

Why some people won't evacuate: FEMA research

October 11 2018, by Karris Mccollum



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With Hurricane Michael threatening more than 300 miles of the Gulf Coast, prompting emergency declarations in more than 100 counties, the results of research done by Dr. Stacy Willett, a Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA) expert, can provide insight into why some people "just won't leave" when advised to evacuate.

In her research done after Hurricane Katrina, Willett, a professor in the Department of Disaster Science and Emergency Services, identified six major reasons why people ignore mandatory [evacuation](#) notices—age, gender, previous experience, cost, pets and the influence of others. She also offers possible solutions for evacuees, their families and emergency officials.

Varied factors impact behavior

Age is one major determinant in an individual's likelihood to obey evacuation orders. Older residents, she found, are more likely to ignore warnings due to ingrained habits, medical and mobility restrictions, and attachment to irreplaceable records, photos and other heirlooms. Tip: Families in hurricane hotspots can plan ahead, duplicating records whenever possible and pressuring older relatives to evacuate.

Gender, too, plays a role. Men are more likely to ignore orders than women, unsurprising considering other studies that linked gender and risk aversion, Willett explains. Women are not only more likely to obey warnings, but to take their families with them, especially in families with children. In fact, public service announcements sometimes target [family](#) matriarchs to increase the odds that the entire household will take heed, she points out.

Families on the fence about evacuating can also be swayed by their personal experience; overzealous evacuation orders in the past can lead a family to choose to wait out the storm, while family deaths, injury, or loss of property can spur a household to action. Tip: Confident officials can offset the negative effects of past overestimation to convince residents that each storm is its own monster.

Advance planning makes difference

Cost is a major barrier to successful evacuation, but local municipalities can counter it by planning ahead. Tip: Some cities provide free bus services to low-income areas, recording passengers to assist in reuniting families later. Efficiently planned evacuation routes, such as assigning times based on zip code and consolidating gas to major roads, can also help.

Most people consider their pets to be a part of their household, so the idea of leaving behind a family pet leads them to stay behind. Some families lack the vehicle space for the household plus pets and others fear that a shelter or hotel won't accommodate animals. However, hotels are increasingly animal-friendly, and more and more shelters have facilities to care for evacuated pets, Willett says.

The last major factor is the influence of other people. Peer pressure and solidarity can sway a family to decide to stay or to go. Tip: If you know someone who lives in a danger zone and isn't sure what to do, invite them to stay with you. If regions outside of the danger zone are welcoming, residents are much more likely to flee danger.

Willett's research paves the way for better, safer and more efficient evacuations. The combined effects of all these counter-measures can help save thousands of lives every hurricane season.

"As horrible as disasters are, it brings out the best in humanity far more than the worst," notes Willett.

Provided by University of Akron

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