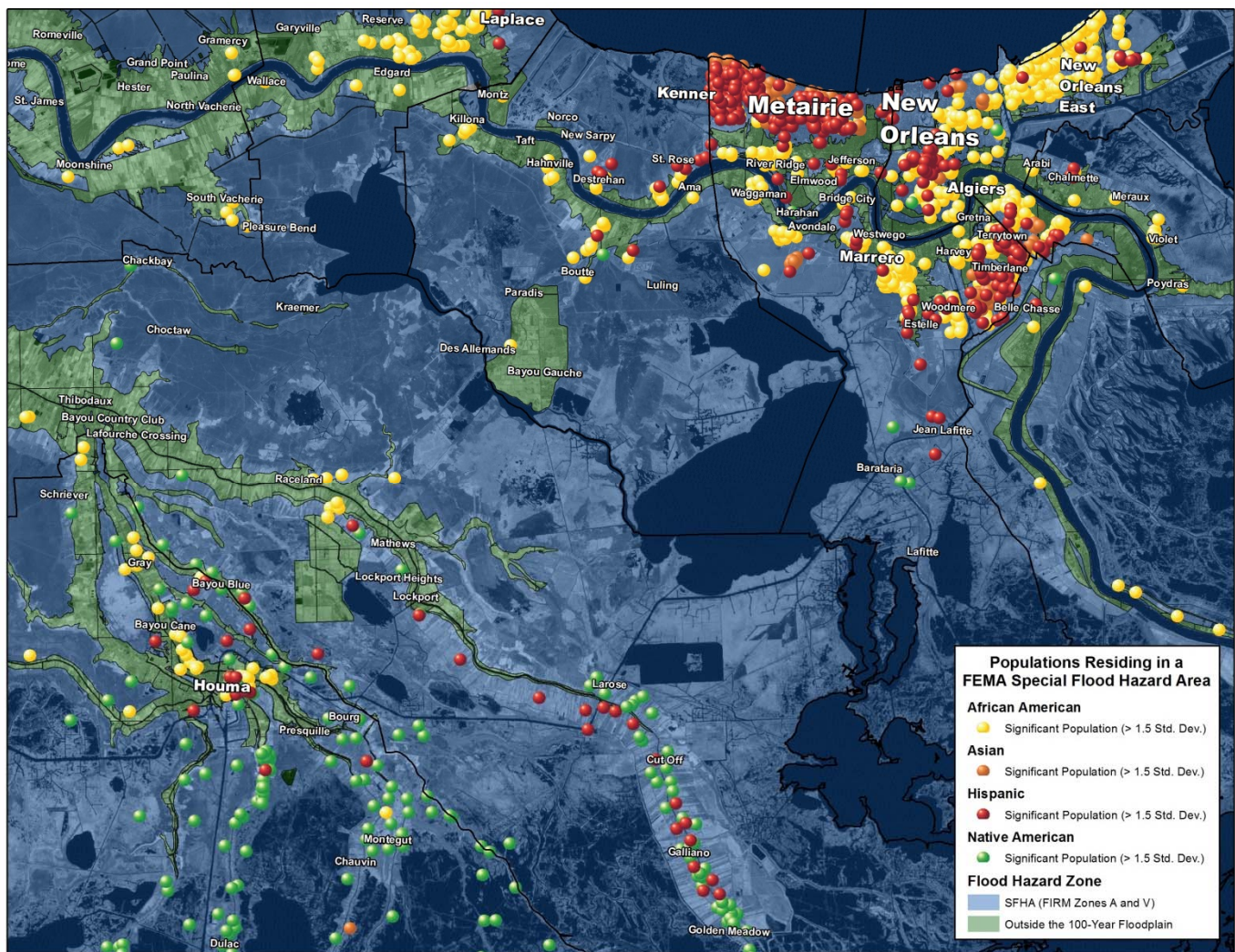


Community Resettlement Prospects in Southeast Louisiana

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Introduction: relocation vs. resettlement

The coming century is likely to see climate-driven migration on a scale never before experienced in human history. Climate change is expected to alter weather patterns, raise sea levels, and increase storm strength and frequency with impacts felt across the globe. While these problems will be enough to cause people to relocate, Southeast Louisiana has the added challenge of an already-collapsing coast. Although there is a plan to address coastal issues (Coastal Master Plan 2012), even if every project in the Plan is funded and works as intended, there will still be many Louisianans displaced by sea level rise, storms, erosion, and perhaps by the planned projects themselves.

The “relocation” of individuals in Southeast Louisiana is inevitable, but resettlement of intact communities is far from guaranteed. Individuals, can and do relocate all the time, and coastal parishes are losing population while towns are shifting inland and shrinking. It would take a concentrated, organized effort to keep these communities together while moving them out of harm’s way. That would be “resettlement,” and history shows that it is very hard to do.

This study assumes that the option of last resort involving community resettlement in Louisiana is greatly preferred over the relocation of individuals. These are communities with distinctive, proud, and valued cultural histories made up of people with strong ties to place and community; the loss of which would be a tragedy. However, the decision about whether resettlement or relocation is preferable is for individual communities to make.

It is unknown exactly who will be displaced in Southeast Louisiana. How resettlement, coastal protection and restoration, climate change and the resulting sea level rise is, or is not, addressed will determine the make-up of the affected population. Whether that population is “everybody south of I-10” or less dire, this report shows they are almost certain to be disproportionately poor, minority, and rural populations dependent on the land and water for their culture and their livelihood.

The Federal government has displaced individuals and communities for a wide variety of reasons – from public development projects to national security concerns – and used a variety of statutory authorities. These statutes often have proven much more effective at relocating individuals than resettling entire communities; however, history shows both relocation and resettlement programs have a difficult time succeeding. Federal and local support and funding often prove unreliable or unsustainable and the history of population dislocation in Southeast Louisiana is generally one of failed government-intervention.

Policy responses to increasing coastal hazards – like federally subsidized flood insurance and Louisiana’s 2012 Coastal Master Plan – have tremendous potential to impact population stability and regional migration. Any rate increases in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) are likely to be borne disproportionately by the state’s marginalized populations. This includes the African American, Asian, and Hispanic populations in the New Orleans urban area

and the Native American populations residing in southern Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. The Coastal Master Plan would potentially provide structural protection to over 86% of families at-risk in Southeast Louisiana. However, sparsely populated rural communities located along the coastal fringe where structural protection cannot be extended remain especially vulnerable to natural hazards and risks. Especially notable again are the Native American communities residing in southern Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes.

Those in harm's way have a demographic profile largely of marginalized populations and local history has led to inherent distrust of government programs that could potentially help Louisiana communities. These issues combine to create a difficult environment in Southeast Louisiana for successfully moving people away from environmental hazards while allowing them to keep their communities and cultures intact.

Legal mechanisms for prior relocation efforts in the United States

During the history of the United States, populations have been relocated under many circumstances – some shameful and some noble, some reactionary and some precautionary. From these circumstances, there are lessons to be learned about what can and should, and cannot and should not, be done in attempting to resettle communities. In general, relocations have been undertaken in the name of public works or in response to a proven hazard. Alternatively, the need for a relocation policy is often simply ignored and individuals are left to their own devices—whether or not that results in a burden on the individuals, their communities, or society as a whole.

The resettlement of communities has proven a much more difficult task. The ability and, more importantly, the willingness to relocate entire communities to preserve their character has proven largely elusive. Unlike an individual, a community is not a legal entity (except in the context of federally recognized tribes). Therefore, organized efforts, when they exist at all, have usually focused on relocating individuals or households, not communities.

Even programs to assist relocation of individuals, let alone resettlement of entire communities, need political, financial, and popular support to succeed. A survey of past efforts in Southeast Louisiana shows the difficulty in successfully managing to resettle an intact community and the political and cultural price to be paid when those efforts fail to incorporate the desires of the communities being moved.

Past Relocation and Resettlement Efforts in Southeast Louisiana

Actual community displacement and relocation in coastal Louisiana has historically been induced primarily by shifting patterns of flooding events, reactive public policies, institutional/legal mechanisms developed in response to flooding events, and federal projects where eminent domain applies. A long history of dissatisfaction with, and resistance to, relocation policies exists. A running theme throughout the examples is the persistence of poorly

managed relocation initiatives that bred mistrust between residents and authorities managing the resettlement programs. In some cases, that mistrust is developed over generations, and contemporary flood control and coastal restoration programs are confronting the contentious politics spawned by decades of broken promises, poor communication, and outright malfeasance by public officials.

Demographic Analysis of Populations Susceptible to Relocation in Southeast Louisiana

The present-day environmental challenges of residing in the Louisiana's coastal zone form overriding and immediate social concerns. As the rate and intensity of natural hazard events continue to climb, population migration becomes an increasingly likely response. In this portion of the study, we are focusing on two primary drivers of environmental migration; the physical risks and hazards and the policy responses to these hazards. Policy responses have focused on attempting to reduce risk through coastal protection and restoration and allowing residents to live with existing levels of risk through subsidized flood insurance policies. While the environmental factors show that certain populations do experience a disproportionate level of risk, it is the policy responses that may ultimately determine the degree of population stability.

Relocation of individuals and resettlement of communities is generally seen by planners and policy makers as a resort of last choice. As Louisiana's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) notes, only a small percent of vulnerable locations would have to consider voluntary acquisition or population migration, with most being able to utilize building elevation and flood-proofing as an alternative. The Center for Planning Excellence (CPEX), while still noting that relocation is seen as a last resort strategy, considers strategic relocation of communities as an essential planning strategy both for the Mississippi Delta region and the lower riverbanks of southeast Louisiana.

The social and cultural effects of migration out of developed urbanized areas would present a suite of impacts significantly different from those resulting from migration out of rural settings. While very little research has been conducted on environmental migration out of urban settings, it is clear there are significant differences between intra-urban or exurban migration and the rural to urban migration traditionally considered in environmental migration studies. Issues specific to urban outmigration have been studied in other contexts, and may include issues such as the following:

1. Vacant housing
2. Blighted neighborhoods
3. Changing demographics as new residents move into at-risk areas
4. Diminished tax or rate base relative to the cost of maintaining infrastructure.

Local, state, and federal governments considering implementing a strategic relocation program in coastal Louisiana need to consider several different factors when attempting to mitigate any adverse impacts of population migration, chief among these being the socioeconomic status

and demographic makeup of the at-risk communities. Relocation authorities should be sensitive, for example, to differences in household structure which may characterize some minority communities as well as the urban and rural characteristics of the communities in question.

Synthesizing the Three Approaches: A Discussion and Conclusions

The history of community resettlement across the United States and in Southeast Louisiana shows us a variety of possibilities but few successes. The mechanisms and plans in place for protecting coastal communities appear to be unsustainable, unfunded, unrealistic, or insufficient. From the perspective of preserving these communities, it is an untenable situation leaving some of the region's most socially vulnerable people in the most physically vulnerable places.

The lesson to be learned from the history of relocation and resettlement across the country and in Southeast Louisiana is that it is easy for these projects to go poorly. Despite a wide array of powers the government can exercise to move American citizens, they are often loath to do so. Should a program be implemented, it needs sustained political and financial support to continue throughout the duration of the project. Furthermore, for a resettlement or relocation project to be successful from the perspective of the people being moved, they need to support the plan and be involved in the decision-making process from the beginning. Every party with a role to play in a resettlement or relocation project, needs to be invested and interested in playing their role.

With notable exceptions in certain exposed communities (and particularly amongst Native Americans), many coastal landowners and other stakeholders are reluctant to initiate or participate in a political process and dialogue that might seem to take their relocation or displacement as a foregone conclusion, especially with state and federal flood protection funds at play. The last thing activists and community leaders want to do is admit "defeat" and give up on homes and lands that have been in their families for generations. The last thing policymakers want to do is push for an unpopular program of resettlement that would have a high chance for failure even if it did get adequate funding—which it almost certainly wouldn't. Given the history of the government's efforts in the region, like Road Home, local communities have a deep distrust of government programs' ability to determine what would be needed to institute community resettlement. Again, the easiest option for all stakeholders is to do nothing. This is the default. It is the disorganized scattering of people out of coastal communities to who-knows-where.

So where does this leave these communities? Going forward, stakeholders need to be involved in the updating of Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan to ensure that nonstructural efforts remain in the plan and that they are adequately structured and funded to serve those who need it the most. Stakeholders need to be involved in determining the future of NFIP: Will it continue? Will it be made solvent? Will it be affordable? Who will it cover? What will be considered when

determining flood maps? These questions cannot be answered without engaging stakeholders from coastal communities.

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