

Most evacuees in Houston plan to stay here

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More than two-thirds of the Hurricane Katrina evacuees who fled to Houston for shelter a year ago said they plan to remain here, according to a recent survey by researchers at Rice University.

Of 362 evacuees surveyed in July, nearly 69 percent said it was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" they will permanently stay in Houston. Nineteen percent said it was "unlikely" and 12 percent said it was "very unlikely" that they would stay in Houston.

A white paper summarizing the results of this National Science Foundation-funded survey is available online at bri.rice.edu/katrina/ .

The survey focused on mostly poor, African-American, unemployed and uneducated Katrina evacuees in Houston - a population estimated at 35,000 to 40,000 people - and was conducted in apartment complexes where evacuees live.

The researchers conducted three waves of surveys - one in September 2005 right after many of the evacuees were bussed to shelters in Houston, one in November 2005 after the evacuees were relocated temporarily into apartments and hotels, and one in July 2006 after they had been settled into apartments. Each wave involved just over 350 different evacuees.

"When you compare the results of the first survey with those from the third round, it's clear that uncertainty about remaining in Houston has decreased among the group that we targeted," said principal investigator

Rick Wilson, chair of political science at Rice. "However, what is very interesting is that even at the outset, sizeable portions of the population thought it was very unlikely they would return to Louisiana."

Just under 50 percent of those surveyed shortly after they arrived in Houston said it was likely they would remain in Houston, and 30 percent said they did not know how long they would be here. By November, 46 percent expected to be in Houston at least a year, and almost 37 percent expected to be here more than a year.

While about 60 percent of the evacuees surveyed had been employed in New Orleans before Katrina, a little more than 60 percent are now unemployed. Almost 74 percent have an annual income of less than \$15,000, and almost 17 percent have an income of between \$15,000 and \$25,000. "Respondents to the study often complained about the difficulty with finding jobs in Houston, in part due to the lack of social networks and in part due to problems in getting around," Wilson said.

Forty-four percent of the evacuees who rated their health as "fair or poor" in comparison to others in their age group said they felt worse today than the day before Katrina. Forty-six percent currently have no health insurance; given that 29 percent had no health insurance before Katrina, the researchers attributed the increase in uninsured to the rise in unemployment among the evacuees.

Between 50 and 57 percent of the evacuees said their lives are worse today than before Katrina in regard to finding a job, transportation, getting around Houston and access to friends and relatives. But 57 percent said their lives are better in regard to Houston schools.

The evacuees' ratings of the performance of elected officials and government agencies in responding to the hurricane and flooding and later in dealing with relocation and assistance suggest that they blame

mostly the federal government for the outcome. President Bush received a favorable rating from only 15 percent at the time of the evacuation, from 28 percent during relocation in Houston, and from 20 percent almost a year after adjustment to living in Houston. Governor Blanco's favorable approval rating during these same intervals were 26 percent, 40 percent and 34 percent, respectively. In contrast, Mayor Nagin received consistently higher approval ratings: 41, 46 and 46 percent for the same periods.

Mayor White received even higher consistent approval ratings when evacuees evaluated his performance in responding to Katrina since their arrival in Houston, with 74 and 76 percent giving a favorable ranking in November and July, respectively. FEMA did not fare as well; a favorable evaluation of 62 percent in November dropped to 41 percent in July. The evacuees also became less-satisfied with the Red Cross, as reflected in a favorable rating of 74 percent in November dropping to 66 percent in July.

"Expectations may have been much higher for the performance of FEMA and the Red Cross after evacuees arrived in Houston," said Bob Stein, Rice professor of political science, who helped analyze the data. "Evacuees may have also expected these relief agencies to have taken greater responsibility for their relocation to Houston than either the mayor or city government."

Of the 362 participants in the July survey, 55 percent were female and 45 percent were male. Almost half (47 percent) were between the ages of 18 and 34; 30 percent were between 35 and 49 years of age; 23 percent were 50 or older. Fifty-five percent were single; 27 percent were married or living with a partner; 14 percent were divorced or separated; and 4 percent were widowed. About one-third of the survey participants had less than a high school education, and one-third had taken some college courses or earned a college degree.

Wilson noted that the three rounds of surveys sampled three distinct cross sections and were not intended to represent all Katrina evacuees. The first wave focused on people who had recently arrived in shelters across Houston. The second wave was conducted in hotels and apartment complexes as evacuees were in transit between the two types of housing. The third wave focused on evacuees in apartment complexes almost a year after the evacuees had settled into Houston. The researchers used a convenience sampling method, soliciting volunteers in each wave, and compared the demographics from their first and third waves to similar samples taken by other pollsters at approximately the same time.

Source: Rice University

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