concerns should not be the only factor that determines such policies. The potential

benefits to public safety should be weighed against the long-term damage such restrictions are likely to mean for the prospects of eventual community rebound. This requires a shift in paradigm away from the only priority being “protect the public at all costs” to one which balances public-safety concerns with the need for residents, business owners, property owners, religious leaders, non-profit directors, and other private stakeholders to reestablish a presence in their community. Such a presence can itself help to mitigate against short-term public-safety concerns. More importantly, such a presence tends to anchor expectations around the likelihood of community rebound and inspires those waiting on the sidelines to orient their behavior toward an eventual return.

### **Focus government response on what is essential and on what can be done swiftly.**

Perhaps the most important thing governments can do in the post-disaster moment is to uphold the basic rules of the game (private property, contracts made prior to the disaster, and the rule of law). Sweeping away such basic rules of the game by threatening widespread use of eminent domain in the post-disaster recovery process creates a great deal of uncertainty that inhibits people’s ability and willingness to reinvest in their community. Following Katrina, the uncertainties created by such threats delayed the return of private stakeholders and further anchored expectations around the pessimistic outcome.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, grandiose redevelopment plans tend to exacerbate and prolong the uncertainties residents and other stakeholders face. Following a disaster, the temptation is strong to completely redesign the city or region with all the accoutrements and amenities public officials might have hoped for pre-disaster. But grandiose plans become yet another source of the problem when they create delays and further uncertainty as people await the outcome of each new planning initiative. It is worth noting that the MQVN and Broadmoor communities were able to gain traction in the recovery process because they *did not* abide by the recommendations of city planners and public officials calling for a wait-and-see approach.

Rather than offer grandiose plans, governments can play a positive role in the recovery effort just by getting

30. For a more detailed argument on this point, see Emily Chamlee-Wright and Daniel Rothschild, *Disastrous Uncertainty: How Government Disaster Policy Undermines Community Rebound*, Mercatus Policy Series, Policy Comment no. 9 (Arlington, VA: Mercatus Center, 2007), <http://www.mercatus.org/PublicationDetails.aspx?id=17710>.

basic services such as electrical, water, and trash collection back on line as soon as possible. Even if the circumstances are extremely difficult, the return of these basic services will be enough to entice some early pioneers to begin the rebuilding process. It is the return of these first movers who will inspire (and provide other essential services to) those waiting on the sidelines.

In the event that local governments cannot get basic services back on line in a timely manner, individuals willing to bear the costs and associated risks of returning even in the absence of such services should be allowed to do so. Able-bodied pioneers who possess the knowledge, tools, and fortitude to take on such challenges can play a critical role in signaling the potential for community rebound. Government can certainly play a role in informing the public of the potential risks, but government does a disservice to communities if it forbids the early efforts of rebuilding pioneers.

**Promise relatively little. Deliver swiftly.**

When it comes to disaster assistance, it is best to promise relatively little, but deliver on those promises swiftly. Making grand promises that have little chance of coming to fruition slows rebuilding efforts and complicates life on the ground, as do complex bureaucracies like Louisiana's Road Home Program. It is better to promise that every affected household will receive a check for \$20,000 within 90 days of a disaster and get it done in 60 days, than to promise every household \$150,000 that never comes. And it is far better to pre-commit and stick to realistic levels of support in advance of the disaster than to decide such matters in the political heat of the disaster moment.

And as a summation of all these points, public policy can help anchor community expectations around the likelihood of a successful rebound, not by promising the world, but by just getting the lights turned on and water service restored. By promising only what is absolutely necessary and achievable, policy makers create room for civil society to step in.

## 5 Conclusions

THE ARGUMENT ADVANCED here is that in the wake of catastrophe, a civil-society vacuum is temporarily created. We argue that the post-disaster moment represents a critical juncture that has lasting consequences

in the prospects for long-term redevelopment. If the civil-society vacuum is filled with private stakeholders, those waiting on the sidelines are more likely to form optimistic expectations regarding the fate of the community and orient their own plans toward an eventual return. If private stakeholders delay their return, the role of government tends to expand into spheres generally considered to be the domain of private civil society. The expansion of government control, in turn, generates even greater uncertainty and delay. As it does so, people tend to develop pessimistic expectations about the fate of the community and instead invest in rebuilding their lives elsewhere.

We have argued that rather than helping communities engage in a swift and robust recovery process, key post-disaster policies adopted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina have had the exact opposite effect. The uncertainties generated in the redevelopment planning process played a pivotal and devastating role in keeping people on the sidelines and inhibiting private stakeholders from taking the lead in directing the community's course. Access restrictions inhibited the ability of residents, business owners, and other private stakeholders to serve as early pioneers who might have sent powerful signals about the potential viability of the community. And rather than counteracting the effects of pessimistic expectations, Louisiana's Road Home Program exacerbated the problem. The complicated design of the program caused significant delays and encouraged people to continue to wait before beginning the rebuilding process.

With every week that passed in which private citizens were prohibited and/or discouraged from returning, government's role expanded to fill the vacuum. Those communities that were able to override this effect by filling the vacuum with private stakeholders fared much better in the recovery process. But the circumstances that enabled some communities to do this (such as the coordinating capacity of the MQVN church in New Orleans East and the BIA and other community partners in Broadmoor) were not available in all communities. For those communities that were unable to fill the civil society vacuum, expectations anchored more firmly around the pessimistic outcome that the community would not rebound.

If policy makers are to advance the interests of communities struggling to rebound in the wake of disaster, the corrosive effects of delays must be considered alongside concerns for public safety. Policy makers must also bear in mind the negative effects government decision making can have as it expands its influence and control into

areas ordinarily considered part of the private sphere. Further, it is essential for policy makers to bear in mind that an imperfect policy solution that is swift is far better than a perfect policy solution that is so complicated that it significantly delays the recovery effort.

The analysis presented here also suggests that if the members of private civil society hope to foster a robust community rebound, their best course is to direct their activity in ways that reoccupies the civil-society vacuum as swiftly as is reasonably possible. Waiting for clarity from local, state, and federal government is likely to generate further confusion and delay. By returning early, a key community figure (such as a church pastor) or a critical service provider (such as a grocery store owner) sends a powerful signal to those waiting on the sidelines that the community will rebound. Equally important, the presence of early pioneers and the people they inspire to follow refills the civil-society vacuum with private stakeholders who can more appropriately direct the future course of the community.





---

## About the Mercatus Center

The Mercatus Center at George Mason University is a research, education, and outreach organization that works with scholars, policy experts, and government officials to connect academic learning and real world practice.

The mission of Mercatus is to promote sound interdisciplinary research and application in the humane sciences that integrates theory and practice to produce solutions that advance in a sustainable way a free, prosperous, and civil society. Mercatus's research and outreach programs, Capitol Hill Campus, Government Accountability Project, Regulatory Studies Program, Social Change Project, and Global Prosperity Initiative, support this mission.

The Mercatus Center is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. The ideas presented in this series do not represent an official position of George Mason University.

## ABOUT THE MERCATUS POLICY SERIES

The objective of the Mercatus Policy Series is to help policy makers, scholars, and others involved in the policy process make more effective decisions by incorporating insights from sound interdisciplinary research. The series aims to bridge the gap between advances in scholarship and the practical requirements of policy through four types of studies:

**POLICY PRIMERS** present an accessible explanation of fundamental economic ideas necessary to the practice of sound policy.

**POLICY RESOURCES** present a more in depth, yet still accessible introduction to the basic elements of government processes or specific policy areas.

**POLICY COMMENTS** present an analysis of a specific policy situation that Mercatus scholars have explored and provide advice on potential policy changes.

**COUNTRY BRIEFS** present an institutional perspective of critical issues facing countries in which Mercatus scholars have worked and provide direction for policy improvements.

**MERCATUS CENTER**  
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

3301 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 450  
Arlington, Virginia 22201  
Tel: (703) 993-4930  
Fax: (703) 993-4935