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Over one million children lived in the Gulf Coast counties most directly affected by Katrina's winds and waters. Early estimates suggested that 372,000 school-age children evacuated as a result of the storm, and 163,000 children between the ages of zero and nineteen years remained displaced months later. Like adults, those children were scattered throughout the Gulf Coast region and across the United States. Some ended up in the homes of relatives or friends; others found refuge in temporary shelters and hotels. Over 5,100 children were reported missing in the aftermath of Katrina, and the last child was reunited with her family in March of 2006. Thousands more children were separated from members of their immediate and extended families in the evacuation.

According to Abramson and colleagues, in the two years following Katrina, between 81,595 and 94,650 formerly displaced children returned to their home state or home communities, while approximately 70,000 children remained displaced. Those children and families who returned to the city of New Orleans faced severe shortages of affordable housing, unsafe environmental conditions, high rates of violent crime, and a lack of classroom space and an insufficient number of qualified teachers in an already deeply troubled public school system. One administrator estimated that in 2006, up to 2,000 school-age children were turned away from the public schools due to lack of available space.

Many children and families along the Gulf Coast were living in crisis well before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Mississippi and Louisiana were the two poorest states in the nation. The typical household income in both of these states was far below the national average, which meant that hundreds of thousands of people in the direct path of the storm had limited or no excess resources available to prepare for or cope with disaster. In Mis-

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Mississippi, over 227,000 children were living below the poverty line in 2004, and in Louisiana, that number surpassed 343,000. Nearly one-third of all children in these states were impoverished, although the percentage of poor children varied significantly by race, with disproportionately high percentages of African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian American children living below the poverty line (see Figure 8.1). These children were especially vulnerable to the various problems that often accompany poverty—diminished educational achievement, neighborhood disorganization, food insecurity, abuse and neglect, physical and mental ailments, and limited or no access to healthcare—and these issues had reached epidemic levels in some of the hardest-hit areas.

The limited research available on children who remain displaced, as well as those who have returned “home,” indicates that the youngest survivors of Katrina have faced many serious physical and emotional challenges since the storm. What is less well understood, however, is how the process of displacement has affected these young people’s lives, relationships, and overall well-being. In our previous work, we examined children’s post-Katrina experiences from the perspective of adults. While the adults’ observations and interpretations are obviously important, hearing children’s
voices adds critical information to the overall discussion of how children fare in disaster. In a great deal of the research on children in both psychology and sociology, the voices of children are often overlooked, and have been almost entirely absent in the scholarship on Katrina.14

This chapter focuses on children’s stories and their perspectives on loss and displacement. We argue in the following pages that the children are in a state of “permanent temporariness.” This term, borrowed from scholars Bailey, Wright, Mountz, and Miyares, refers to being constantly in flux, living in between two worlds, and floundering in “perpetual limbo.”15 While they used this concept to understand the legal, economic, and political situation of immigrants and asylum seekers, it is also applicable to children of the Katrina diaspora. Listening to the children’s stories of evacuation, multiple displacements, and continued disruption reveals how unsettled they remain, how uncertain they are about where “home” is for them.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN’S VOICES

This ethnographic project began as an effort to learn how children and families fared in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Over the five-year period of this research, we studied hundreds of individuals. Because we had varying levels of contact with the participants in the larger sample, we divide these individuals into core, secondary, and tertiary groups.

Our core sample includes twenty-five children whom we interviewed and observed several times; we examined them over time. Within this core group, we interviewed the children and the children’s family members, teachers, and/or other adults who knew them. In addition, sixty other children constitute our secondary sample, whom we formally or informally interviewed and observed at one point in time. The data from this group include field notes and/or transcriptions from audio-recorded interviews. Finally, a group of well over two hundred children whom we observed but did not interview formally comprise our tertiary sample. We watched them, and sometimes engaged in informal conversations, in classrooms, on playgrounds, in school lunchrooms, in disaster relief shelters, and so forth. When observing these children, we recorded systematic field notes regarding their behaviors and interactions with other children and adults.

All of the children we interviewed and observed were between three and eighteen years old.16 Our interview sample was split evenly by gender: half males and half females. The children were all originally from New Orleans,
and the racial composition of the sample—approximately two-thirds African American and one-third White—reflected the pre-Katrina demographics of the city. The children came from low-income, working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle-class families.

We conducted interviews with the children in our core and secondary samples in one-on-one as well as small-group settings. The group interviews typically included between two and five children who were siblings, neighbors, or classmates. Thus, all of the children were familiar with one another before the group interview, which seemed to put them at ease. Both the one-on-one interviews and group interviews were audio-recorded. We also spent many hours speaking informally with children, sharing lunches and dinners, and joining with them and their families in their daily activities.

We gathered observational data at various locations throughout Louisiana in the months and years following the storm. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, we observed operations at a large mass shelter in Lafayette and at a much smaller shelter in a Baptist church in Baton Rouge. We visited the Goodwill food and clothing distribution center for hurricane evacuees in Lafayette and later spent time at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Welcome Home Center in New Orleans. We conducted interviews and observations at two childcare centers located in shelters and at a private daycare center in Lafayette. We observed and interviewed students and several teachers at nine schools, including: a temporary school for displaced students in New Iberia, which was formed by two teachers and a group of parents following Hurricane Katrina; a private Catholic school in Metairie; two charter schools in New Orleans; a state-run "Recovery School" in New Orleans; a private school in New Orleans; a public high school in New Orleans; a public high school in Lafayette; and a public elementary school in Baton Rouge. We spent afternoons and evenings in FEMA trailer sites in Baton Rouge and Scott, visited the flood-damaged homes of families in New Orleans, and attended church services with displaced families.

During the months between our fieldwork visits to Louisiana, we communicated with children and adults through telephone calls, e-mail messages, and cards and letters. In the subsequent sections we present some of our findings from this project; throughout the chapter we privilege children's voices in telling their story of what happened during and following Katrina and examine how a wide range of factors resulted in a state of permanent temporariness.
EVACUATING AND BECOMING DISPLACED

All of the children in our study faced the coming of Katrina with members of their immediate families. Some of the families were able to leave New Orleans before the levees broke, but some were not. For the children we interviewed who were still in the city when it began to flood—all of whom were African American and working-class or poor—the situation was frightening and dangerous. Children of all ages expressed to us their fears of being in the city as it filled with water and increasingly desperate survivors awaited rescue and life-sustaining resources.

During three separate group interviews, a classroom of African American teenagers at a New Orleans middle school described their experiences after the levees broke. Over half of the students did not evacuate prior to the storm, and they were struggling to make sense of the horrifying things they saw and experienced. One recounted her intense fear as she and her mother watched the water engulf their home; another woke up and thought she must be dreaming as she saw the water continue to rise and rise. A third student described his terrifying experience evacuating after the city had flooded:

And I was scared. After I fell in the water, you know how the water was dirty? That water was dirty. We was walking from my house on the bridge, and they had my sister's hand, my sister was eight months, and I was holding her, she couldn't walk. She was only eight months. And you couldn't see the curb. And everybody else was big, my mom and my brother, just me and my little sister. And we walking, and I ain't seen the curb. You can't see that in the water. I ain't seen the curb, and I stepped down and my little sister almost died, and I don't know how to swim. My brother jumped in there and got me and he got my little sister.

Some of the children in our study had to receive shots for their health after they had been in the floodwaters; waters which were considered especially dangerous for persons with more vulnerable immune systems. The children, understandably, complained to us about both the water and the shots. An African American five-year-old who was separated from his mother and had to evacuate out of New Orleans with his older sister could only remember that the storm was “really big” and that “the water was very high.”

During a group interview, several adolescent African American boys recounted their experience with the evacuation. One of them explained how officials separated the members of his family in the Superdome: “My dad
and my mama went with my auntie, and my cousin and my sister, they all went to Tennessee. Me and my two brothers and my one older cousin, we stayed behind.” Another stated: “I knew how to swim, but I wasn’t going to get in the water because of the alligators and the snakes.” His friend responded: “I swam to the Superdome. My uncle couldn’t swim, so I went down and got him a piece [of foam] and I came back and gave it to him.”

A few children and youth who did not evacuate said that they were not scared of the storm and the water. One seventh grade African American boy, for example, told his dad that he wanted to stay because he had been informed by others that his housing project would not be harmed by a hurricane; later, when the waters came after the levees were breached, he explained that he was not worried because he knew how to swim. He did, however, have trouble with what followed: their homes were looted, and in the Superdome the hallways smelled of urine, the food was rotten, the military mistreated the evacuees, and some people died.

Some of the children who were trapped in the city for days discussed the things they did to survive, including taking supplies from stores. A fourteen-year-old African American girl who sought shelter with her family at the Convention Center related:

We broke into the store and took stuff. The police came around and had shotguns and all that. We was taking real stuff that we needed. They shot the gun off. We was getting it for the elderly people, water and stuff. They shot at my cousin, because he tried to take this car for this lady so he could take her to the hospital. He took the car and they shot him in the head.

Her friend quickly responded:

That’s not breaking in, that’s called surviving. And I’m not trying to be mean, but when Black people do it, they say, “They’re stealing, they’re stealing,” and when Caucasian people do it, it’s like, “They’re surviving. They’re trying to survive.” And I’m like, that’s not fair. Just because we are Black don’t mean we’re stealing. We’re trying to survive just like the other people are trying to survive. And all they show was Black people killing and looting.

Subsequent conversations with these and other youth revealed similar astuteness regarding race, the media, politics, and the disaster.
Other children evacuated with their families before the levees broke, and thus their evacuation experience was less dangerous, but still anxiety-producing. One eight-year-old African American boy evacuated with his mother before Katrina made landfall, and he told us how they had to hurry and run in and out of the house loading up essential belongings. He explained: “I wanted to take all my toys, and I was sneaking them in my pants.” His mother caught him, however, and made him put his toys back in his room. A number of children described long, hot, crowded car rides as their families evacuated the city.

For the most part, the children were not involved in the family decision to leave and felt little control over the situation. As we noted in our earlier work, however, mothers and fathers indicated that they evacuated because of their children. In fact, several parents said that they would not have evacuated at all had it not been for their children.

The children in our study spoke of the people, pets, and belongings that they had to leave behind when they evacuated. While past research has shown that adults, and especially the elderly, suffer from losing the possessions of a lifetime in a disaster, there has been little focus on what these losses mean to children. Our interviews demonstrate how difficult it was for young people to come to terms with some of the important things they had to leave behind and ultimately lost in the storm, such as toys, clothing, pictures, and school awards. The boy we described who tried to “sneak out” his toys in his pants ended up losing all of those toys when his home flooded. One African American middle school student was particularly upset about the loss of her favorite “cute” shoes, prompting her classmates to tease her. One of her friends mentioned missing her room and a small rug she had hand-made. And a White five-year-old told us how scared he was that he had lost a favorite shell that his grandmother (who died less than a month after Katrina) had given him.

It is not surprising that children’s fates in Katrina were tied to their families’ fates—especially their mothers’. This was true in terms of whether children evacuated, where they ended up, what types of shelter or housing they occupied, and what sorts of schools they attended during the evacuation. The children’s emotional states were also affected by their parents’ reactions to the disaster. Although parents often tried to hide their emotions, the children were keenly aware of how their parents were responding to the immense loss caused by Katrina. For many of the children, one difficult experience was seeing their mothers or fathers crying after Katrina, as described by this white nine-year-old boy:
INTERVIEWEE: They [his mom and dad] were sad, like, once they thought about it, they would start crying and stuff.

AUTHOR: How did you feel when they started to cry a little bit?

INTERVIEWEE: Uncomfortable, you know?

Outside the family context, children reflected on the unsettling experiences in evacuation when they found themselves in new communities that were demographically and culturally quite different from their former neighborhoods in New Orleans. In one of the focus groups with African American seventh graders, the students explained how they had evacuated to many locations, including Georgia, Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi. Two of them proceeded to playfully argue over who was in the “lamest” town. Then they explained, more seriously, how they encountered racism in the places where they evacuated. One of the students described his encounters:

Some people was prejudiced. They were worse than the people down here. It was a White person—no offense. A White person would walk up to you, and they’ll be like, “Hey!” and if you don’t speak back, they’ll shoot you right there. And the police, they don’t care. Yes, indeed. At first, [they would] say, “You-all is niggers, you need to go back where you belong.” And I would say, “You-all are crackers,” or whatever.

Some of the Black children, who had previously attended segregated public schools in New Orleans with student bodies overwhelmingly made up of African American youth, ended up in similarly segregated schools in the cities where they evacuated. These schools, like those in New Orleans, tended to be seriously underfunded and had inadequate human and material resources. Other African American youth entered schools where they were in the minority. Most White children in New Orleans and the surrounding suburbs attended predominantly White schools before the storm and also during their evacuation. However, several of the White children in our study attended diverse public schools in New Orleans, and they had to adjust to attending schools and living in communities that were much less diverse than New Orleans. The White nine-year-old we quoted a moment ago, for example, attended a predominantly White school in Houston, whereas he had attended an elementary school in New Orleans that actively promoted and celebrated cultural and racial diversity. The diversity was one of the many things that he missed about his old school in New Orleans.

Children—both Black and White—spoke of feeling unwanted or disliked in their new schools due to their city of origin, New Orleans. However,
African American children, in particular, faced the most hostile responses. This was likely a result of the racial framing of Katrina, as well as preexisting prejudices against African Americans that are prevalent in US culture. An African American teen described a falling out she had with a friend she met at the school she attended in Texas during the evacuation:

A girl was friends with me for a whole week without knowing where I was from. Once I told her where I was from, she just completely stopped hanging out with me. That’s weird. I was like, “You can’t do that just because I’m from New Orleans.”

An African American thirteen-year-old who evacuated with his mother and two-year-old sister to Baton Rouge found that in his new public school, which was predominantly African American, students were cruel and sometimes violent toward him. He explained why kids at the school threatened him:

Like my first day of school, the first word that appeared out of this person’s mouth is that New Orleans is s-h-i-t, New Orleans is this, New Orleans is that. A lot of cursing and putting New Orleans down. If you got to know us better than what you hear on the news, you would see that we are not that type of person. . . . [But] our reputation is “the highest killer rate in Louisiana.”

In addition to being burdened with the stigma of New Orleans that led to his being bullied, this particular teen also found that the school was a rougher and more dangerous place than his school back home:

Guns, knives, drugs in the back of the school. I saw it all. . . . If you normally go to school in New Orleans, you know that the schools in New Orleans, you don’t even need the police. This school had police in the back, police in the front, security at the door. They pat you down at the door every morning.

The school that this teen attended in Baton Rouge was in a racially segregated and low-income part of the city. He ended up in the school because it was the only option in the district surrounding the FEMA trailer park where his family relocated. Over time, the bullying that he faced escalated to a point where he and his mother felt that it was no longer safe for him to attend the school. He was not able to transfer to another district, because
his family did not own a car and they had minimal resources. He eventually
dropped out of seventh grade and started caring for his little sister while his
mother worked.

Families with more resources were able to exert more control over the
entire evacuation process, including the decision about where their chil-
dren would attend school. Moreover, the middle-class and White families
in our study were more likely to have extended family and friendship net-
works in other cities, which further eased the transition for their children.

Some of the White middle-class children who evacuated to the homes
of family or friends were able to view the evacuation as an enjoyable adven-
ture. A number of these families even tried to treat the evacuation like a
vacation and hence called it their “hurrication.” One White five-year-old,
who lived during evacuation with his family and two other families, thought
“It was cool. There was a pool and a hot tub . . . and seven hundred billion
dogs.” While his friend corrected him that there were actually “only six
dogs,” it did not curb his enthusiasm about the experience. At the same
time, even these children who had safer and more secure evacuation expe-
riences were well aware of, and upset by, the devastation caused by Katrina. A
White elementary school student at a Catholic school in Metairie watched
media coverage of the storm and later stated, “I saw on TV that Katrina was
a big hole and it destroyed all the houses.” A White nine-year-old boy suc-
cinctly described Katrina as “Terrible. Heartbreaking.”

Although African American youth faced more significant challenges in
the evacuation, several relayed positive experiences, including seeing new
places, meeting new people, and getting to travel outside of New Orleans—
which, for some, was their first time. One of the middle school students, an
African American girl, remarked:

A good thing about Hurricane Katrina is that I went exploring from one
state to another. When we were about to go to Georgia, my mom was
scared and I was excited to go to Georgia. We went there anyway, and it
was fun. . . . Well, I’m glad to be back, but I miss Georgia. It was a nice
place . . . it was kind of fun there. I really liked it. My mom liked it, but
she was very homesick, so after about, like, a couple of months we came
back to New Orleans.

Some African American students, in contrast to many of those who
faced stigmatization and hostility, found that students welcomed them to
their new cities. A student who attended school in Houston commented:
They like the way we talk. Because everybody was like: “You-all got a different accent from us. Your accent is cute.” Or they kept saying, “Say fried chicken.” I’d be like, “Fried chicken.” And then they walk around, they be like, “Fried chicken.” They’d be trying. ... And they would actually come to school dressed like how I was dressed. ... I didn’t want to leave that school. I didn’t want to leave for nothing.

Children had a wide range of views on the evacuation, and while some liked traveling and meeting new people, others did not. In a group interview, for example, one student remarked, “I met new friends,” and a classmate quickly chimed in, “I don’t like new friends.” These examples illustrate that while race and class were often the most significant factors in determining how children experienced the evacuation, many other factors such as family circumstances, the context of the receiving city and school, and individual personality also shaped their interpretations and feelings.

When reflecting on the storm, several of the African American teenagers displayed a strong racial consciousness and were more political in their analysis than younger children. This was also seen earlier in their discussion about looting. In one exchange in a middle school, a group of students expressed their anger at the government and their belief that the levees were intentionally destroyed. Each paragraph is a different speaker, although some students speak more than once.

I knew it all would happen. Katrina did none of that stuff. I’m talking about people doing that. Katrina [in the] Gulf, she was a Category 6. When Katrina hit New Orleans, it was a Category 1. The day Hurricane Katrina came, I mean, water and rain and everything. Next day, sunny and pretty outside. Next day water rising. Ain’t nobody stupid? Come on! Next day sunny, next day water. They blew the levees.

Look what Bush did. Bush pushed the button. He sure did!

He pushed the goddamn button! [laughter]

Bush did it! I know he did it! ’Cause when everybody was outside on the bridge and stuff, they could have sent them somewhere. They waited about five days, and then Bush decided, “Well, look, send them here, send them there.” How would he feel if somebody sent his daughter somewhere and his wife and he don’t never get to see them in two years?

His daughter’s an alcoholic.
Author: How do you feel about the government right now?
Down, babe.
It was Blanco, too.
Backstabber.
It was Blanco, too.
Bush’s daughter is a drunk.
She [Blanco] was talking about “Who gonna pay for this? Who gonna pay for that?” while we out there dying. It was Blanco and Bush. And then he gonna come. . . . He gonna come and look around in New Orleans and act like he crying.
He [Bush] gonna ride around in an army truck and pretend he was crying. He wasn’t crying. He did that. I’m telling you. He did that because he wanted to stop crime and nobody else would do it. The jails were getting too full.
They showed it, Bush and Blanco did that. Even Ray Nagin tried to help them [blow the levees].
No, he didn’t!
Yes, he did. . . . Ray Nagin even tried to help them.
When the levees broke, we saw it on TV, because it was like far distant. They had the men on the bridge and they had the stuff, and everybody got out of the water. And when he pushed the button on the bridge, it just blew up, boom! Explosives everywhere. Katrina did not do that.

Other work has indicated that African American adults were much more likely than White adults to believe that the government had blown the levees. These beliefs among some African Americans have been shaped by historical experiences with overtly racial responses to potential flooding and because of a profound mistrust of historically racist government authorities. Our research documents that some youth also came to share this perspective on Katrina and that they believed political leaders, especially President Bush and Louisiana Governor Blanco, attempted to feign empathy after a delayed response that led to the deaths of many people. We can surmise that these views were likely shaped by the adults in the children’s lives, as well as by their peers.
TRYING TO MAKE A NEW HOME: PERMANENT EVACUEES

In the years following Katrina, tens of thousands of individuals did not return to New Orleans for a wide range of economic, social, and personal reasons. During this time, many of the children and families in our study had to begin the long and arduous process of making a new home in a new place. Yet many felt that New Orleans was still “home” and not returning there meant a continuing a state of displacement; this “permanent temporariness” involved living in one place while thinking constantly about another. The children talked to us about the many difficulties they faced as they adjusted to new surroundings and went through many simultaneous transitions. However, with these challenges also came new opportunities.

For some youth who grew attached to people—both volunteers and fellow evacuees—at shelters, moving out of shelters to a trailer, apartment, or house was bittersweet. A twelve-year-old African American girl explained her emotions when she left the Cajundome shelter in Lafayette and moved with her mother into their own FEMA trailer:

I was happy because we were moving and we had a little bit more freedom. We had our own shower, and we don’t have to wait, like, a bunch to get in the shower after other people. But it was sad because that was my home for, like, some months, and I was getting attached to a lot of people, and I was getting attached to Mr. Brad and Miss Sue and Miss Renee.

A thirteen-year-old African American boy expressed a similar feeling about leaving a church shelter in Baton Rouge and moving to a FEMA trailer:

At first I really wanted to stay at the church. Because it was like, at church I knew everybody. I didn’t want to leave. I just got settled in. Just the thought of being around people who went through the same thing with me, it was, like, a peaceful place. Nobody got into it. It never was, never caused commotion or stuff like that. ... I really did want to stay at the church as long as I could.

Once families decided to settle in new cities, rather than return to New Orleans, children faced significant adjustments at their new schools. An eight-year-old African American boy in our sample moved with his mother, infant brother, and maternal grandmother to Lafayette, where he was attending a new public school. His mother was pleased with the school, but the boy was not. There were several other displaced children from New
Orleans in his new school. They might have helped each other adjust, but the school required that the evacuee students be placed in separate classrooms.

In addition to school upheavals and losses, children also faced losses associated with family relationships, particularly their grandparents and fathers. Most of the African American children in our study were from single-parent families and lived with their mothers before Katrina. However, almost all of them saw their fathers frequently—in many cases, several times a week—before the storm. After Katrina, the children relocated to new cities with their mothers, while their fathers returned to New Orleans or settled elsewhere. One boy told us how much he missed his father, and then he said, “Sometimes I be crying over my dad.” Another girl noted that she was “not very close” to her father before the storm. However, she saw him at least “every other weekend.” After Katrina, when her father relocated to Texas, the visits dwindled to once a year at family reunions. He also began calling less often and missed birthdays and other key moments in his daughter’s life. She eventually steeled herself and decided to try to love her father, but “from a distance”:

I don’t want to say I don’t need him, but I mean, I’m better without him and the disappointment, like, he tells me he’ll come pick me up and then he doesn’t. Sometimes it’s disappointing. . . . It’s better to just—like, sometimes you just have to love people from a distance, just so you won’t destroy yourself in the process.

In the disaster aftermath, children in families headed by single African American mothers were more vulnerable to the loss of fathers and extended family members and the support and resources they provided. In many ways, the separation from fathers and other family members represented an “invisible loss,” since those relatives did not live with them before the disaster.

Children clearly missed many things about New Orleans, but they often noted that they were glad that they were far from the crime there and the threat of more hurricanes. When we asked one boy what he liked about Lafayette, he thought for a minute and then stated: “Let’s see. They haven’t had a hurricane in a long time.” He went on to explain that he would want to live in New Orleans again “if they didn’t have all that killing there.”

Children who settled in different cities encountered new opportunities, such as extracurricular activities at school that they did not have in New Orleans. Initially, children hesitated to dive into new things, not knowing
if they would be staying long. One African American girl, after at first resisting joining any clubs, was voted head cheerleader at her new school in Lafayette and later joined the local 4-H club. She proudly showed us the dress that she had sewn for her 4-H project and had modeled at the county fair. She was also nominated by one of her new teachers to attend a national leadership conference in Washington, DC, and she was invited to participate in a beauty pageant. She indicated that she could not have participated in these same activities in New Orleans:

I feel that, like, in New Orleans we didn’t get a lot of chances. Kids, they didn’t get a lot of chances. They didn’t have stuff like Washington, DC, trips. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I was also accepted to be in a beauty pageant. I had to pick either Washington, DC, or that. I’m going to Washington, DC, but next year they’re gonna save my spot [for the beauty pageant].

Similarly, a young African American boy who had fought the idea of relocating permanently did eventually join a local Little League baseball team and a junior football league in Lafayette and found enjoyment in the sports and his teammates.

One of the most significant changes for a number of the displaced youth in our study was related to their housing situation post-Katrina. Two of the families we interviewed in Lafayette, both headed by African American single mothers, were able to acquire newly built Habitat for Humanity houses. The mothers, as well as their children, worked on these houses as part of the required “sweat equity” hours that new homeowners must contribute. This led to a strong sense of pride and accomplishment among adults and children alike.

Families we interviewed that had moved into FEMA trailers in Lafayette and Baton Rouge in the months following Katrina were also grateful to have new homes. One thirteen-year-old African American boy who had been in and out of homeless shelters and was living in a run-down apartment with his mom and baby sister before the hurricane described how he felt when they arrived at their FEMA trailer:

My mama told me that the man gave her the keys and she broke down in tears... because we never had anything this big before. She let me open the door with the key. And when I got in, I was like, “Do we have to share with roommates or something like that?” She was like, “No...” I said, “It can’t be all mine.” I’ve never imagined having a big house like this under
the circumstances, before Katrina and even after Katrina. So we came in, she let me unlock the door, and she let me choose which room I wanted. And then I chose that room, and then I went in, and I couldn't believe that I had my own room to myself. That was the first time ever having my own room to myself. There was just peace of mind, stuff like that. ... [Before Katrina] the place we were living in, it was a sewer. ... And we couldn't pay the rent. We've been having it hard, before Katrina, going from pillar to post, from shelter to shelter. And it was just a blessing just to have our own [home] and not worry about where we are gonna sleep at or how we were gonna eat, stuff like that.

Other children in our study had also endured poverty and ongoing crises prior to the storm. For example, one boy, who was only five years old at the time of our interview, explained that when they evacuated to Baton Rouge, "My mom didn’t have money. We didn’t have nothing." As we continued talking, he added that when he was a baby they did not have money then either.

Life in the FEMA trailers brought some level of temporary stability for displaced children like the boys we quoted above, but these units were never intended to serve as permanent housing. FEMA allowed families to stay rent-free in the trailers for twelve to eighteen months, and in some cases for longer periods, although there was often confusing information about the assistance deadline and how much time families would have to find new housing. Some families had no place to go when the FEMA aid ran out. Thus, the families in the most economically precarious situations prior to the storm continued to struggle with immense uncertainty in the aftermath of Katrina. For the children, living in FEMA trailers for several years contributed to their state of permanent temporariness.

**RETURNING “HOME”: THE UNSETTLEDNESS CONTINUES**

Over half of the young people in our study were able to return to New Orleans with their families and either reoccupy their original residences or find new ones in the city. Most of them felt strongly that they wanted to return to the city, yet when they got back they found that there were many difficulties associated with returning to the “new New Orleans.” These children and youth thought that it no longer felt like “home.”

We asked a group of African American teens what their families needed
the most when they returned to New Orleans, and they responded as follows. Again, each line represents a different child:

We had to find a house.

Money.

A job.

Shoes. [they all laugh]

These youth and most other children we interviewed were acutely aware of the financial and emotional struggles that their families were facing, even though they did not always articulate their fears to the adults in their lives. An African American adolescent spoke of the frustration of having a fence put up around the housing project where he lived before Katrina. Another student returned to his family’s apartment in a different housing project, but officials would not allow the other units to be reoccupied. He stated, “I think the whole project should be open. They just got, like, a hundred or some families, and they got so many vacancies. They want a lot of people to come back to New Orleans, but I think that if they opened up the projects, they could get everybody back.” Another teenager observed that rebuilding efforts were focusing on people who could afford houses, but for African American families like his who used to live in the housing projects, “We didn’t get nothing.” Later in the conversation, we asked the students what they missed the most from before the storm, and one boy responded: “I miss my [housing] project. . . . I miss the people, I miss the project. I miss everything about it.” These African American youth were also facing the politics and inequities involved in the large-scale housing project demolition initiated by the Housing Authority of New Orleans, which clearly was a source of stress and sent messages to them about their race, class, and place in the city.

Besides confronting the life-sustaining needs of families as they returned to New Orleans, the children also were forced to adjust to new or changed schools. As has been widely documented, the schools of New Orleans were underfunded, in physical disrepair, short-staffed, and wracked with problems before the storm, and these issues were amplified after Katrina. Many thousands of children found that their original schools were destroyed or were closed permanently after the storm; others who were able to return to their former schools found them unfamiliar and unwelcoming, since the
hallways and classrooms were filled with strangers. An elementary school student in New Orleans described being back in his old school this way: “It has people leaving, people going, people coming, people staying, people coming back.”

Children of all backgrounds felt the stress in New Orleans school settings. In private schools, for example, White children from families with resources were also struggling with the loss of teachers, friends, and community and other drastic changes to their school situations. Yet, while children shared these losses across race and class lines, the school setting was particularly problematic for low-income children, as there were far fewer resources available to support them. For example, many low-income African American children were enrolled in schools without a single social worker or school counselor to come to their aid. In addition, the Recovery School we studied had no drama or art program or outdoor playground, was racially segregated, and had a severe shortage of qualified teachers. It is not surprising that children told us that they “hated” their school or wished they could do experiments in science instead of just sitting in their seats.

Another challenge for youth who had returned to the city was feeling vulnerable to future hurricanes. As is apparent in their evacuation stories, they had every reason to be terrified of being in that situation again. Perhaps as a result of their fears of storms, children and teens exhibited an uncanny awareness of weather patterns and the state of the levee system surrounding New Orleans. In one of our focus groups with seventh graders, several of the students said they were scared that another big disaster could happen. In fact, when we asked how they felt about future hurricanes, a student quickly and nervously asked, “Are we gonna have a hurricane?” Another student explained that she had a breaking point: “[If a] hurricane comes, I’m so sorry. I like New Orleans, but I ain’t coming back. After a while, I say, if three good more hurricanes come—” A fellow student then interjected, “One more!” and then the girl continued, “No, I’m gone if three more big ones come, New Orleans gonna be off the map completely. It ain’t gonna be no more New Orleans. New Orleans gonna be abandoned.” Younger children also expressed their fears about future storms and often felt anxious when it rained or if there were storm warnings.

Children of all backgrounds who returned to New Orleans articulated serious concern over the increase in property crime, assaults, and murders in the city. Their knowledge about crime came from television, listening to their peers and the adults in their lives, and in some instances, firsthand experience. One African American adolescent described the ways that violence was affecting his ability to function in the city:
I miss having to come outside and you-all got to be scared to be outside. Before Hurricane Katrina, we would just come outside and [talk] to everybody, but not everybody all over the world, in different parts, we want to know what they is, what they do, how they do. But now, you can't go outside no more. Just sitting on the porch. You can't chill no more. It's just dangerous. Yesterday somebody was shot in my mama's backyard. They don't only come at you at night now, they kill you in the broad daylight now. They just don't care.

Another African American boy, twelve years old, explained that certain neighborhoods have more crime than others, "Just make sure [tourists] stay downtown. They can't come uptown." When we asked him where he lives and goes to school, he said, matter-of-factly, "This is uptown."

Perhaps the most difficult problem for the children who returned to New Orleans was dealing with life without the family and friends who did not return. It was often the case that extended-family members, and sometimes the case that immediate family such as an older sibling or parent, stayed elsewhere. This loss was profound. When we asked middle school students how they coped emotionally, one African American girl explained, "We try not to talk about it," and, as several of her friends nodded, she added, "because it makes us cry."

Children frequently talked about friends who were permanently displaced to places like Arkansas, California, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Nevada, Tennessee, and Texas. One boy, who was in second grade when Katrina made landfall, returned to New Orleans after the storm, but his best friend relocated to Atlanta. This was difficult for him, and he said, "I asked him if he was gonna come back, like when he grows up, and he said, 'Maybe.'" A White nine-year-old said that she was "really excited" to come back to her house in New Orleans, but when she got there her friends were gone and the neighborhood had changed:

It was freaky and it was really quiet... nobody was back, and it was really weird seeing that nobody was out in the school. All my friends were still gone. I remember on Friday [before the evacuation], my friend and I were going to have a sleepover on Saturday. Before we-evacuated we said, "If we can't have the sleepover, I'll see you on Monday!" And I didn't see her for, like, a year.

Later in the same interview, she brought up the feeling in her neighborhood again:
It was weird, because, like, there weren’t any cars out, and all the trees were dead. At night it was just really quiet and none of the streetlights were on, so it was really dark and kind of spooky. And you didn’t hear all the noise outside and the cars running by. It was just kind of a weird feeling.

CONCLUSION

The children’s individual experiences and perspectives, taken as a whole, tell a larger story: all the children in our study, regardless of whether they returned to New Orleans or remained displaced, felt and continue to feel unsettled. Their story is one of permanent temporariness.

Permanent temporariness means a life of limbo. Past research has shown that living such a life can lead individuals to resist developing new relationships or getting involved in new activities, since it is unclear how long they will be in a particular setting.27 It also can result in frustration, stress, disillusionment, depression, and changes in identity.28 Perpetual limbo for immigrants and political asylum applicants means a fear of sudden deportation and a loss of their new lives. For the children of Katrina, living “lives in limbo” meant that every place felt unstable, transitional, impermanent.

While all the children in our study experienced some degree of permanent temporariness, children who were marginalized, whose families had fewer resources, who were poor, and who were Black, were likely to experience this state more profoundly. Indeed, children’s pre- and post-disaster experiences were clearly shaped by their racial background and class status. Before the disaster, factors such as where children lived, the type of housing they occupied, and the quality of the schools they attended were correlated with their race and class. In the disaster, children’s access to transportation and their likelihood of evacuating, ending up in shelter, attending a “safe” school, and reestablishing stable housing were all influenced by race and class. The way in which people treated the children and youth during displacement was often based on class, race, and city of origin, and this treatment manifested itself in particular ways based on age—such as some children being bullied or taunted by older children or youth at a new school.

Age is sometimes left unexamined in analyses of vulnerability and social inequality. Yet age, like race and class, is a social category or structure attached to power and privilege; these categories and many others overlap and shape experiences and relationships. We found that race, class, and age interacted in important ways. Through listening to children’s voices, we
were able to learn about their experiences in the disaster and its aftermath, the challenges they faced during the evacuation and relocation, and their struggles with the loss of their homes and schools and separation from their family members.

In some cases, children suffered from increased vulnerability because of their age and stage of development. For example, younger children were physically vulnerable to the floodwaters due to their smaller size and still-developing immune systems. Older African American children and teens were keenly aware of the racism that led to a delayed and inadequate response to the disaster. They were also forced to confront unjust treatment from authorities and inequalities in their schools and neighborhoods. Children of all ages were affected by their parents' emotional states, and children and youth expressed extreme sadness at the loss of teachers, friends, and important possessions. Children had little or no control over where their families evacuated, how long they stayed, and if or when they returned to New Orleans. They also had little or no control over what schools they attended.

It is important to understand that children are relatively powerless members of society: they do not vote, they do not determine policy, they usually do not make decisions for their families, and they are often exploited or their voices are silenced. While children and youth have agency and are capable of contributing to society in meaningful ways, their exclusion from positions of authority and decision-making processes often renders their experiences and needs invisible in disasters.

Research on the impact of disasters on children has documented the environmental, social, economic, and familial factors that place children at particular risk: experiencing a life-threatening event, losing a loved one, witnessing scenes of destruction, suffering severe loss and damage to home and community, having a parent who is depressed or absent, experiencing persistent uncertainty, and becoming displaced or homeless. Children displaced by Katrina experienced most, and in some cases all, of these risk factors. Research on children and disasters has shown that most children, when faced with adversity, are capable of coping with one or two major risk factors in their lives without significant detrimental consequences. However, children are highly susceptible to developmental damage and troubling life outcomes when a number of risk factors accumulate.

For the children who survived Katrina, and especially those low-income and minority youth who were living in crisis before the storm, there has been no clearly identifiable “end” to the disaster. Instead, children who have returned to New Orleans, as well as those who live in new cities, continue
to struggle to make sense of the loss, disruption, and state of permanent temporariness caused by Katrina. Indeed, the losses children have suffered are profound and have had an enormous impact on their everyday lives and their perspectives on the future. It is our hope that the needs of these children are acknowledged and addressed and that their stories are not forgotten.

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NOTES


5. Abramson et al., "The Legacy of Katrina's Children."


10. Ibid.

11. Abramson et al., “The Legacy of Katrina’s Children.”


16. In addition to interviewing the children, we also conducted qualitative interviews with adults in the child’s life: parents and other extended family members; teachers, school counselors, and administrators; and shelter workers and disaster relief volunteers. In this chapter, however, we focus solely on the data from our interviews and observations with the children.

17. We also brought along Play-Doh so that we could engage in an activity with the youngest interviewees while talking to them about their experiences. This gave us something to work on during the interview, and the children appeared pleased when we told them that the Play-Doh was theirs to keep. As the research progressed, we gave the children who were age twelve and younger paper and crayons and asked
them to depict their experiences in the storm, the things that they lost, and the people and things that helped them to recover. This method was particularly effective, as it increased the amount and depth of information that they shared with us.

18. Most of the children were shy initially, but after “hanging out,” making trips to Wal-Mart with us, attending church, and receiving piggyback rides through the grocery store, they warmed up to us and were willing to share their stories.

19. These various activities were summarized in a series of written field notes. We each analyzed the field notes and interview transcripts and developed a set of codes based on questions from the interview guide and emergent themes.

20. The FEMA Welcome Home Center, which opened in January 2007 in downtown New Orleans, housed agencies and organizations that provided resources for those affected by Katrina. It was designed to be a one-stop information center for federal assistance.

21. We took numerous photographs during our fieldwork, and we included photos of the families and the children’s schools in the cards we sent after our visits. The loss of a lifetime of photographs was traumatic for many of our participants, and thus sending a photo seemed to be one way to offer our gratitude for the time they spent with us. We also mailed books and birthday presents to some of the respondents. We periodically purchased clothes, school uniforms, backpacks, school supplies, blankets, and other necessary items for the children and families that were in dire financial situations.


27. Bailey et al., “(Re)producing Salvadoran Transnational Geographies.”


