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Abstract

In September 2008, Hurricane Ike caused massive damages to Galveston Island's residential structures including four public housing developments. These developments were located in neighborhoods with some of the lowest incomes and highest percentages of people of color on the Island. Four months later, the Galveston Housing Authority (GHA) decided to demolish all four developments consisting of 569 housing units due to the damages to the buildings. Today, despite federal regulations requiring reconstruction, court orders mandating replacement of the demolished units, and available funding, only 142 low-income apartments have been rebuilt. We used the social vulnerability framework to understand these outcomes through the ability of groups to shape post-disaster recovery decisions. This paper argues that one of the overlooked characteristics of social vulnerability is a diminished ability to participate in post-disaster decision-making. We found that social vulnerability limited participation through three distinct mechanisms: the physical displacement of public housing residents, the stigmatization of public housing, and the reduction of residents to housing units in the debates. There were few local advocates arguing for the preservation of public housing units and even fewer remaining residents to speak up for themselves in the face of strong local resistance to the reconstruction of public housing units or the return of public housing residents. The void of a strong and authentic local pro-public housing perspective in Galveston provided an opening for various local campaigns to claim that their desired plan benefited the poor. The disaster recovery became an opportunity to remove or reduce public housing units and therefore public housing residents. Our findings show the dynamic features of vulnerability. While static factors of vulnerability can limit access to resources for recovery, dynamic processes of social marginalization and exclusion limit the voices of socially vulnerable groups in recovery decisions and exacerbate marginalization.

Keywords

Public housing, Social vulnerability, Participation, Recovery decisions, Hurricane Ike, Galveston

Disciplines

Demography, Population, and Ecology | Emergency and Disaster Management | Public Policy | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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SOCIAL VULNERABILITY AND PARTICIPATION IN DISASTER RECOVERY DECISIONS:

Public Housing in Galveston after Hurricane Ike¹

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Jane Rongerude

Abstract

In September 2008, Hurricane Ike caused massive damages to Galveston Island's residential structures including four public housing developments. These developments were located in neighborhoods with some of the lowest incomes and highest percentages of people of color on the Island. Four months later the Galveston Housing Authority (GHA) decided to demolish all four developments consisting of 569 housing units due to the damages to the buildings. Today, despite federal regulations requiring reconstruction, court orders mandating replacement of the demolished units, and available funding, only 142 low income apartments have been rebuilt. We used the social vulnerability framework to understand these outcomes through the ability of groups to shape post-disaster recovery decisions. This paper argues that one of the overlooked characteristic of social vulnerability is a diminished ability to participate in post-disaster decision-making. We found that social vulnerability limited participation through three distinct mechanisms: the physical displacement of public housing residents, the stigmatization of public housing, and the reduction of residents to housing units in the debates. There were few local advocates arguing for the preservation of public housing units and even fewer remaining residents to speak up for themselves in the face of strong local resistance to the reconstruction of public housing units or the return of public housing residents. The void of a strong and authentic local pro-public housing perspective in Galveston provided an opening for various local campaigns to claim that their desired plan benefited the poor. The disaster recovery became an opportunity to remove or reduce public housing units and therefore, public housing residents. Our findings show the dynamic features of vulnerability. While static factors of vulnerability can limit access to resources for recovery, dynamic processes of social marginalization and exclusion limit the voices of socially vulnerable groups in recovery decisions and exacerbate marginalization.

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35 **Introduction**

36 On the morning of September 13th 2008, Hurricane Ike crossed between
37 Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula in Texas as a Category 2 storm, causing
38 \$29.5 billion in damage to the Houston-Galveston area, making it one of the costliest
39 storms in U.S. history (Berg, 2009). The 10 to 15-foot waves generated by the storm
40 damaged more than 75% of the island's residential structures including four public
41 housing developments. These developments were located in neighborhoods with
42 some of the lowest incomes and highest percentages of people of color on the Island
43 and had long been viewed by city leaders as a barrier to revitalization. Four months
44 later the Galveston Housing Authority (GHA) decided to demolish all four
45 developments consisting of 569 housing units due to the damages to the buildings.
46 Today, despite federal regulations requiring reconstruction, court orders mandating
47 replacement of the demolished public housing units, and available funding to finance
48 reconstruction, only 282 mixed income apartments have been rebuilt with only half
49 of those set aside as affordable units and less than half of the displaced public
50 housing families remain on the Island.

51 Disasters magnify pre-existing social and economic trends in places without
52 fundamentally changing them (Kates, 1977). The concept of social vulnerability
53 recognizes that the social inequalities embedded in local sociopolitical systems prior
54 to a disaster inhibit the ability of different groups of people to cope with and rebound
55 from disaster events (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 1994). As a result, social
56 vulnerability identifies people who are at greater risk in disasters. It helps explain
57 how and why residents of public housing, for example, face greater uncertainties and
58 obstacles for housing recovery than the general population. However, despite the
59 implicit recognition that pre-disaster conditions shape post disaster outcomes, the
60 literature has little to say about the relationship between social vulnerability and the
61 ability of groups to shape post-disaster recovery decisions. This relationship is
62 especially important for public housing residents whose very ability to remain
63 housed is contingent on an often tenuous social contract.

64 Using Galveston as a case study, this paper argues that one overlooked
65 implication of social vulnerability is a diminished ability to participate in post-
66 disaster decision-making. This implication is in part spatial. Unable to return to their
67 homes after Hurricane Ike, public housing residents in Galveston scattered across
68 the region and many found housing off the Island. However, barriers to participation
69 are also a result of the marginalization inherent to social vulnerability. When a
70 contentious public process in Galveston revealed strong local resistance to the repair
71 of public housing units or the return of public housing residents to their communities,
72 there were few local advocates arguing for the preservation of public housing units
73 and even fewer remaining residents to speak up for themselves. The marginalization

74 of former public housing residents and the absence of a strong and authentic local
75 pro-public housing perspective provided an opening for various local campaigns to
76 claim that their desired plan to demolish or diminish public housing in fact benefitted
77 the former residents. Disaster recovery became an opportunity to remove or reduce
78 public housing units and therefore, public housing residents.

79

80 **Literature Review: Social Vulnerability, Marginalization, and Public Housing** 81 **Recovery**

82 Social vulnerability acknowledges that disaster risk is not distributed evenly
83 across a population or a place. Damage levels, for example, are not simply due to
84 the force of the hazard agent itself, but are also related to factors such as income,
85 race/ethnicity, housing type and tenure, and neighborhood characteristics (Maly &
86 Shiozaki, 2012; Bolin, 1982 & 1985; Bolin & Bolton, 1983 and 1986; Peacock &
87 Girard, 1997; Van Zandt, Peacock, Henry, Grover, Highfield, & Brody, 2012;
88 Gotham, 2014; Highfield, Peacock, & Van Zandt, 2014; Peacock et al., 2014). The
89 relationship between high levels of damage and social vulnerability (Grigsby, 1963;
90 Myers, 1975) are partly due to the fact that older, lower valued, and poorer quality
91 homes are more likely to house low-income and minority populations (Van Zandt et
92 al., 2012; Peacock et al., 2014). Consequently, the physical and social concentration
93 of damage lead to very different recovery trajectories for housing in lower-income
94 neighborhoods and communities of color (Chang, 2010; Comerio, 1997; Green,
95 Bates, & Smyth, 2007; Green & Olshansky, 2012; Zhang, 2012).

96 Social vulnerability then contributes not only to greater disaster risk, but to
97 differentiated post-disaster outcomes (Bolin, 1982 & 1985; Bolin & Bolton, 1983
98 and 1986; Peacock & Girard, 1997; Van Zandt et al., 2012; Gotham, 2014;
99 Highfield, et al., 2014; Peacock et al., 2014). When compared to their more affluent
100 neighbors, low-income households face greater rates of post-disaster displacement,
101 have more difficulty accessing and navigating the bureaucratic systems that
102 distribute assistance (Fothergill and Peek, 2004), and are more likely to face
103 discrimination in the aid distribution process (Aldrich, 2010). Furthermore, the
104 poverty, exclusion, and marginalization that socially vulnerable groups experience
105 before a disaster adapts rather than dissipates in the post-disaster context, at times
106 taking new forms that create additional barriers to accessing recovery services. For
107 example, Haubert Weil (2009) documented discriminatory housing practices in the
108 Gulf Coast region after Hurricane Katrina including the rejection of Latinos from
109 homeless shelters on the presumption that they were newcomers.

110 Participation in the recovery process provides an opportunity for local
111 communities to guide post-disaster decision-making. Participatory structures such

112 as deliberation and co-production build local capacity, facilitate consensus, and
113 enable participants to reach a shared sense of a common future (Campenella, 2006;
114 Murphy, 2007; Chandrasekhar, 2012; Chandrasekhar et al, 2014; Iuchi, 2015;
115 Vallance, 2015). However, these processes are shaped by pre-existing institutional
116 structures (Chandrasekhar, 2010) that perpetuate rather than disrupt pre-existing
117 social and spatial relations. Without deliberate efforts to facilitate inclusion, their
118 voice is easily diminished or excluded in post-disaster decision-making.

119 Public housing communities by definition are socially vulnerable. Public
120 housing in the United States is only available to households with incomes at 30% of
121 the Area Median Income (AMI) or less. Public housing communities often have
122 more residents of color and higher concentrations of poverty than the general
123 population within a given jurisdiction. Furthermore, public housing itself has little
124 political or public support at the local or federal levels. Since the early 1970s, there
125 has been a steady national trend of dismantling public housing communities.
126 Through federal programs such as HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhoods, local
127 public housing authorities (PHAs) have replaced public housing units with mixed
128 income developments or household-based subsidies such as the Housing Choice
129 Voucher. To date, more than 98,592 public housing units have been lost nationally³.
130 A growing number of rent burdened low income households are competing for a
131 shrinking number of housing subsidies, leaving a significant segment of low income
132 households trapped in substandard, overcrowded, and overpriced housing (Kamel,
133 2012).

134 Unlike other types of housing, particularly owner-occupied single-family
135 housing, there is no previously agreed upon course of action for permanent recovery
136 of public housing after disasters and consequently their fate is open to discussion by
137 different political agendas. Furthermore, local governments have little economic
138 incentives for rebuilding and sometimes face great political resistance against
139 replacing lost affordable housing units. As a result, PHAs have seized the
140 opportunity to demolish public housing after disasters using emergency disaster
141 funding (Graham, 2012). The most well-known example of this dynamic comes
142 from New Orleans where the displaced tenants of public housing developments and
143 other renters were significantly underrepresented in the city's and state's recovery
144 plans for mixed income replacement despite heavy damage to rental housing (Clark
145 & Rose, 2007) and the large proportion of renters in the pre-Katrina housing market.

146 Participation in local recovery debates provides the opportunity to shape
147 housing recovery outcomes. Disadvantaged communities are often more vulnerable

³ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-research-032017.html>

148 to disaster impacts not just because of the inherent lack of wealth, but because pre-
149 disaster decisions were made about features of risk and vulnerability in these
150 communities without the input or consent of residents (Dash, Peacock, & Morrow,
151 1997). Post-disaster, these populations continue to have little access to political
152 power and often face significant barriers to participating in public recovery
153 dialogues. The displacement of public housing residents outside their communities
154 further limits their ability to participate in open forums and enables exclusionary
155 decision making about recovery. Consequently the fate of public housing residents
156 is open to public debate and vulnerable to cooptation by local political agendas.

157 **Methods and Data Analysis Techniques**

158 This study began with the question, “Why has public housing not been rebuilt
159 in Galveston despite court orders and federal regulations requiring the one-for-one
160 replacement of all lost units?” Research spanning the three and a half years following
161 Hurricane Ike revealed that public housing recovery did not follow the same
162 trajectory as other housing typologies.⁴ As single family, owner-occupied homes,
163 rental units, and vacation homes were being rebuilt and the communities adjacent to
164 public housing sites were recovering, public housing languished. The social
165 vulnerability framework provided tools for understanding the increased risk that
166 public housing units and residents faced prior to the disaster event, but it was not
167 sufficient to explain this failure to rebuild.

168 The case study format provides “an in-depth exploration from multiple
169 perspectives of the complexity of a particular project policy, institution, programme
170 [sic] or system in a ‘real life’ context (Simons, 2009, p. 21).” Because it provides
171 what Yin describes as an average case (2009) where the size, scope, demographics,
172 and damage experienced by public housing communities were typical of the US
173 experience, Galveston presents an opportunity to elucidate the complexity and
174 unique challenges inherent to public housing recovery. While this case is situated in
175 the US context, it furthers our understanding of social vulnerability and the
176 experiences of marginalized communities within the recovery process.

177 This research utilizes two data collection techniques: in-depth interviews and
178 archival research. The interviews included a total of 18 individuals representing 21
179 organizations: representatives of three local government agencies, two local NGOs,
180 two local nonprofit agencies, four churches and charity organizations, two
181 businesses, two universities, and six local officials. Of the organizations interviewed,
182 only GHA was focused on public housing. Fourteen of the organizational
183 interviewees were non-Hispanic white. Four were African American including one

⁴ Sara Hamideh, the first author on this paper, conducted these interviews as part of her dissertation research. See Hamideh, 2015.

184 representative of a government agency, two reverends, and one local NGO director.
185 Eleven interviewees were men and seven were women. Most interviewees were over
186 the age of 40.

187 The interviews were all semi-structured, allowing us to gather similar
188 information from each respondent while also allowing new topics to develop (Berg,
189 2007; Weiss, 1994). Interviews were designed to take between 30 and 45 minutes
190 each, but some interviews lasted up to two hours. Interviews were conducted at the
191 place of the interviewees' choosing, often their workplace in Galveston. Interviews
192 were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author wrote detailed
193 fieldnotes and uploaded these and the transcripts to Atlas.ti software which was used
194 for qualitative analysis.

195 We collected and reviewed 174 documents including Galveston long-
196 term recovery plan, GHA public housing rebuilding plans and annual reports, GHA
197 press releases, lawsuits, legal complaints, and court orders related to public housing,
198 newspaper and other forms of media reporting about public housing in Galveston,
199 professional reports commissioned by Galveston City Council about public housing,
200 blog posts, video recordings of city council meetings, and video recordings of GHA
201 press conferences. City Council and GHA board meetings were of particular
202 importance to our study because they offered the only formal opportunities for
203 former residents to participate in the debates. We reviewed all of the 205 city council
204 meeting minutes posted on City of Galveston official website that cover council
205 meetings between September 2008 and December 2014 and found 24 meetings
206 during which public housing rebuilding schemes were discussed or issues were
207 raised with respect to public housing. We also reviewed all of the 83 GHA Board
208 meeting minutes between January 2010 and December 2014 posted on the GHA
209 official website and found 23 meetings during which public housing rebuilding
210 schemes were discussed or issues were raised with respect to public housing. We
211 uploaded these documents and recordings to the Atlas.ti software for qualitative
212 analysis.

213 We coded and recoded the data in three stages (Saldaña, 2009). First, we
214 performed open coding of basic themes only. Then, we examined relationships
215 between basic themes, and performed axial coding to connect similar themes
216 together under larger concepts. Finally, after identifying core concepts from axial
217 coding, we started selective coding of the data in relationship to these larger ideas.
218 Working through the data, we generated theoretical memos that highlighted key
219 issues and their connections in the data. Themes related to the arguments against
220 rebuilding public housing and arguments for replacing it with mixed-income,
221 inclusion and participation of former residents, recovery visions and agendas that
222 involved public housing, and descriptions of former residents and public housing in

223 the debates provide the basis for the results discussed below. Our selective coding
224 focused on understanding whether former residents of public housing were
225 participating in the debates about rebuilding their homes and how social
226 vulnerability limited their participation.

227

228 **Housing affordability in Galveston**

229 In the past few decades, Galveston's port activities have declined while beach-
230 related and historical tourism has become the Island's fastest growing industry
231 (Angelou Economics, 2008; Gulf & South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation, 2010).
232 Service jobs are essential for the operation of Galveston's tourism industry and bring
233 a significant amount of revenue to the city, however, they are typically low-skill,
234 low wage work. According to Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics
235 (LEHD) data, 14.7% of the 34,480 jobs in Galveston in 2008 were in the
236 accommodation and food services industries which serve the tourism economy.
237 From all the jobs in the City, 27% earned employees \$1250 or less a month. Also,
238 on a higher estimate, Angelou Economics reported that Galveston's tourism industry
239 provided approximately 9,300 or more than 30% of all jobs in the city prior to Ike.
240 On average, annual earning of employees in Galveston's tourism sector was only
241 \$20,610 (Angelou Economics, 2008⁵).

242 The city did little prior to Ike to address the housing needs of low-wage
243 earners. During the three-year period before the storm, almost 46% of the renter
244 households in Galveston were paying more than 30% of their household income for
245 housing, a threshold used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development
246 (HUD) to indicate rent burden. More specifically, 90% of the low income⁶ renters
247 and 76% of low income homeowners in Galveston spent more than 30% of their
248 income on housing expenses prior to Hurricane Ike (2007 American Community
249 Survey 3-Year Estimates). One resident described housing affordability on the
250 Island before Ike this way:

251 *They [are] only paying you minimum wage for all that, and that's not enough*
252 *money to survive on, on this island. For people like me, especially with four*
253 *kids, that's not gonna work. You can't survive off of that. That's gonna pay a*
254 *light bill. If you got a car that's your gas and lights, and you might not even*
255 *have enough gas to get to work for the whole week. (As cited in Nolen et al.,*
256 *2014)*

5 Labor and wage calculations were produced using software created by the Minnesota IMPLAN Group (Angelou Economics, 2008).

⁶ Annual household income less than 20000

257 Since the hurricane of 1900, a 10-mile long, 17' high seawall has largely
258 protected residential structures in Galveston during storms. It has also shaped
259 development on the Island, separating year-round and working class neighborhoods
260 from seasonal and affluent neighborhoods. The vast majority of Galveston's year-
261 round residential housing is located behind the seawall in the city's urban core,
262 where housing affordability is greater. The median value of owner occupied housing
263 in the urban core of the city is \$122,000, whereas in the Island vacation areas, the
264 median home price for single family homes is \$178,000 (2005-2009 ACS, census
265 track data). Increasing market demands for vacation housing have pushed
266 development and investment outside the seawall toward the east and west ends of
267 the Island. In these areas, 55% of the housing is vacant and over 72% of this vacant
268 housing is for seasonal or vacation use. In the urban core, 24.9% of the units are
269 vacant and only 16.8% of those vacancies are due to seasonal or vacation use.
270 Despite the increasing disinvestment in the urban core neighborhoods, they have
271 remained a stable and affordable option for the city's low income residents.

272 Both housing quality and housing affordability were major issues on the
273 Island prior to Ike and public housing filled a significant gap in the housing market.
274 In 2000, 69.2% of the renters in Galveston were very low-, low- or moderate-
275 income⁷ (GHA, 2008). GHA operated 990 public housing units and 1,213 Section 8
276 units. Most individuals living in public housing have one or more characteristic of
277 social vulnerability. From the 850 families that were living in GHA's public housing
278 units, 82% were extremely low income, 42% had a disability, 86% had children,
279 39% were elderly, and 67% were African American, as Table 1 shows. GHA had a
280 waiting list almost equal to its total number of existing units and vouchers. As Table
281 2 shows, the year before Ike, a total of 852 families were on the waiting list for public
282 housing alone, where 93% were extremely low income and 57% were African-
283 American. An additional 824 families were on the Section 8 waiting list with 73%
284 identified as "extremely low income" and 76% as African-American (GHA, 2008).

285

286 [Table 1 about here]

287 [Table 2 about here]

288

289 Despite the Island's substantial affordable housing needs, local leaders had
290 been attempting to demolish existing public housing since 1980s (Lord, 2011). In
291 2005, GHA razed Old Palm Terrace, a 228-unit public housing development, and

⁷ Extreme need was determined based on percent of the very low income population that paid more than 30% of income for rent. More than 30% of the very low income population were paying more than 30% of income for rent

292 replaced it with The Oaks, a new subdivision with 28 subsidized single-family
293 homes and 10 duplexes. GHA's 2008 5-year plan set a goal to increase rental
294 vouchers, while decreasing the agency's portfolio of public housing units. GHA
295 planned to apply to HUD to receive Replacement Housing Factor funding to
296 demolish and replace units in one of the older complexes, Palm Terrace. Once HUD
297 funding became available, GHA intended to submit HOPE VI applications for both
298 Oleander Homes and Palm Terrace Annex to redevelop those sites as mixed-income
299 developments (GHA, 2008). These projects would have further reduced the city's
300 stock of physical public housing units.

301

302 **Public housing and displacement after Ike**

303 GHA owned 990 public housing units prior to Ike. Out of those units, 528 apartments
304 suffered substantial damages from the Hurricane, resulting in the immediate
305 displacement of 578 households (GHA, 2011). Approximately four months after the
306 storm, the GHA board decided to raze two large public housing developments
307 immediately, Oleander Homes and Palm Terrace that made up more than half of
308 their multifamily units. In addition, the Board proposed the renovation of Cedar
309 Terrace and Magnolia Homes (GHA, 2009) or the rest of multifamily public housing
310 units in Galveston. Referring to a HUD website guideline⁸ regarding accidental
311 losses and without consulting with the residents, GHA was going to speed up the
312 demolition⁹ which would have eliminated all of the 569 multifamily units in the City
313 without providing permanent replacement housing (Lone Star Legal Aid v.
314 Galveston Housing Authority, 2013). In response, an advocacy group, Lone Star
315 Legal Aid (LSLA) filed a complaint with HUD representing displaced residents in
316 an effort to stop the proposed demolition (Lone Star Legal Aid v. Galveston Housing
317 Authority, 2009). LSLA requested that GHA create a plan to that protect the rights
318 of displaced residents during the demolition and rebuilding process (Lone Star Legal
319 Aid v. Galveston Housing Authority, 2009). LSLA and GHA entered into a
320 Settlement Agreement with Replacement Plan (also referred to as the Conciliation
321 Agreement) in March of 2009 (Galveston Housing Authority v. Lone Star Legal Aid,
322 2009). Under this agreement, GHA committed to rebuild all 569 demolished public
323 housing units, to provide displaced residents with housing vouchers until rebuilding
324 was complete, and to guarantee the right of residents to return to the rebuilt units
325 (LSLA and GHA, 2009b).

326 Even though displaced public housing residents were eligible for temporary
327 vouchers from the Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP), many families

⁸ HUD, Demolition for an Accidental Loss,
https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/centers/sac/demo_dispo

⁹ by March 23, 2009

328 were not able to find an affordable unit where they could use the DHAP subsidy
329 (Wilder, 2008; Vinogradsky, 2009). Because the displaced population was
330 disproportionately minority, many households also faced additional burdens created
331 by unfair housing practices and enduring racial discrimination in the local housing
332 market. Demolition of these developments intensified the pre-storm shortage of
333 affordable low income rental housing in Galveston (Oakley & Ruel, 2010).
334 According to GHA’s 2010-2014 5 year plan, at the time the plan was submitted
335 2,359 households were on the GHA waiting list for housing assistance (as cited in
336 LSLA v. GHA, 2013).

337 The loss of public housing in Galveston after Ike decreased the amount of
338 affordable housing on the Island; displaced low income residents, especially people
339 of color; and created disparate outcomes between racial groups. The Kirwan Institute
340 issued a report in December 2011 detailing the “disparities in population losses”
341 between white and African-American residents following the Hurricane. According
342 to that report, the city of Galveston lost 16.5% of its population between 2000 and
343 2010 with 11.4% loss of White population compared to the 36.7% loss in the African
344 American community (Reece et al., 2011). We compared the pre-Ike racial-ethnic
345 composition from 2007 (ACS 3-year) to 2010 to understand how pre-Ike population
346 trend was exacerbated by the Hurricane. Table 3 presents the absolute and relative
347 changes in the population of each category along with its aggregate margin of error
348 (margin of error for the difference).¹⁰ The relative change in non-Hispanic Black
349 population is almost twice the non-Hispanic white population during the three years
350 following Ike.

351 [Table 3 about here]

352

353 Three years after Ike, 217 of the 578 displaced households were still active in
354 the DHAP program. While some of the displaced residents were able to use those
355 temporary vouchers or other resources to find housing on the Island (Oakley & Ruel,
356 2010), a sizeable portion were forced to move outside Galveston or were unable to
357 find a unit where they could use the temporary DHAP subsidy (Vinogradsky, 2009).
358 Moreover, DHAP assistance cannot provide permanent housing for displaced
359 families. Demolition of public housing complexes created a major obstacle against
360 return and recovery of former residents and other low income renters.

361

¹⁰ We used 2007 (ACS 3-year) to 2010

362 **The struggle over rebuilding**

363 The ability of local officials to rebuild public housing and other low to moderate
364 income housing depends on federal recovery funding, particularly CDBG allocations
365 by Congress. However, rebuilding also requires support from local officials, which
366 can be a significant hurdle for public housing. The Action Plans that Texas
367 Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) had developed for
368 spending CDBG recovery funds gave Councils of Governments (COGs) and local
369 jurisdictions significant control over prioritizing the needs for spending (TDHCA,
370 2009a,b) and lacked state oversight to ensure local jurisdictions will rebuild
371 affordable and government assisted housing lost in Hurricane Ike (TDHCA, 2009b).
372 Consequently, two housing advocacy groups, the Texas Low-Income Housing
373 Information Service (TLIHIS) and Texas Appleseed, filed multiple complaints with
374 HUD in 2009 and 2010 raising concerns about inability of the State to affirmatively
375 further fair housing in its use of disaster recovery funds and asking HUD to require
376 revisions of recovery plans in accordance with Fair Housing requirements (TLIHIS
377 vs. State of Texas, 2009; Texas Appleseed and TLIHIS vs. State of Texas, 2009).
378 Accepting these concerns, HUD facilitated a conciliation agreement between
379 advocates and the State requiring Texas to set money aside from the CDBG recovery
380 funds for TDHCA’s affordable housing programs including public housing. More
381 specifically, the agreement stated that “no less than \$50 million from the TDHCA’s
382 affordable housing funds shall be available for use in the city of Galveston for the
383 one for one replacement of all family and elderly public housing units destroyed by
384 Ike.” (Texas Appleseed and TLIHIS vs. State of Texas, 2010, p16).

385 Even though state and federal agencies eventually committed funding and
386 legal commitment to rebuilding, GHA’s demolition decision preceded any local
387 plans for rebuilding. Initially board members said they hoped to rebuild everything
388 in two years. Later they committed to a time frame of no more than five years (Evans,
389 2009). In the years following the demolition, the GHA produced multiple plans for
390 rebuilding. Each faced persistent and multifaceted local opposition. Each successive
391 plan reduced the number of public housing units to be rebuilt on the original sites
392 and increased the number of vouchers and scattered site units (See table 4). With
393 each plan, the opportunities for displaced housing residents to return to their original
394 homes diminished. For example, GHA’s 2009 plan proposed replacing 569 public
395 housing units with 340 apartments, townhomes and duplexes on the four public
396 housing sites, with another 229 units scattered throughout the city. In 2011, GHA’s
397 *Scattered Sites Initiative* increased number of scattered site units to 247 to be located
398 across Galveston Island in neighborhoods that were not impacted by Hurricane Ike
399 (GHA, 2011a,b).

400 GHA's 2012 plan, *Mixed Income Communities Initiative*, limited the
401 construction of new public housing units at the original sites to mixed income
402 developments where 51 percent of the units must be public housing and 49 percent
403 market rate. Consistent with both the federal HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhood
404 programs, this approach endeavored to use GHA's rebuilding efforts to revitalize
405 Galveston's low income neighborhoods and stimulate private investment. Despite
406 persistent local opposition to rebuilding any form of government assisted housing,
407 this last plan ultimately gained support from local authorities. In 2014 construction
408 of the first mixed income development at the Cedar Terrace site began.

409

410 [Table 4 about here]

411 The inability to reach an agreement for a rebuilding plan not only extended the
412 waiting time and uncertainty of return for displaced residents of the demolished
413 units, it also magnified the unmet housing needs of low income Galvestonians. By
414 2011 at least 186 displaced households were still waiting to return to Galveston, and
415 1138 new households were on the public housing waiting list (GHA, 2011).
416 Nonetheless, debates about the plans largely disregarded the magnitude and
417 legitimacy of low income housing needs.

418

419 **Who speaks for public housing?**

420 Involvement in post-Ike recovery planning was shaped by long standing race- and
421 class-based differences among Galvestonians. One local advocate for low income
422 families described the historical exclusion that people of color had experienced in
423 Galveston and its effect on how they viewed post-disaster planning:

424 *This is what people of color in Galveston, African American people, have been*
425 *feeling for years. They have been beat down for so long, that they don't believe*
426 *anything good is going to happen... The African American population were*
427 *skeptical because they were like they never have done that and it ain't going*
428 *to happen, and it didn't.*

429 When low income Galvestonians, and in particular public housing residents, were
430 given a chance to participate in decision-making, the outcomes were different. For
431 example, GHA's initial commitment to rebuild every unit destroyed by Ike at its
432 original location was based on costs, access to jobs and services, and most
433 importantly, input from displaced residents (Oakley, Ruel, & Reid, 2010). In sharp
434 contrast to the Galveston elite and even the general public on the Island, public
435 housing residents spoke on behalf of the preservation of their homes.

436 Worried about the long wait for public housing, local and state housing
437 advocates raised the issue frequently in city council meetings and in interviews with
438 local newspapers. For instance, David Miller, president of the National Association
439 for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Galveston, described
440 talking to residents every day who wanted to return to the Island but could not
441 because affordable housing was not available (abcNews, 2012, August 28). Phillips
442 who led Galveston County Coalition for Justice said in a GHA workshop in 2010
443 *“We didn’t need a court to tell us we need to rebuild our public housing ... We don’t*
444 *want to be like New Orleans and wait five years for our new homes but we haven’t*
445 *hit a nail yet”* (White, 2010). In post-disaster surveys conducted by GHA, public
446 housing residents expressed a strong desire to return home.

447 Two months after Ike, local officials initiated a community-based planning
448 process by forming the Galveston Community Recovery Committee (GCRC) with
449 300 members. The goals of this large participatory initiative were to unify recovery
450 efforts, achieve consensus on a recovery vision, and develop a long-term recovery
451 plan. GCRC was intended to be inclusive and open, however, public housing tenants
452 had a negligible presence in the committee meetings and many of the approximately
453 20 African-American participants had to divide their time between the Northside
454 Galveston Taskforce, a minority advocacy group and GCRC (Lord, 2011). Not
455 surprisingly, public housing remained marginal to GCRC concerns and discussions,
456 and the committee’s Long Term Recovery Plan failed to address either public
457 housing or affordable housing issues.

458 **Social vulnerability and barriers to participation**

459 This study began by asking why the demolished public housing units in Galveston
460 had not been replaced fully almost a decade after Ike. We were particularly interested
461 in how the conditions of social vulnerability before the storm contributed to unequal
462 housing outcomes during recovery. We found that social vulnerability limited
463 participation through three distinct mechanisms: the physical displacement of public
464 housing residents, the stigmatization of public housing, and the reduction of
465 residents to housing units in the debates.

466 Out of sight, out of mind

467 The limited presence of former residents in the local public housing debates partially
468 explains the failure to rebuild public housing. Residents of public housing,
469 disproportionately African-American and low income, had very limited political
470 influence in the debates. There was a sense that Galveston’s elite, sometimes referred
471 to as Born on the Island (BOI) and from wealthier local families, are the only group
472 who can influence decisions and pursuing their interests in recovery. Although BOI
473 referred to wealthy locals in the public vernacular, in reality many public housing

474 residents were BOI as well, with connections to the Island that went back
475 generations.

476 Physical displacement outside the Island significantly limited the ability of
477 displaced residents to participate in the public housing debates. One of the local
478 reverends from a church on the North Side, where all four public housing
479 developments were located, described for us the absence of displaced residents in
480 debates:

481 *My neighborhood are all gone... And those who are gone can't come back*
482 *because there is no transportation ... the ones that are going to be affected*
483 *the most, are the ones that [can't come back]... They never went back to get*
484 *them. ... You're stuck. You grab whatever you can take on that bus. ... If a*
485 *percentage of people who are actually for it [rebuilding public housing], are*
486 *not here, who else is going to be back? ... Because everybody else is against*
487 *it. So if you have more against, and they are the ones who are present ... [they]*
488 *are the majority ... and in a democratic [system] who's going to win that? The*
489 *majority. Because you've got the voting power, you've got everything.*

490 After reviewing the discussions during City Council and GHA meetings when
491 public housing issues were discussed, we found only one instance of a former
492 resident of the demolished units (self-identified) speaking about replacement of lost
493 units. As shown in Table 5, during the City Council meetings about public housing
494 49 people spoke in support of rebuilding either public housing units or in support of
495 the mixed income scheme. Majority of those people were residents of Galveston that
496 lived in private housing or in other forms of government assisted housing on the
497 island such as the elderly housing developments owned by GHA. However, none of
498 those supporters identified as a former resident. From the 18 people that spoke in
499 support of public housing during GHA meetings or press conferences, seven were
500 Galveston residents and two among them were former resident of the demolished
501 developments who expressed their need for returning home.

502

503 [Table 5 about here]

504

505 When GHA decided to demolish their public housing developments, housing
506 advocates such as LSLA and TLIHIS became involved. They worked to preserve
507 the rights and pursue the interest of tenants through legal actions such as the
508 Conciliation Agreement. That settlement also included an agreement from GHA to
509 “meet and consult with the displaced tenants’ representative on at least a quarterly
510 basis regarding the planning and implementation of the demolition and replacement”

511 (National Housing Law Project, 2009). Nevertheless, advocates were not always
512 present or included in local deliberations where some Galveston residents took
513 strong stands against rebuilding or the construction of mixed income developments
514 in lieu of public housing. In a strong anti-public housing environment, even victories
515 of the advocates were difficult to enforce without local political support. For
516 example, GHA’s 2012 rebuilding plan made a dramatic departure away from the
517 terms of the Conciliation Agreement. Although the original agreement with HUD
518 was between GHA and LSLA, the new terms contained in GHA’s 2012 plan were
519 not negotiated with LSLA and had not been approved by LSLA (LSLA v. GHA,
520 2013). As a result, even strong advocacy on the behalf of residents was not enough
521 to fill the void created by the absence of the residents themselves.

522

523 Using stigma to win: move the weak out and let the strong move in

524 The presence of stigma related to public housing, even post disaster, is well-
525 established. After Katrina, Baton Rouge area GOP Congressman Richard Baker
526 exulted to the New Orleans Times-Picayune, “We finally cleaned up public housing
527 in New Orleans... We couldn’t do it, but God did” (Hirsch & Levert, 2009, p. 212).
528 This stigma is often race and class-based, but also reflects a larger uneasiness with
529 public housing itself, which has always been marginal within the provisions of the
530 US welfare state (Hackworth, 2006).

531 Even though public housing residents suffered disaster losses, they were often
532 not considered equally deserving of the right to return home as other Galvestonians.
533 Opponents of rebuilding used the negative perceptions of public housing to put their
534 return against successful recovery for the Island. Several interviewees and local
535 reporters connected opposition to rebuilding public housing to racism. Based on the
536 high percentage of people of color in GHA’s public housing developments and on
537 the waiting list, they described GHA’s failure to replace all demolished units as a
538 continuation of racial exclusion and discrimination. According to the former chair
539 of a local philanthropic organization,

540 *... [R]ight after the storm, some people thought that "this is great, we got rid*
541 *of all this blighted ugly places, let's just not bring it back. And that has*
542 *degenerated into a racist classist conversation that is very unpleasant.*

543 Petitions and campaigns for blocking GHA rebuilding plans with comments
544 like the followings demonstrate that racial and class-based stigmas played a role in
545 objecting to public housing recovery.

546 *“The island is a tourist destination and the public housing unfortunately was*
547 *linked with crime, prostitution, drugs, vagrancy, public drunkenness and*

548 *loitering in city streets. People felt unsafe especially at night in some areas...*
549 *Galveston was a dump before Ike and will be a dump after Ike if it is not cleaned*
550 *up and the people removed that are sucking the life out of the island.”* (As cited
551 in TLIHIS and Texas Appleseed v. State of Texas, 2009).

552 One of the leading local voices against rebuilding described the return of
553 public housing residents in this way, *“this is lose-lose. These people are low income*
554 *minorities getting here, they have a bad life. It’s bad for all of us. Because they don’t*
555 *do well they get into crime and things like that.”* Such stigmas were perceived by
556 displaced residents as tools for exclusion. A former resident of Cedar Terrace
557 described active opposition against rebuilding as a method of excluding low income
558 people from the future of the Island: *“They want the people who’ve lived here the*
559 *majority of their lives to stay out. They want the tourists to come back. Move the*
560 *weak out and let the strong move in* (As cited in Wilder, 2008).”

561 Disaster victims reduced to housing units

562 Displaced and stigmatized public housing residents had little standing in many of
563 the heated arguments both for and against rebuilding. These arguments tended to
564 focus on the benefits or losses that Galveston as a whole would experience from
565 replacing public housing units; whereas benefits and losses to the displaced residents
566 were often absent from the debates. This subtle distinction is important. In this
567 discourse, displaced residents were reduced to housing units. The debate over
568 rebuilding became a disagreement over the number and type of units to be
569 constructed rather than returning residents to their homes. The people themselves,
570 already marginalized because of their poverty, race, and housing tenure before Ike,
571 were further dehumanized and marginalized after the disaster in the face of broader
572 concerns over the strength of the local housing market and the economic well-being
573 of the city.

574 Much of the debates over rebuilding public housing was concerned with its
575 benefits to housing market in Galveston instead of displaced residents. One of the
576 arguments used against proposals to rebuild subsidized housing was that the high
577 percentage of vacant properties before the storm meant that there was no demand for
578 new affordable housing units in Galveston. Opponents suggested that *“The agency*
579 *[GHA] should consider whether it’s appropriate to rebuild any subsidized housing*
580 *on an island with so much vacant property* (TLIHIS and Texas Appleseed v. State
581 of Texas, 2009).” While vacancy rate was approximately 30% before Hurricane
582 Ike¹¹, it was noted by housing advocates and local planners that such high vacancy
583 did not necessarily reflect oversupply of habitable and available rental properties. A

¹¹ According to 2007 3-year ACS residential vacancy was estimated at 28.9% with a margin of error of 2.4%.

584 sizeable proportion of vacant properties were either not well-maintained or were
585 only available for occasional rent in the tourist seasonal rental market.

586 One common perspective against rebuilding expressed concern with the well-
587 being of Galveston’s private multifamily rental housing market and argued that
588 because multifamily landlords and developers suffered losses from Ike they could
589 not compete in price and quality with mixed income developments funded by tax
590 dollars. These free market proponents argued that it should be private developers
591 creating affordable housing in Galveston, not public entities such as the GHA
592 (Oakley & Ruel, 2010). But housing market in Galveston was expanding high end
593 vacation home developments, and clearly failed or were not interested in providing
594 affordable housing for both middle income and lower income households.

595 One of the long-standing proposals from the removal campaign was giving
596 displaced residents vouchers so they can decide whether to live in Galveston
597 __where opponents claimed job opportunities are scarce __or elsewhere with more
598 job opportunities and lower risk of hurricanes. According to Lewis Rosen, who ran
599 for Mayor in 2012 promising to block rebuilding plans, *"The Housing Authority
600 should not be in the business of building homes, especially where we don't have job
601 opportunities for people. We need to provide housing for people who have the
602 opportunity to move where the jobs are. And we can do that through vouchers."* (As
603 cited in Pitman, 2012). However, without quality affordable housing in Galveston
604 or nearby, vouchers would have failed at providing meaningful choice for displaced
605 residents, especially those employed in low wage tourism jobs on the Island (Smith,
606 2012).

607 Public housing rebuilding plans were often evaluated based on goals other
608 than helping displaced residents. When GHA changed their rebuilding plan in
609 2011—increasing the number of market rate and scattered site units and reducing
610 the number of public housing units at the original sites—the mayor at the time was
611 leading a push to attract middle income professionals and revitalize the city. He
612 argued that replacing public housing with mixed income developments would help
613 both the city and low income residents, *"[Hurricane Ike] gave the city a rare
614 opportunity to start fresh by bulldozing projects that ... shouldn't have been around
615 as long as they were (Pitman, 2012)."* Some business interests also saw mixed
616 income developments in the downtown area as an opportunity to attract more tourists
617 to Historic Downtown and facilitate economic development. A downtown-seaport
618 partnership expressed interest in collaborating with GHA to redevelop Magnolia
619 Homes as part of a larger push to improve downtown *"by putting into the mix
620 opening up the streets so it's not a fortress and is walkable and livable (White,
621 2010)."*

622 To the extent that the interests of public housing residents were present in this
623 debate, it was focused on ways that redevelopment might provide them with a
624 different, and therefore better future. Supporters argued that these communities
625 would provide low income residents with new opportunities to climb out of poverty.
626 They frequently referenced successful mixed income developments in places like
627 Atlanta and New Orleans, but made little mention of the small percentages of public
628 housing residents that returned after construction (Graham, 2012). With the debate
629 focused on new construction, advocates for public housing residents were left with
630 the reality of further delays before displaced residents would return to Galveston. As
631 one advocate stated, *“I’ll bet you a nickel that 24 months from today there will not
632 be a shovel turned (As cited in Smith, 2012).”*

633 Interests of displaced residents were of secondary importance and
634 misrepresented in the local public housing debates. The lack of meaningful
635 participation from former residents allowed mixed income proponents to present
636 their plan as the only solution that can benefit the poor. The removal campaign often
637 argued against bringing displaced residents back to hazard-prone and low
638 opportunity neighborhoods of Galveston. In a petition against rebuilding public
639 housing on the Island signed by more than 2000 people, some people expressed
640 concerns related to flood risk: *“The Island is in a flood zone and is not an
641 appropriate place for public housing as everyone has seen after Hurricane Ike.
642 Building structures on the island is more costly because of hurricane building
643 standards and insurance is much more costly. Evacuating low income residents is
644 costly and dangerous to everyone involved.”*(As cited in Stanton, 2009). The
645 removal policy agenda often ignored possibility of using effective building and
646 design strategies that can mitigate risk of hazards particularly hurricanes to residents
647 of coastal areas, high or low income. In addition, the same group rarely discussed
648 implications of high risk of hurricanes on the Island for bringing back private
649 homeowners or other recovery projects in Galveston.

650

651 **Conclusion: vulnerable not only to disasters but also to local politics aimed at**
652 **eliminating affordable housing**

653 Galveston provided a revealing case to understand lack of representation for
654 vulnerable population in recovery because a large proportion of the poor were
655 physically displaced outside the barrier island. Our study shows that being
656 vulnerable means more than living in hazardous areas and having limited access to
657 recovery resources. It also implies less control and representation in decisions about
658 one’s recovery. Hence making recovery of those people a political contest as what
659 is in the best interest of the city rather than what is in the best interest of residents.

660 Consequently, displaced residents of public housing are not seen as disaster victims
661 like everyone else, but as the government assisted units they lived in. Rebuilding
662 that unit is the issue of discussion rather than supporting displaced residents to
663 recover.

664 Without adequate affordable housing in Galveston, public housing residents
665 were forced to move away from established roots and out of the city of Galveston.
666 The burden of GHA's conduct fell disproportionately on people of color and on
667 families with children (LSLA v. GHA, 2013). The effects of this population decline
668 is evident in local community centers in African-American neighborhoods. Burkley,
669 the pastor of Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church, an African-American
670 congregation near the former public housing sites and many Ike-damaged abandoned
671 rental homes described this loss as a race and class issue:

672 *"I'm suffering big time. Members that I had were all gone. We have a smaller*
673 *number of members at church. You just can't make the determination and say we're*
674 *not going to let this group of people come back. Because they are the worst set of*
675 *folks."*

676 Although housing advocates were vocal against both removal of public
677 housing and mixed income schemes, they had little influence in local recovery
678 debates. In the local representation vacuum from displaced residents as the main
679 stakeholders of public housing debates, several agendas filled the void by proposing
680 plans and claiming to be pursuing the best for those residents and the city. Our
681 analysis shows how lack of representation and stigmas attached to this vulnerable
682 population provided an opportunity to pursue different plans without considering
683 their impacts on displaced residents.

684 This study highlights the importance of understanding social vulnerability as
685 a process. One of the significant implications of our findings is the dynamic features
686 of vulnerability. While static factors like poverty can limit a household's resources
687 for recovery, dynamic processes of social marginalization and exclusion after
688 disasters limit the voice of socially vulnerable groups in recovery decisions. Socially
689 vulnerable populations face significant barriers in participating in post-disaster
690 discourse and as a result, face even greater barriers to housing recovery. This study
691 demonstrated that while it is important that all groups have access to and can
692 influence recovery decisions, it is even more important to secure that access and
693 influence for groups that are targeted for elimination through deliberate policies.
694 Considering the growing risk of disasters in many parts of the US, protecting
695 residents of affordable housing from both the disasters and discriminatory processes
696 that follow is crucial.

697

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960 *Table 1 Families in the GHA Public Housing Units, 2008*

	# of families	% of total families
Total # of families	852	
Extremely low income (<=30% AMI)	694	82%
Very low income (>30% but <=50% AMI)	128	15%
Low income (>50% but <80% AMI)	23	3%
Families with children	727	86%
Elderly families	325	39%
Families with Disabilities	359	42%
Race/ethnicity		
1. White	274	32%
2. Black	573	67%
3. Native American	9	1%
4. American Asian	0	0%

Source: GHA 5 year Plan for FFU 2008 -2012 (GHA FFY 2009 – 2013)

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963 *Table 2 Families on the Public Housing and the Section 8 Tenant-based Assistance Waiting List,*
964 *2008*

	Public Housing		Section 8	
	# of families	% of total families	# of families	% of total families
Waiting list total	852		824	
Extremely low income (<=30% AMI)	790	93%	598	73%
Very low income (>30% but <=50% AMI)	56	7%	182	22%
Low income (>50% but <80% AMI)	5	.6%	361	4%
Families with children	395	46%	324	40%
Elderly families*	17	2%	1	.2%
Families with Disabilities	114	13.38%	15	2%
Race/ethnicity				
1. White	331	39%	183	22%
2. Black	487	57%	629	76%
3. Native American	12	1.4%	4	.5%
4. American Asian	1	0.1%	1	.1%

Sources: GHA 5 year Plan for FFU 2008 -2012 (GHA FFY 2009 – 2013)

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967 *Table 3 Change in population composition after Hurricane Ike*

	Absolute change ACS 2007-ACS 2010	MOE	% change ACS 2007-ACS 2010
Total	-4961	±2568	-9.2%
Hispanic	631	±2433	4.2%
Not-Hispanic White	-2967	±2146	-11.8%
Not-Hispanic Black	-2367	±1723	-22.0%
Not-Hispanic other	-258	±917	-8.7%

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Table 4 GHA replacement plans

GHA Plan year	New units	On the same footprints	Scatter-site
2009	1,500		
2009	569	390	179
2009	569	340	229
2011			247
2011 mixed income	569	51% public /49% market	
2012 mixed income	141	51% public /49% market	288 in Galveston; 100 Off the Island

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Table 5 people speaking in support of rebuilding public housing, 2008-2014

Public Meetings	Total # people speaking	# Galveston residents	# former public housing residents	# organizations rep. or officials
Galveston City Council	49	31	0	18
Galveston Housing Authority	18	7	2	9

