

Hurricane Harvey Versus the People of Houston

In the fall of 2017, the people of Houston, Texas were paying a lot of attention to the weather. Hurricane Harvey was coming. The storm traveled across the Atlantic Ocean and into the Gulf of Mexico. Then it moved closer to Texas coast. About three days before it came to land, Houstonians and others along the Texas coast had to make a decision. Did they want to stay in their homes, or should they pack up and leave?

As the storm grew closer, most chose to stay even when the situation became dangerous. As more and more rescues happened, people around the country could not understand people's decision to stay put. Why did they not go to safety when they had the chance?

One factor is experience. Many Houstonians knew what to expect. They went shopping, bought bottled water and prepared to lose electricity. In other words, they prepared for a regular hurricane. In a regular storm, wind knocks down trees, and the power goes out. In a regular storm, there is a chance that the water is not safe to drink for a while. People are used to this. They think, "well, I'll have an eventful few hours, but unless a tree falls on my house, I will sleep in my own bed afterwards."

There is also a sense of excitement when a hurricane is on the way. People are not happy about hurricanes, but many locals do not necessarily fear them, and some see them as an adventure. Neighbors cheerfully help each other cover their windows. They organize supplies, make plans and talk about parties. If the city loses electricity, they will not go to work. Instead, they will gather in homes. They will cook the meat from their freezers, and they will create memories that become stories. They'll tell these stories for years afterwards.

There is research to support these stories of loyalty to friends and neighbors. Jessica Fox, Director of the International Disaster Psychology Program at the University of Denver in Colorado has studied natural disasters. She is interested in learning from people's choices in the face of a crisis. She says that one of the most important things that keeps people in their homes is their feeling of belonging to a community. People want to share the experience with their neighbors. By going through a hurricane together, a community becomes stronger.

People like to know that their neighbors will be there for them, and they want to be there for their neighbors. As a result, when a tree falls on a house, a family can go across the street or next door. When the storm ends, the whole street will help that family rebuild.

A feeling of trust in the community also makes people feel optimistic. They are not alone, so they feel less vulnerable. They have a sense that everything is going to be okay. They trust their ability to solve problems, and they are less likely to believe information coming from people outside their community. According to Fox, the source of information that drives a decision is important. People will listen to people they know and trust. They may ignore people they do not know even when those people have scientific data.

Finally, a third historical factor influenced many people's decision to stay in Houston during Hurricane Harvey. These people had bad memories of Hurricane Rita in 2005. In the days before Hurricane Rita arrived on land, weather reports warned of high winds and dangerous flooding. Several news organizations told people to leave the city. Many Houstonians listened and they got in their cars and headed for the freeways. The result was a traffic delay hundreds

of miles long. Houston is a city of over five million people including suburbs. There was no way for so many cars to get out. Traffic did not move for hours at a time. It was dangerously hot. People ran out of gas. They did not have food. Some people even died from the heat. And to make matters worse, Rita turned east and never came to Houston at all. These terrible stories became part of the city's history. Those who experienced evacuation during Rita did not want to do it again. Those who stayed home said, "See! We were right to stay here."

With a history of positive neighborhood support during a storm and a disastrous situation on the roads during Rita, it is not surprising that many people decided to stay home during Harvey. On the Friday night when Harvey arrived in Houston, many people relaxed in front of the television. Some visited friends to watch sports. Others went to bed.

Harvey was not a regular hurricane, however. Harvey did not bring wind. It brought rain, a lot of rain. The rain flooded the streets, and in many parts of the city, it began pouring into homes. Sometimes one neighbor noticed and called other neighbors. Mothers and fathers woke up their children. They put their best furniture on tables. People with a second floor, took it upstairs. And still the rain continued to fall. This was a new kind of storm, and it was more destructive and more dangerous than hurricanes of the past. As the rain became worse, and the waters continued to rise, the situation became serious.

The same reason that led people to stay in their homes then became a source of strength and support when the disaster worsened. Social media became an important source of information and communication. The local newspaper, the Houston Chronicle reported news and advice. Other news organizations joined in. Reports of catastrophic flooding went out into communities. Catastrophic is a frightening word because it means something is worse than usual. The catastrophe did not come from wind. It came from water. Once the flooding begins, it is difficult to change one's mind.

Soon people's phones and computers filled with evacuation notices for many neighborhoods. The rising water was no longer an inconvenience. It was a serious threat to human life. The water was rising in places that had never flooded before. Eventually, people started to leave. They carried their pets and a few important things over their heads and walked through the water to army trucks or higher ground. Those with boats helped with the rescues.

However, some Houstonians still chose to stay. They did not want to sleep in a school, a church, or one of the larger shelters, The George R. Brown Convention Center, or the NRG stadium. They wanted to be home. Some of them had young children. Others were older and had trouble moving. These people were vulnerable. They would have a hard time evacuating if things went from bad to worse.

Things did get worse. People began posting about their situation. Marian Williams, a resident of Bellaire was one of them. The water is at our door," she wrote. Then a couple of hours later, another post: "We have two feet of water in the house." And then, "We are in the attic." Another elderly Chinese woman named Mrs. Wang was trapped in her second-floor apartment. She spoke no English. Her daughter, Jinpin Wang, could not go to her, but was able to arrange for a rescue by contacting the Cajun Navy, a volunteer rescue operation.

Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Wang and thousands of others were rescued during that weekend, including sick people in a nursing home, and disabled children in need of medical attention.

Many of these people would have been fine in a regular storm, but this was something completely different.

Weather experts began calling Harvey a thousand-year flood event. Thirty-five inches of rain fell on the city over the weekend. Then there was more bad luck. Dams built to protect the city from flooding were in danger of breaking. They were called the Addicks and Barker dams, and both were old. They were not strong enough to hold water, so the government had to let more water out of the dam. This release of water caused more flooding in Houston's neighborhoods.

The effect of the storm was terrible. Homes that had never flooded before were full of water. Half a million cars were flooded. One hundred thousand homes were damaged. Schools and hospitals were closed for weeks. A chemical plant exploded, and dangerous chemicals from factories around the city went into the waterways. The governor of Texas announced that the storm caused over 100 billion dollars in damage and lost productivity.

Harvey was a bigger disaster than anyone expected, and it caused much public conversation about climate change, the responsible development of neighborhoods, and the role of government in maintaining the Addicks and Barker dams. However, what people like to remember is why they stayed and how they helped or were helped. In the days after the storm, neighbors and friends with dry homes washed clothes, brought food, and helped carry ruined furniture to the street. They knocked out walls, and gave hugs when necessary. In doing so, they became a part of Houston's history and sense of itself as a community.

A storm like Harvey is never a good thing, but people supported each other, and the long slow recovery began. It is hard to know how Harvey will affect people's decision to stay or evacuate in the future, but the expectation that other storms will come is quite certain. Harvey was immediately followed by four more hurricanes named Irma, Jose, Maria, and Nate. In fact, September of 2017 had more and worse hurricanes than any month ever recorded. Bigger storms are expected in the years to come. How people in Houston and other hurricane prone areas deal with future storm events is going to be more and more important.

Discussion

Do you agree with people's reasons for staying during a hurricane? What would you do?