

Evidence Based Library and Information Practice



Libraries Assist Disaster Survivors with Information Needs and Refuge but Need to Amplify Their Role and What They Offer

Braquet, D. M. (2010). Library experiences of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans flood survivors. *LIBRES: Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal*, 20(1), 1. <https://www.libres-ejournal.info/528/>

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Evidence Summary

Libraries Assist Disaster Survivors with Information Needs and Refuge but Need to Amplify Their Role and What They Offer

A Review of:

Braquet, D. M. (2010). Library experiences of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans flood survivors. *LIBRES: Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal*, 20(1), 1. <https://www.libres-ejournal.info/528/>

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Abstract

Objective – Describe the experiences and library usage of patrons displaced by Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans Flood.

Design – A qualitative study with interview components and a questionnaire with open and closed-end questions

Setting – New Orleans, Louisiana and surrounding area

Subjects – 314 questionnaire respondents and 30 interview (24 face-to-face and 6 phone)

participants with 5 individuals completing both

Methods – The study consisted of an online questionnaire with open and closed-end questions occurring concurrently with semi-structured interviews conducted over the phone and in person. Individuals were recruited via convenience sample by flyers at public locales in the New Orleans area and electronic mailing lists, forums, blogs, and news sites that catered to the New Orleans community.

Main Results – Disaster survivors use libraries for Internet access, information and technology

assistance, mental relief, physical refuge, and also view them as symbols of both loss and hope. Library resources (including the physical spaces) allowed survivors to regain a sense of control by helping patrons access local information and experience pre-disaster pastimes, such as leisure reading.

Conclusion – The study provides rich description of how libraries can support people displaced by disaster, however just over half of participants did not consider the library a part of their disaster experience. Future research should examine how libraries and library workers can amplify their impact during disasters and disaster recovery, as well as partner with disaster planning and response professionals.

Commentary

Libraries and library workers have often served patrons and their communities at critical junctures. This includes, but is in no way limited to, events such as the Ferguson, MO protests (Peet, 2015), providing ongoing support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali & Gatiti, 2020), and natural disasters, which are the focus of this article.

This research did include some quantitative data but the findings were thematic and descriptive in nature, so it was appraised with the Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies (Letts et al. 2007). While the author clearly articulated the need for the study, unreported methodological components undermine the rigor of the study. There was no mention of a theoretical or philosophical frame for the study and minimal description of how interview data was coded. The author also makes no acknowledgment of their assumptions or biases and how this could have shaped the data.

The known demographic data of the interviewees and survey respondents, by the author's own acknowledgment, is not

representative of New Orleans. Further, 14 of 30 participants did not complete the demographic questionnaire sent to interviewees, creating a significant missing data problem, as from the tables we can determine that primarily white people with some higher education (community college, 4-year degree, graduate school) provided this information. This missing data issue was also observed, though to a lesser degree, in the survey respondent demographic tables. The survey was only distributed via Internet, likely missing important perspectives and experiences of those without or with limited Internet access. Combined with all data being gathered one year after displacement, the author is wise to counsel against demographic generalizations or conclusions. Library workers should contemplate the missing perspectives before considering how to apply the findings to their own setting.

Despite these issues, this is a very valuable study as it centers the experience of the patron and disaster survivor, making them an agent and active participant rather than a passive recipient of the library's beneficence. The study's credibility, which would have been improved with an interview guide or list of interview questions, is strong as all of the themes are illustrated with participants' words. The manuscript would have benefitted greatly from the inclusion of the survey questions as well. Without seeing the full survey, it is difficult to contextualize the limited findings reported.

The author's findings, while written over a decade ago, are underscored by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has highlighted the importance of the key themes identified by the author – information and technology assistance, Internet access, and reading to escape. As Flaherty (2016) asserted, library involvement in disaster planning "can pay dividends in the long run in terms of community stability, resiliency and recovery" (p. 3).

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