

Displaced Once Again: Honduran Migrant Children in the Path of Katrina

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of Honduran migrant children in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Some had migrated to this city after Hurricane Mitch devastated their already poverty-stricken country in 1998, but many of them were forced to relocate again after Katrina. Many others have only recently arrived in New Orleans to join relatives attracted by the construction boom that followed the disaster. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Honduras and New Orleans, I examine the contribution of these young migrants to their families' survival strategies, including their participation in post-disaster reconstruction work. Findings counter dominant frameworks that pathologize the experience of disaster survivors, assuming their responses to be maladaptive, and conceptualize children as passive, dependent victims. Instead, I argue for a holistic approach that places young displacees in the broader context of the cultural and socioeconomic factors that prefigured the catastrophe and examines children's resilience, not just their vulnerability.

Keywords: children, disasters, child migrants, child labor, Hurricane Katrina, children's resilience, Honduras, Central America,

Introduction

Of course we need children!!

Adults need children in their lives to listen to and care for, to keep their imagination fresh and their hearts young and to make the future a reality for which they are willing to work.

—Margaret Mead

Pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans was home to the largest enclave of Hondurans in the United States—indeed, more Hondurans lived in New Orleans before the disaster than in any other community outside of their home country in Central America. Some had arrived in the 1950s, fleeing violence and political instability, and established family networks that generated, and sustained, subsequent migratory flows between both regions. Others migrated to the city after Hurricane Mitch devastated their already poverty-stricken country in 1998, but were forced to relocate again after Katrina. Many others, both children and adults, have only recently arrived in New Orleans, attracted by the construction boom that followed the disaster. The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Honduran community as a whole has been considerable, as was indeed the case for New Orleanians of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnographic fieldwork in Honduras and New Orleans reveals that, while the impact of Katrina has been highly stressful for some Honduran child migrants, others perceive post-disaster reconstruction efforts as opportunities for positive change. Some young people are even making significant contributions to their families' post-disaster survival—often through their participation in waged labor. Their reasons for migrating to New Orleans are complex, linked to the economic status of the family, and reflective of children's own ambitions and aspirations. The migrants are also influenced by cultural expectations about the kinds of work that are acceptable for children at different ages, and about children's participation in economic activities. These complexities are better understood from a holistic perspective that places children's experiences in the broader context of the cultural and socioeconomic factors that prefigured the disaster and examines their resilience in times of crisis, not just their vulnerability. The systemic circumstances that frame the situation of Honduran migrant children in post-disaster New Orleans, as well as their own expectations, opportunities and challenges, constitute the central themes of this paper.

I begin my analysis by briefly discussing some theoretical and methodological issues related to the study of children in disasters, and to child migration. I then examine the subsequent waves of displacement experienced by Honduran migrant children in New Orleans, from the early Diaspora, to the impact of Hurricane Mitch, to the recent post-Katrina situation. The experiences of the various generations of Honduran child migrants in New Orleans are discussed next. Finally, I present some concluding remarks on the need to acknowledge the roles and contributions of children as active agents in situations of disaster, including their involvement in processes of migration and labor.

Children and Disasters

Current disaster scholarship is guided by the understanding that, while the most immediate causes of disasters such as Hurricanes Mitch in Central America and Katrina in the U.S. Gulf Coast are natural phenomena, their consequences are not. Rather, their impact is the result of human agency framed by social conditions such as poverty, inequality, and environmentally unsound practices. This perspective has shifted the focus away from the event and its immediate impact towards the “ongoing societal and [hu]man-environment relations that prefigure [disasters]” (Hewitt 1983, 24-27). Integral to this approach is the concept of vulnerability, understood as “the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” (Blaikie et al. 1994, 9). In other words, disaster vulnerability—or resilience—is socially produced, and “associated with underlying social, economic, territorial and political processes operating in specific locales” (Oliver-Smith 2005, 1).

The link between ethnicity and disaster vulnerability has been discussed in the social science literature, with available data suggesting that marginalized ethnic minorities tend to be impacted disproportionately by disasters (Bolin 1982; Bolin and Bolton 1983; Peacock and Bates 1982; Peacock, Killian, and Bates 1987; see also Fothergill, Maestas, and Darlington 1999 for a review of the literature on race, ethnicity, and disasters in the U.S.). They may have limited access to necessary resources, or be segregated into structurally vulnerable neighborhoods where inadequate and poor quality housing may be susceptible to greater damage (Bolin and Bolton 1986; Peacock and Girard 1997). Also significant are findings that the value systems specific to different ethnic groups play important roles in framing the way individuals view themselves in relation to the world, often shaping their interpretation of disasters (Ensor 2003; Lindy, Grace and Green 1981). Although some noteworthy exceptions do exist,¹ analyses of ethnic and racial differentials in disaster-related impacts tend not to disaggregate data by age, nor are issues of acculturation or generational differences among migrant groups generally discussed (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001, 9). The situation of Honduran children in post-Katrina New Orleans, however, is framed by factors—legal immigration status, degree of integration into mainstream U.S. society, cultural expectations, experience with previous disasters—that are directly related to generational differences, pointing to the need for more nuanced ethnicity-, generation-, and age-sensitive research.

Age, together with ethnicity, gender and other variables, influences the range of societally-ascribed roles, behaviors, and expectations of people in every community and, thus, it is an important determinant of their vulnerability to disasters. It follows that children’s responses to disasters are likely to differ from those of their

¹ For instance, Khoury and colleagues (1997) found ethnicity to be related to post-Hurricane Andrew deviance for girls but not for boys, with Hispanic and African American girls being more likely to engage in minor deviant behavior than white non-Hispanic ones. Bolin and Klenow (1988) also found race and age differences in disaster situations, with elders recovering faster than younger people, and elderly whites doing better than their black counterparts.

adult counterparts and need to be examined accordingly. Yet, little systematic investigation into the effects of potentially traumatic events on children or adolescents was evident prior to the 1950s (Keppel-Benson and Ollendick 1993). The literature on children's responses in disaster situations has expanded considerably in recent years (Balaban 2006; Hoven et al. 2005; Jones et al. 1993; La Greca et al. 1996; La Greca et al. 2003; Pfefferbaum 1997; Saylor 1993; Tasker 1993; Yule et al. 2000), but research has focused primarily on those who have been negatively affected and have displayed problematic emotional reactions to the disaster. Evidence, however, indicates that many youngsters appear to cope well with stress, displaying remarkable adaptability in their responses to disaster-induced changes (Belter and Shannon 1993). These children should also be studied, so that "the factors which foster adaptive functioning and resilience in the face of disaster" can be identified (Ibid., 101).

The opportunities and challenges facing children who migrate to post-disaster areas to seek jobs in the recovery and reconstruction efforts—an increasingly common phenomenon—are also severely under-researched and poorly understood. Even less is known about these children's contributions to their families' post-disaster survival strategies, their views and perceptions regarding their ability to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and the impact of their involvement in reconstruction efforts on other areas such as health, education and participation in family life. In spite of the increased attention to the social dimensions of catastrophes (Fothergill and Peek 2004), the record of analyses and interventions addressing the particular needs of children in disaster situations remains at best incomplete (Anderson 2005; Mandalakas 1999).

This study is an effort to contribute to the growing body of literature on child-centered disaster research and seeks to explore the experience of young disaster displacees and the many obstacles and opportunities they may encounter. It is based on the premise that more holistic approaches that position young disaster survivors in the broader context of their social relationships such as family, larger community, and general socio-economic conditions increase our understanding of children's resilience as well as vulnerability, and contribute to our ability to more effectively equip them to mitigate and withstand the impact of disasters. Furthermore, this study also aims at expanding the limited data currently available on child migration. As is the case with research on children in disasters, most child protection work undertaken with child migrants in difficult circumstances emphasizes their vulnerability and the often dire conditions they may endure. Children's own motivations—such as their need or desire for income—are generally underplayed in policy discourse, even though academic research is providing mounting evidence of migrant children's autonomy in decision-making (Whitehead and Hashim 2005).

Research Methods

The data that form the basis of this study were gathered through a variety of social science methods including ethnographic fieldwork both in Honduras and New Orleans, as well as key informant interviews and analyses of available records. More specifically, fieldwork in Honduras was initiated in 1999, shortly after

Hurricane Mitch devastated this disaster-prone region. Most of the initial 12-month research period took place in the town of Morolica, a southern rural community that was severely impacted by the hurricane. Focus groups, gender analyses and community mappings were combined with a household survey administered to 100 Morolican individuals—50 females and 50 males of varying ages (Enzor 2003). Subsequent shorter visits to the country targeted urban areas focusing on Tegucigalpa, the capital, and San Pedro Sula, a large urban center in the north. Personnel from various governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in child welfare, including orphanages and shelters for street children, were interviewed. Although access to youngsters in these institutions was quite restricted, their input was solicited whenever possible. The Honduran phase of the research provided information on the background conditions and root causes that prefigured the next wave of displacement for Honduran migrant children.

The bulk of the data on Post-Katrina New Orleans was gathered in the fall of 2006, with two short visits in early 2007. Five pre-Katrina migrant families were identified with the assistance of a common acquaintance. All of the members of one of those families were the U.S.-born descendants of Honduran migrants who had arrived in New Orleans in the mid-20th century. The other four pre-Katrina families included both pre- and post-Mitch migrants, with most children (three girls; seven boys) being U.S. born—although five young adults, all male, were under 18 when they first arrived in the U.S. In each case, both children and adults were encouraged to relate their experiences of the Katrina disaster as part of informal “family discussions” that ranged from 30 minutes to a couple of hours. Conversations were not audio recorded but notes taken were reviewed with participants at the end of each exercise.

Post-Katrina migrants were found at three main locations—two gas stations and the parking lot of a large home improvement store where migrant workers would congregate every morning. Interview guides, rather than structured questionnaires, were used to elicit open-ended responses from study participants. The length and structure of these interviews were determined by the need to work around the arrival of contractors seeking to hire workers. Conversations were occasionally interrupted as migrants were hired and driven away. Approximately 45 individuals participated in these minimally directed discussions, sometimes individually, sometimes in groups; at least a dozen of them were under 18, but the precise number is impossible to specify as some very young-looking individuals refused to give their age. All of them were male, as no females were present at these sites during my fieldwork.² Their older relatives were also interviewed whenever possible. Questions for this group were mainly aimed at obtaining information as to when, how, and why they had migrated to the U.S., what their life was like back in

² My research indicates that at least some Central American women did travel to New Orleans after Katrina. They occasionally arrived in the back of trucks, driven by their male counterparts, to the locations where migrant workers congregated. These women sold food items, coffee, and sodas to the male migrant workers. The three women with whom I briefly spoke were originally from Guatemala and had arrived with their respective husbands from other parts of the U.S., rather than directly from Central America. They reported to know a few other women in a similar situation.

Honduras, what their living conditions had been since they arrived in New Orleans, including who they lived with, and what their hopes and expectations for the future were. While most participants appeared reluctant to describe their trip from Central America to the U.S., some post-Mitch, and virtually all post-Katrina migrants, volunteered that they were undocumented. Additional informants interviewed in New Orleans include officials from a number of secular and faith-based organizations operating in the area, the Honduran Consulate, child advocacy groups, day care and school teachers, universities, and contractors. None of these interviews were tape recorded.

This study, primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature, seeks to document the variation among the different groups of Honduran migrant children in New Orleans, and understand their experiences of disaster-induced migration. The results must, of course, be interpreted within the constraints of the data collection methods. While sampling and self-selection limitations tend to preclude ethnographic fieldwork from producing statistically representative conclusions, "ethnographic observations sensitize us to the power of social context in shaping the lives of immigrant children" (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001, 11). My findings suggest that migrant children in New Orleans often demonstrate great resourcefulness and levels of independence and initiative that belie the prevailing portrayals of children in disaster situations as invariably vulnerable, passive and dependent victims. The large numbers of young people affected by catastrophes like the ones provoked by Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast and Hurricane Mitch in Honduras, underscore the great importance of taking account of the needs, motivations and capacities of children explicitly and consistently (Jabry 2005).

The Legacy of Mitch for Honduran Children

Children and their families in Honduras are exposed to recurrent natural disasters caused by tropical storms, droughts, floods and landslides. Additionally, full-blown hurricanes strike the region every decade or so, killing thousands and leaving many more homeless. For example, Hurricane Fifi killed an estimated 10,000 Hondurans in 1974. Four hundred people died in floods in November 1993, and in November 1996, Tropical Storm Marco struck the north coast destroying 4,000 homes (Humphrey 1998, 7).

Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Central America in October 1998, was one of the worst natural disasters to hit this area in recorded history. The death and destruction provoked by Mitch were compounded by the highly vulnerable economy, unequal distribution of resources, pervasive food insecurity and severe environmental degradation that characterized Honduras even before the disaster (Enzor 2003). The total number of dead reached 5,657, with 12,272 injured, and 8,058 declared missing (PMRTN 1999, 4). In all, about 276,000 families were affected by the hurricane, and over 600,000 people were evacuated (FAO 1999, 3). Not having yet fully recovered from the devastation caused by this disaster, Honduras has been impacted by several other destructive environmental extremes. One of the most recent events was Tropical Storm Gamma which caused floods that forced over 23,000 people to flee their homes in 2005 (National Hurricane Center 2005). Since official disaster figures were not disaggregated by age, it is not

possible to know the precise number of children who have been impacted by these catastrophes.

Eight years after Hurricane Mitch, Honduras remains among the poorest countries in the Global South, with over half of the population living in abject poverty (UN Human Development Report 2006). Post-Mitch Honduras' formal economy is weak and unemployment is high; workers with administrative or retail positions do not make a living wage, and earnings in the informal economy are even lower. This situation is particularly difficult for children. In effect, one of the most noticeable and sad aspects of the dislocation that characterizes post-disaster Honduras—and this is also the case in other Central American countries—is the alarming increase in the number of abandoned and street children. Child-advocacy groups working in Honduras estimate that the number of street children in the country is approximately 7,500—an increase of 20 percent since Hurricane Mitch. Street children and other indigents are often killed by death squads as part of an unofficial “social cleansing” program. More than 3,270 street children have been murdered since 1998 (Casa Alianza 2006).

Even for those children who belong to supportive, nurturing families, access to education in Honduras can be a challenge. Longitudinal data on education is difficult to obtain because many records were destroyed by Hurricane Mitch. Available information for 2001 does show that, while net enrollment for grades one through six reached 87 percent, only 29 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds were enrolled in grades seven through twelve (Schuh Moore 2004). Moreover, the United States Agency for International Development estimates that as of 2001, 75 percent of Hondurans had not completed the seventh grade, and approximately 1.6 million—of a total population of about seven million—had not completed the sixth grade (USAID 2006).

Belying Western paradigms of childhood, generally understood as a period of sanctuary from adult concerns and obligations, the survival of most poor Honduran families is often dependent on the economic contribution of children, monetized or not. Fluid family arrangements characterized by the practice of migration and child fosterage—a social feature that Stonich (1993, 126) has called “the elastic household”—are also common. Fosterage is a customary strategy in times of family crisis resulting from a variety of factors including adult out-migration, marital or other personal problems, or economic difficulties created by disasters and social upheaval. When such difficulties arise, children are sent to live with other, better-off relatives. Honduran children, who by the age of 12 or 13 are already well socialized in the roles they are expected to fulfill as adults, often contribute to their birth and foster households by performing a variety of tasks or even engaging in wage labor. While no national figures are available, my fieldwork indicates that incidences of fosterage increased considerably in Honduras after Mitch.

The other common feature of flexible households in times of crisis in Honduras is migration. Both adults and children with wage-earning potential are sent abroad, usually to the United States, in hopes that they will be able to send surplus earnings home. For children in particular, conditions of deprivation and marginality,

difficult access to schooling, and cultural expectations that they should contribute to support their families are additional factors driving them to seek better opportunities abroad. Most avenues for immigration to the U.S. are based on family reunification and/or require that aliens have a family member or employer who is eligible, able and willing to sponsor them. Immigration opportunities based on self-petitions are extremely limited (Wasem 2005) and, although the trip north is expensive even when traveling alone—“*coyotes*” (smugglers) can charge as much as \$6,000—undocumented migration is not uncommon. Not all would-be migrants succeed in reaching their intended destination, however. During the three-month period after Hurricane Mitch, an estimated 6,000 undocumented Central Americans were apprehended and detained along the Texas-Mexico border, more than half of whom were from Honduras. Many others—approximately 75,000 of them—were granted temporary work permits under the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) program and are living legally in the United States (USDOJ 2006). New Orleans, home to the largest Honduran enclave outside of Honduras itself, has been a favorite destination for displaced Central American migrants since the first half of the twentieth century.

Katrina and Its Aftermath

The landfall of Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005 resulted in the most destructive and expensive disaster in the history of the United States. Storm surge and wind hammered the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama causing death and destruction of property and public infrastructure. The city of New Orleans suffered extensive flooding as the levee system that protected New Orleans from Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River was breached (Peek and Fothergill 2006). Even before Katrina, the Gulf states constituted the poorest stretch of coastline in the United States. Census estimates suggest that in 2001, an average of 17.5 percent of the population in these three states had incomes below the poverty level. In 2002, half of the eight slowest-growing U.S. metropolitan areas were located in these states (Donato and Hakimzadeh 2006). Rates of extreme child poverty in the communities affected by Hurricane Katrina are among the highest in the United States. Before the disaster, about 39,000 children under age six lived in New Orleans. Of these, some 17,000 (more than four in ten) lived below the federal poverty level. A high percentage of families were headed by a single parent, and many parents were either out of work or in low-wage jobs. Additional contributing factors included parents' low education levels and frequent health problems and disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2004).

The human effects of Hurricane Katrina were extensive. In Louisiana alone, the official death toll stands at 1,464 (Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals 2006). Beyond mortality statistics, individuals and groups were severely disrupted at all levels of analysis, from individual and household to state and national levels. Incidents of psychological trauma, rising ethnic tensions, dislocation and violence were often reported, as was the impact of the disaster on New Orleans' youngest survivors (Kirschke and van Vilet-- 2005). The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2006) reported that 5,071 children were separated from their families in the chaotic aftermath of Katrina. The number of school-aged children from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama displaced as a result of the hurricane

reportedly exceeded 300,000 (Hunter 2005). Indeed, the enormous magnitude of the devastation, the rising death toll, and the more than one million survivors displaced by the hurricane, prompted Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to describe the impact of Katrina as an “ultra-catastrophe” (Peterson et al. 2006).

Apart from the staggering magnitude of the devastation, one of the most noticeable features of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans has been the arrival of large numbers of migrant workers eager to join the massive reconstruction operations. At the national level, construction work is a growing source of employment for both documented and undocumented Mexican and Central American-born workers, who constitute about 30 percent of the U.S. construction labor force (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). “This highly mobile construction labor force is part of the phenomenon of ‘hurricane chasers’—construction workers who arrive in the aftermath of a storm to clean up and rebuild affected areas” (Fussell 2006, 2).

Undocumented migrants are, on average, significantly younger than those with legal immigration status. The large majority of both categories (93 percent) are male. Over a third of the undocumented migrants—32 percent—who arrived in the wake of Katrina are Hondurans (Fletcher et al. 2006, 12) for whom the presence of a large community of fellow compatriots is an additional enticement. According to the Honduran Consulate in New Orleans, an estimated 3 percent of post-Katrina Honduran migrants are children, defined as persons under 18 years of age. Although no official figures are available, Consulate personnel acknowledge that many of these youngsters are joining the hundreds of day laborers who gather at street corners, gas stations and the parking lots of construction supply stores to wait for contractors to arrive in trucks and take them to job sites. Advocates for undocumented migrants have reported that post-Katrina arrivals often suffer unfair treatment by employers, especially lack of payment of wages (Browne-Dianis et al. 2006; Fletcher et al. 2006), and lack of access to health care and safety precautions (Aguilar and Podolsky 2006). Adults and children alike often live in overcrowded substandard lodgings, sleep on cots in church shelters, or become squatters in abandoned buildings. Overall, the promise of plentiful and high paying jobs has not translated into an easy life for these migrants.

Honduran Children in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Honduran migrant children in New Orleans constitute a diverse group who entered the social hierarchy of their new society under a wide range of circumstances. One of the most significant factors framing the challenges and opportunities facing these children is their generational status. The experiences of recently arrived migrant children are in some important ways quite different from those of U.S.-born generations, and need to be examined accordingly (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). The ability to assess their new situation through a dual frame of reference, and appreciate the new opportunities available to them in the host country, are characteristics often shared by both adult migrants and their children born and raised abroad. Conversely, “the children of immigrants who arrived when they were very young or who were born here will not have the same clear-cut frame of reference against which to measure their current situation” (Ibid., 88).

Thus, their expectations tend to reflect those prevalent in the mainstream culture in which they grew up, rather than those common in the country that their parents left behind. Generational differences in Katrina's impact on the various groups of Honduran child migrants currently living in New Orleans are indeed noticeable.

U.S.-Born Honduran Children in New Orleans

The first wave of Honduran migrants arrived in New Orleans fleeing the political unrest and economic instability caused by military coups, compounded by the destruction provoked by the floods that impacted the country during the late 1950s. The primary pull factor was the establishment of close trading relationships between banana growers in Honduras and the Standard Fruit Company, located in New Orleans. By mid-century, the combination of these factors led to the settlement of many Hondurans in this U.S. city (Euraque 2004; Henao 1982).

Early Honduran migrants to New Orleans belonged to different classes across the social spectrum, from wealthy young women pursuing an education with local Ursuline nuns, to poor male immigrants who worked as mechanics and carpenters at the steamship wharves. Later arrivals from Honduras and other Central American countries often worked in hotels, casinos and restaurants in the New Orleans area (Donato and Hakimzadeh 2006; Euraque 2004). Hondurans represented 12.8 percent of New Orleans's foreign-born population in the 1970s, and their presence in the city grew significantly after Hurricane Mitch battered Central America in 1998. Estimating the number of children in this community is extremely difficult as children rarely appear separately from adults in the available statistics; the paucity and poor quality of the data sources, and the illegal and/or undocumented nature of a substantial proportion of this movement, pose additional difficulties.

Second and third-generation children—the descendants of the early waves of Honduran migration to New Orleans—tend to be U.S. citizens, be better educated, and have much higher living standards than their recently arrived counterparts. Although many cultural traditions are preserved and family ties with relatives in the home country are generally maintained, my fieldwork suggests that these U.S.-born children tend to be fully assimilated into mainstream society. Their experiences of displacement in the wake of Katrina appear to be very similar to those of non-migrant children, and the likelihood that they will participate in reconstruction operations very low.

Most of these children evacuated the city ahead of Katrina, as did 80 percent of the population of New Orleans, and did not personally experience the raging winds and surging floodwaters, or the horrors of the Superdome. Some stayed with their families in shelters and/or trailers for varying lengths of time in the immediate wake of Katrina; others followed their families to different states—Florida, Texas, California—to the homes of other relatives or friends who had also migrated to the U.S. and offered them refuge. For either group, any disaster-related trauma would be the result of their parents' decision to leave a pet behind, being separated from their school friends, or returning to a completely devastated neighborhood months after the hurricane, rather than due to exposure to the direct effects of the hurricane itself. *"Se me perdieron los periquitos; Papá dijo que si los soltábamos*

estarían bien, pero yo creo que no porque no estaban acostumbrados. Los pobres! ("I lost my parakeets; Dad said that they'd be fine if we let them loose, but I don't think so because they were not used to it. The poor things!"), lamented a 10-year old boy who had recently returned to New Orleans after relocating with his family to Texas for almost a year. Interestingly, he added *"Los próximos me los llevo!"* ("I'm bringing next ones with me!"), as if taking the occurrence of future disaster events for granted.

The teenagers with whom I spoke appeared mostly affected by social isolation, and some report difficulty concentrating and enjoying normal activities. The loss of the social network and sense of self associated with familiar surroundings—home, neighborhood, school, recreation facilities—is a source of mental distress that can potentially lead to more serious psychological problems. For these youngsters, having to adjust to new schools as their temporary housing changed, and being forced to form new friendships, have been the two greatest sources of stress. *"Aburrimiento"* (boredom), *"estar como prisionero"* (being like a prisoner), *"tener que vivir con tanta gente en un sitio tan pequeño"* (having to live with so many people in such a small place), *"no tener nada que hacer"* (having nothing to do), and *"estar separado de los amigos"* (being separated from friends) are also frequently mentioned.³

In general, my research suggests that older children appear to be experiencing more anxiety and dislocation than their younger counterparts. Younger children with limited cognitive abilities may be mostly unaffected—or even totally unaware—of the crises facing their families and communities. Other times, their trauma might be related to a general feeling that they are no longer safe. These findings are consistent with the views expressed by mental health experts working in the disaster-affected areas. Psychiatrists associated with Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, for instance, argue that for these young children, "if it happened once, the world is an unsafe place." As stated by a psychology professor at Tulane University who is currently counseling young Katrina survivors, "the hardest thing for them is dealing with the ongoing challenges of living in New Orleans right now" (Stong 2006). In other words, most of "the stress that is happening [to these children] is from dealing with ongoing, day-to-day stress, as opposed to reliving their hurricane experiences" (Ibid.). Mental health experts predict that, as their families get back on their feet, and the children themselves are able to return to a sense of normalcy, the majority of them should be able to recover from the ongoing stress they have been experiencing since Katrina.

Honduran Child Migrants in the Aftermath of Mitch

The experience of those migrant children who arrived in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, but before Katrina, is complicated by an array of variables including their age upon arrival, their legal status and that of their relatives in the U.S., and the time elapsed since they arrived. The Honduran Consulate believes

³ The second and third generation Honduran youngsters I interviewed only spoke Spanish—not always very fluently—in the presence of their older relatives. They tended to speak English among themselves.

that most migrant children during this time period tended to be a bit older than those who arrived pre-Mitch, and mostly male. The ages of those included in my research, all of whom were male, ranged from 11 and 12 to the late teens when they first arrived in New Orleans. All expected to work; most hoped to be able to go to school; some, especially those who were younger when they first arrived, and those with legal immigration status, did do so.

A significant factor shaping the experiences of these children, perhaps more than is the case for other Honduran child migrants, is what Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001, 36) term the "ethos of reception," referring to the general social and cultural climate they encounter, in addition to the opportunities available to them. As already discussed, in Honduras there is a long-standing cultural practice of child fosterage whereby children are sent to live with relatives in response to family crises and, in this social context, it is not interpreted as abandonment. While the qualitative nature of my research does not allow me to offer concrete figures, my data does strongly suggest that few, if any, of the Honduran children who migrated to New Orleans between Hurricane Mitch (1998) and Hurricane Katrina (2005) came to the U.S. as a family unit. Many of these children appear to have migrated primarily to be reunited with other family members who emigrated earlier, and most of them were separated from one or both parents anywhere from a few months to a few years. Some still have one or two parents or primary guardians back in Honduras. Responses to this separation range from traumatic (rare), to stressful (some), to expected and relatively manageable (most). Protracted family separation, however, tends to be viewed as symptomatic of a pathological family situation by non-Hondurans in New Orleans. Those Honduran unaccompanied children who are aware of how negatively their separation is perceived in the host culture appear defensive or ambivalent, and generally prefer to avoid the subject.

Immigration status is another crucial factor that determines the range of opportunities available to migrants, often superseding other considerations. Those migrant children who came to join their relatives who had been granted temporary protection status after Mitch soon discovered that this status did not extend to other family members, not did it include provisions for family reunification, considerably limiting their range of options. The phrases "*No se pudo*," and "*No ha podido ser*" (it was not possible; it just couldn't be) were uttered in reference to the impossibility of obtaining a work permit or legal residence in the U.S., a source of much frustration for those involved. This situation has been particularly hard on those migrant children who arrived when they were too young to have a clear memory of the deprivation that many of their compatriots endured in their home country, or to have experienced the devastation and subsequent dislocation caused by Mitch. Rather than using their parents' standards, who often see themselves as better off than they were in the old country, these children apply the expectations about quality of living prevalent in mainstream New Orleans society, and may feel deprived in relation to the more affluent lifestyles of their non-migrant peers.

A 19-year-old expressed his frustration by saying:

No hay puerta de entrada... Hay mucha discriminación... Aunque tengas capacitación, sin los papeles... Nada... Pero tampoco te puedes volver... Adonde vas a ir? Y ahora con Katrina! Mire esto! Esto no es vida!

There is no entry door... There is much discrimination... Even if you are qualified, without papers... Nothing... But one cannot go back either... Where would one go? And now with Katrina! Look at this! This is not living!

He came to the U.S. accompanied by an older brother about three years after Mitch to join their father who had been working in New Orleans since before Hurricane Mitch. Neither brother has yet managed to regularize their immigration status. Trained as an electrician, at the time of this research he was living with his father and brother in the hotel they were helping rebuild.

As was the case with U.S.-born Hondurans, the majority of the young people in this group evacuated New Orleans before Katrina. Their primary source of stress is not so much the immediate trauma of the event or the scope of devastation, but the subsequent prolonged dislocation they have suffered, and the uncertainty of their situation. Unlike the U.S.-born group, however, a small proportion of those who resettled in relatively nearby cities—such as Houston—are participating in reconstruction operations together with relatives or family friends, staying in New Orleans during the week and commuting to Texas on weekends. These youngsters tend to rely on kinship networks to secure work and transportation, and are frequently more fluent in English and less subject to exploitation than more recent child migrants. Yet, as illustrated by the quote above, they are also more likely to perceive the new wave of displacement brought about by Katrina not as an opportunity, but as a burden.

Post-Katrina Migrant Children

A third group of Honduran migrant children is represented by those who arrived in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Although a few of those in this study were as young as 13 or 14, the majority are a bit older—most who agreed to give their age reported themselves to be 15, 16, or 17. My fieldwork among these young Hondurans indicates that they have a clear understanding that it is the poverty and deprivation of their home circumstances that drives them to earn money as migrant workers, and that they are expected to attempt to make the best of these difficult circumstances. Individual characteristics, inclinations and choices—their pre-existing level of education, sense of social status, and aspirations to a better future—are also important. None of them expressed a view that they had not wished to migrate, but many acknowledged the pressure of feeling responsible for contributing to their families' survival. The sense of responsibility that children have towards their parents and siblings is clearly seen in the frequency with which they remit a portion of their hard-earned incomes home to Honduras. The large majority perceive themselves as workers, not as dependent minors. In effect, older teenagers who can pass off as adults prefer to avoid drawing attention to their young age, fearing that contractors would not hire them, or else offer them lower salaries than adults would be able to negotiate. Younger, easily recognizable children tend to be hired together with their adult counterparts, and are likely not

to receive an independent salary—a far less desirable arrangement from their point of view. As they often put it, "*Hay más abuso si creen que eres un cipote*"⁴ ("there is more abuse if they think that you are a kid").

Another disadvantage of being perceived as young and inexperienced pertains to the cooperation/competition nature of the interactions among migrant workers. Young migrants sometimes worry that others might attempt to take advantage of them, particularly in money-related matters. Both adults and children express a concern with having their savings wired to their families back home as soon as possible, as they have no hope of opening bank accounts in New Orleans and do not trust the many other workers with whom they often have to share their living quarters. Housing arrangements for most migrant workers are indeed unsecure and appalling. Those who arrived shortly after the hurricane spent their few first weeks in New Orleans squatting in vacant warehouses in Central City, cooking over open fires, washing their clothes in buckets⁵, and sleeping on blankets and mattresses on the concrete. Over a year after Katrina, many are staying in the very hotels they are helping reconstruct—hotels that were flooded during the hurricane, forcing the removal of all of the furniture including beds. Sleeping in these dank, moldy rooms, however, is described as far better than suffering hungry mosquitos and cold nights in the outdoor camps set up during the early cleanup operations. Together with their adult counterparts, these young migrants work cleanup, demolition and painting jobs, and can be seen working on roofs, installing sheetrock, and laying tiles all over town.

As was the case with Pre-Katrina migrants, family separation is a common feature of the experience of most of the Honduran children who arrived in New Orleans to join other "hurricane chasers" in the wake of the disaster. Categorizing them as autonomous child migrants, however, would not be accurate. The large majority of these children either traveled with one or more adult relatives (e.g., father, older brother), or made the long journey from Honduras accompanied by a group of trusted friends in order to join family members already in New Orleans. While in many cases children may have been sent off to work in order to supplement their family's income and do acknowledge a sense of obligation to the other members of their households, their responsibilities appear to be flexibly negotiated, depending on family circumstances and their own wishes.

The motivations that prompted the move can play an important role in the experiences of those involved. Most young migrants claim that they came partly to join their relatives who were already living in the U.S.—either before or after Katrina—and partly so they could earn higher wages. Most have expectations of having at least some control over the money they earn. Construction jobs currently pay about \$150 for an eight- to ten-hour day of work. Right after the Katrina it was possible to make \$200 or even \$300 a day, working ten hours a day, seven days a week. For purposes of comparison, an automobile mechanic would make \$45 a

⁴ The word *cipote* is Honduran and Salvadoran slang for "child."

⁵ The Guatemalan women who sold food to the male migrant workers also told me that they occasionally earned additional income providing laundry services for them.

week in Honduras. They expect to remain in New Orleans for at least a year, with some stating they would stay as long as three or four years, or until the work dries out. With no documents validating their presence in the United States, sweeps by immigration officials seeking to identify undocumented migrants are reported as a source of anxiety. Many, however, feel that they have good odds of avoiding capture and deportation—an impression reinforced by the fact that police officers sometimes pass by the areas where migrants congregate, or even go inside the stores and gas stations to make a purchase, without bothering the easily identifiable migrants.

Some of these post-Katrina migrant children might have also been attracted by the “bright lights” of their stereotypical image of city life in the United States. The promise of better opportunities, or even adventure, coupled with chronic hardship back home, often make younger Honduran migrants quite enthusiastic about their prospects, even in the face of a hostile reception in the new environment. Sentiments similar to the one below were often expressed by youngsters in this group.

“Aqui trabajas duro... si... y te miran feo; mucho abuso, pero si se gana plata... Si... vale la pena el viaje!”

Here you work hard... yes... and they look at you the wrong way [literally, “they give you ‘ugly looks’”]; there is much abuse, but one can make money... yes... it’s worth the trip!”

Being able to draw upon a variety of coping strategies, developed in response to previous experiences in disaster situations, are also important assets (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). Furthermore, ethnographic research demonstrates that interpretations of “objective reality” may vary from person to person, based on their personal experiences and cultural expectations. “This is frequently true of recent immigrants who frequently compare their current lot with the standards and expectations of their country of origin. And for many new immigrants coming from extremely poor countries, the advantages in the new land are obvious and self-evident” (Ibid., 12). “*Después del Mitch, cualquier cosa se supera*” (“Having survived Mitch, anything can be overcome”), said a father who had recently arrived in New Orleans with his teenage son. “*Con la ayuda de Dios, aquí se puede buscar una vida de provecho*” (“With God’s help, here we can have a profitable life”), added the youngster. Indeed, the migrants in this group, both children and adults, while acknowledging the stark reality of their experience, often express a sense of hope and faith in their ability to adapt to their circumstances with relative ease—“*salir adelante*” (“forge ahead”)—and a general optimism about the future.

Conclusion: Preparing for “Future Katrinas”

Unquestionably, large-scale disasters such as the ones provoked by Hurricane Mitch in Central America and Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. Gulf Coast, compounded by the subsequent displacement experienced by many families, may indeed cause trauma to some of the affected children. Children’s responses to adverse

circumstances, however, have proven to be far from homogenous, and should not be assumed to be universally maladaptive. As Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF's Senior Advisor on Child Protection, points out, "We know from experience from all regions of the world that children have an incredible capacity to recover and resilience to face these kinds of events and get better" (UNICEF 2005, 1). Some U.S.-born Honduran child migrants in New Orleans whose experiences with evacuation and relocation have been highly stressful do appear to be at higher risk of developing disaster-induced mental health problems. Conversely, for many of their more recently-arrived counterparts for whom displacement, social exclusion, and pervasive economic uncertainty frame the conditions of everyday life in their home country, Katrina's devastation is instead seen as a harbinger of hope and opportunity in the construction business. It should be emphasized that "arguing for a view of children as at least potentially resourceful is not to sanction their exposure to adversity, not to deny that some children may be rendered more vulnerable" (Boyden 2003, 16). However, focusing exclusively on children's weaknesses might undermine their efforts to overcome the challenges they face and harm their self-esteem. It also ignores the possibility that they may have useful and valid solutions to the problems caused by disasters and displacement (Ibid.).

As this study illustrates, the capacities of children are often essential assets for families in the aftermath of a disaster. Given the United Nations' predictions that by 2010 as many as 50 million will be displaced by disasters and related interventions (UNU EHS 2006), and the fact that children tend to constitute a large proportion of any given population, assuming all children in disaster situations to be traumatized, helpless victims potentially ignores a large part of local capacity at a time of crisis when it is most needed. Ironically, children's contributions tend to be either overlooked or, conversely, abused as children are compelled to engage in forms of hazardous labor to ensure their own survival and that of their families. Findings that there may be some positive outcomes for children who engage in waged labor—including participation in potentially dangerous reconstruction work—can be controversial, particularly with regards to the policy implications. It is necessary to bear in mind that conceptualizations of childhood, and of acceptable forms of work for children at different ages, are mediated by cultural and socio-economic factors (Anarfi et al. 2005). In this light, disaster responses need to acknowledge the importance of children's contributions without criminalizing child workers, and address the needs of the communities, families and children themselves while ensuring that no hazardous labor is involved (Jabry 2005).

This study also highlights the significance of migration in shaping the opportunities and challenges facing Honduran children in Post-Katrina New Orleans. High rates of child migration generally occur from relatively impoverished areas where adults also use migration as part of their survival strategies. In these circumstances, children may migrate to meet their own ambitions and aspirations, out of their sense of responsibility to their parents, or a combination of these. Although the conditions under which they live, and often work, may indeed be exploitative, the young people are not simple pawns or naïve victims of circumstances. It is also worth noting that migrant children, even those who share a common national origin

and destination, do not constitute a homogeneous category. Child migrants' perceptions of their situation in the new country frequently reflect differences in generational status which, in turn, affect their degree of assimilation into the host society, and determine their frame of reference. While first-generation Honduran migrant children often maintain a positive attitude and experience the move as one of hope and opportunity, others, especially those unable to place their current lives in the context of the deprivation and marginality their relatives left behind, may perceive their situation in New Orleans as fraught with difficulties and discrimination.

The case of Hurricane Katrina represents a compelling challenge to better understand the impact of disasters on some of the most marginalized sectors of society, and to plan for effective response in advance of such destructive scenarios. The overall story that has emerged from this research is that children play an important part in assessing their own opportunities and responsibilities within their families and societies, even in—or perhaps especially during—times of crisis. Their role in making decisions about their life trajectories and in negotiating difficult circumstances is often much more independent, context-specific, and diverse than generally assumed. For many, the tragedy of Katrina is still unfolding. For others, especially many recently arrived Honduran migrant children, the post-Katrina saga is one of considerable hope and potential personal progress.

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