

The Disproportionate Impact of Hurricane Katrina on People with Disabilities

Introduction

While environmental justice has a much wider scope than the traditional environmental movement, its proponents have often overlooked the role of disability in determining access to environmental benefits and decision-making. Disability has a strong correlation with increased exposure to environmental risks, especially those related to “natural” disasters. A long history of both overt and subtle forms of discrimination against people with disabilities has relegated them to vulnerable positions within society and has severely limited their options for coping with disasters. Although this should place disability well within environmental justice’s purview, discussion surrounding disaster has either entirely ignored the disproportionate impact inflicted on certain populations or solely acknowledged the effect on racial, ethnic, and economic groups (Belasen and Polachek, 2008; Kahn, 2005; McCallum and Heming, 2006; National Council on Disability, 2006; Smith, 2006; Stringfield, 2010). Even the studies that acknowledge the increased burdens placed on people with disabilities often fail to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in decision-making processes (Chappell, Forgette, Swanson, & Van Boening, 2007; Cigler, 2007; Davies & Hemmeter, 2010). Scholars, activists, organizations, and government agencies must view able-ness as having a significant impact on a person’s relationship to environmental benefits, hazards, and decision-making. When Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, denying this correlation created a lack of resources for people with disabilities, resulting in a dramatic loss of life.

Historical Context of Disability in the United States

People with disabilities throughout the history of the United States have consistently been relegated to the bottom rungs of society, resulting in appalling abuses (Baynton, 2001). The

eugenics movement in the 20th century was one of the most blatant forms of discrimination against people with disabilities. Eugenicists supported “the building up of a higher race by the elimination of the defectives and the improvement of the stock,” according to Dr. Goddard, who worked at New Jersey Training School at Vineland in in the early 1900s (as cited in “Eugenicists Would Improve Human Stock,” 1912). This type of thinking resulted in support for the segregation of people with disabilities, horrific abuses in institutions, and forced sterilization laws in over thirty states (“Eugenicists Would Improve Human Stock,” 1912). 60,000 people with cognitive disabilities were sterilized in the United States between 1927 and 1957, though the first sterilization law was enacted in 1907 and forced sterilization continued to the late 1970s. Unfortunately, many of the key ideas behind the eugenics movement, such as the construction of people with disabilities as abnormal and burdensome, persist to this day (Block).

Few people have questioned the stereotypes surrounding disability that stem from eugenics. Disability, with its negative connotations, has often been employed to justify the construction of certain groups as inferior. Opponents of both abolition and women’s suffrage argued that these groups were naturally inferior, disabled, and less evolved than white men (Baynton, 2001). Disability justified their control over the two groups, since slaves and women would supposedly be unable to survive independently (Baynton, 2001). Immigration laws in the late nineteenth century similarly excluded people with disabilities, and were closely linked with ideas of inferior ethnicities (Baynton, 2001, p. 48). Efforts of marginalized groups to overcome oppression have often involved separating their identity from the stigma of disability, a strategy that persists today (Baynton, 2001, p. 51). These movements have rarely questioned the validity of the construction of disability as an inferiority, but rather sought to disassociate from a heavily marginalized group.

While the groups included under the broad definition of disability has grown gradually narrower over the past two centuries, the stigma, and resulting abuses, remains. Today, while many advancements have been made, those constructed as having disabilities are often still viewed as burdens on society that are unworthy of protection or consideration (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). While people with disabilities represented 19 percent of the population in the United States as of 2010, they are still treated as abnormal and uncommon (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Given the large number of people with disabilities, the United States has a startling lack of accessible infrastructure, a problem which became life-threatening to many people during Hurricane Katrina (National Council on Disability, 2006). Inaccessible infrastructure, coupled with both subtle and overt forms of discrimination stemming from historical systems, resulted in many people with disabilities having an entirely different environmental experience during Hurricane Katrina than those without disabilities.

Literature Review

Most of the literature examining the impact of disasters like Hurricane Katrina reinforces the historical tendency toward discounting the experiences of people with disabilities. It fails to effectively articulate the environmental injustices inflicted on people with disabilities as a result of systemic ableism in the United States. Most authors ignore the relationship between the disproportionate impact of disasters on people with disabilities and the environmental justice framework (Belasen and Polachek, 2008; Chappell, Forgette, Swanson, & Van Boening, 2007; Cigler, 2007; Davies & Hemmeter, 2010; Kahn, 2005; McCallum and Heming, 2006; National Council on Disability, 2006; Smith, 2006; Stringfield, 2010). By overlooking the ableism apparent in disaster planning, evacuation, and recovery, the contexts creating this ableism, and the relationship between disability and environmental justice concepts, the literature surrounding

disasters perpetuates the exclusion of people with disabilities from consideration in the environmental justice movement.

Lack of an Environmental Justice Framework

A large portion of the literature about disasters like Hurricane Katrina fails to recognize even the most widely recognized disproportionate impacts on certain economic, racial, ethnic, or spatial groups, let alone the impact on people with disabilities. Authors like McCallum and Heming discuss the impact of hurricanes in general terms by only including statistics of the overall death toll, rather than examining the varied impacts experienced by different groups (2006). Belasen and Polachek's study on the effect of hurricanes on labor markets similarly generalizes people's experiences of hurricanes by analyzing earnings and employment at the county level (2008). Rather than identifying differences between the incomes of people belonging to different social groups or even between richer and poorer counties, the study merely compares the effect of hurricanes on counties directly impacted and neighboring counties. This entirely ignores the spatial, political, and social inequities existing before the storm and the different levels of recovery for different groups.

Kahn's paper also overlooks structural inequalities between groups in his examination of the impact of natural disasters (2005). He overgeneralizes the issue by comparing the rates of deaths resulting from natural disasters in wealthy and poor nations. While the attempt to analyze disparities based on income is admirable, the scale of analysis makes it impossible to examine the wide variety of impacts experienced by different groups within countries. While a wealthier country may have a lower death toll associated with disasters, the deaths may be concentrated in particular social or spatial groups within the country's borders. Risks associated with natural disasters are unlikely to be equally distributed across a country's population, as this study

implies. By overlooking the heterogeneous nature of any human population, Kahn contributes to the invisibility of people with disabilities.

A small selection of the literature surrounding disasters does succeed in addressing the high impact they have on people with disabilities, but many authors fail to frame this disproportionality as an issue of environmental justice. Although environmental justice is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to concretely define, it generally focuses more heavily on the structural contexts creating inequitable risks than other frameworks (Cable, Mix, & Hastings, 2005; Holifield, 2001). The National Council on Disability's 2006 report on the impact of Katrina and Rita on people with disabilities identifies key inequalities between the experiences of people with disabilities and those without, such as differences in access to urgent information, evacuation transport, food, shelter, and medical care, which ultimately resulted in disproportionate mortality rates among people with disabilities. This analysis of disproportionate experiences based on disability addresses only the symptoms of much deeper structural processes leading to the systematic neglect of people with disabilities from disaster plans, evacuations, shelters, and recoveries. By failing to employ an environmental justice framework, the authors ignore the deep inequities that existed long before the hurricane made landfall. The history of the treatment of people with disabilities in the United States is essential to fully understanding the challenges they face. By not including the structural analysis typical of environmental justice literature, these authors fail to understand the full extent of the obstacles and histories that create different experiences for people with disabilities during disasters.

In addition to overlooking structural factors contributing to disproportionate impacts on people with disabilities, studies rarely promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in disaster decision-making (Chappell, Forgette, Swanson, & Van Boening, 2007; Cigler, 2007;

Davies & Hemmeter, 2010). Instead, they focus on surface issues of wheelchair accessibility in evacuation vehicles, different methods of transmitting emergency information to the deaf community, or government aid distribution following disasters (Chappell, Forgette, Swanson, & Van Boening, 2007; National Council on Disability, 2006). They overlook the need for people with disabilities to have access to the planning and implementation of disaster response efforts. As Dina Feldman argues in her article on environmental justice and disability in Israel, people with disabilities are generally excluded from environmental decision making (2007). The inclusion of marginalized and exploited groups in decision-making processes is an essential objective of the environmental justice movement, so the exclusion of people with disabilities from disaster planning should be acknowledged by members of the movement. Rather than simply studying the impact of disasters on people with disabilities, researchers ought to examine the decision-making processes and contexts leading up to the tragedies that occur during and following disasters. By not calling for the inclusion of people with disabilities in disaster planning or examining deeper structures creating inequities, much of the literature surrounding disasters overlooks two of the key factors contributing to the disproportionate impact on people with disabilities.

Lack of Discussion of Disability in Environmental Justice Literature

Those authors who do incorporate some environmental justice concepts into their discussion of disasters often overlook the role of disability in shaping people's experiences before, during, and following disasters. Stringfield's (2010) study of people returning to New Orleans in the years following Hurricane Katrina successfully describes the correlations between race, ethnicity, income, and return rates and alludes to some of the historical contexts contributing to vulnerabilities in certain populations. The study did not, however, evaluate return

rates of people with disabilities. People with disabilities are forced into vulnerable positions by long histories of exclusion and exploitation, and this context would theoretically lead to lower return rates. This context results in many people with disabilities having lower incomes and a reliance on support systems that were destroyed during Katrina. Studying the return rates of people with disabilities would have been a productive endeavor.

Neil Smith's article, "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster", similarly undervalues the impact disasters have on people with disabilities (2006). His assertion that disasters more heavily impact groups that have been made vulnerable through social, political, and economic processes supports key environmental justice arguments, but he fails to extend this analysis to people with disabilities. By overlooking the important role disability plays in a person's ability to recover after a disaster, these studies and others like them reinforce a history of excluding disability from discussions of environmental injustice.

Case Study

The construction of people with disabilities as inherently inferior has created numerous environmental injustices, such as those observed in the case of Hurricane Katrina. People with disabilities, especially those with mobility impairments or sensory disabilities, suffered devastating environmental injustices before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Before Katrina struck New Orleans, the city's inhabitants were already predominately members of marginalized demographic groups. 67.3 percent of the population was African American, 50 percent was below the poverty line, and 23 percent had some type of disability (Cigler, 2007, p. 65). All three groups are traditionally associated with social vulnerability and predictably suffered more as a result of the storm (Cigler, 2007, p. 67; Luft, 2009, p. 509). Where these

factors overlapped, as they often do, disability compounded the already disproportionate impact faced by African Americans and low-income communities.

People with disabilities in the city faced immense challenges with obtaining information about the storm, evacuation transportation, shelter, medical care, and reconstruction support (Chappell et al., 2007; Cigler, 2007; Davies & Hemmeter, 2010; Lord, 2010, pp. 119-120; National Council on Disability, 2006). Most people with disabilities dealt with these struggles in subtler forms on a daily basis (National Council on Disability, 2006). The hurricane exacerbated this everyday discrimination and exposed the structural obstacles people with disabilities faced in New Orleans. One of the main reasons the hurricane so heavily intensified the struggles of people with disabilities was that they were not included in decision-making processes related to emergency preparedness systems planning. They were unable to voice the challenges that could prove fatal in disaster scenarios, resulting in disproportionately high mortality rates among people with disabilities, particularly in elderly populations (National Council on Disability, 2006). The neglect of people with disabilities in disaster planning and Katrina reconstruction is a symptom of a much larger historical context that has made the struggles of people with disabilities invisible.

Emergency Information

People with disabilities, particularly those with visual and auditory impairments, were excluded from one of the earliest and most crucial steps in surviving a disaster, obtaining information. While many regulations do require accessible information in emergencies, many television stations and Homeland Security websites failed to comply, especially early in the hurricane (National Council on Disability, 2006). This lack of access to information meant that many people with disabilities were unaware of the magnitude of the storm or evacuation

procedures. Officials also failed to use the Emergency Alert System at any point during the hurricane, which dispatches fully accessible emergency information (National Council on Disability, 2006). Not employing the one broadcast system that was guaranteed to be fully accessible exemplifies the inattention paid to the needs of people with disabilities throughout the hurricane. Many people with disabilities had experienced problems with emergency information in the past and had planned to rely on their cell phones for alerts, but cell towers and power failed early in the storm (National Council on Disability, 2006). When the power went out, many people used radios to receive crucial alerts, but those with hearing impairments had no way to access information (National Council on Disability, 2006).

Even those people with disabilities who received alerts and survived Katrina struggled with the information's accessibility. Many people could not understand the instructions officials gave in shelters, since they were rarely repeated in accessible formats to people with hearing impairments (National Council on Disability, 2006). After the storm many people with disabilities became even more vulnerable to problems resulting from inaccessible information, because FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers lacked technology necessary for receiving emergency alerts (National Council on Disability, 2006). The lack of accessible information across the media is a daily challenge for people with disabilities, but this inconvenience became a crucial factor in determining a person's chance of surviving Katrina.

Evacuation

Those people with disabilities who were able to receive pertinent information regarding evacuation often struggled to find accessible transport. One of the main problems was the inaccessibility of most of the evacuation busses; many did not have wheelchair lifts or ramps and were not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (National Council on

Disability, 2006). Many people with mobility impairments regularly had to wait several hours more for accessible public transportation, but this inconvenience became life-threatening during the storm when it was coupled with busses only arriving after the hurricane hit (Luft, 2009, p. 499; National Council on Disability, 2006). Had local plans included people with disabilities, they would have recognized the implications of this daily struggle in a disaster scenario and provided for people with different evacuation needs.

Another problem was the inadequate evacuation of residents in nursing homes. While people aged 60 and over only represented 15 percent of the population in New Orleans before Katrina, their population constituted 73 percent of deaths related to the hurricane (National Council on Disability, 2006). Many of these deaths were people with disabilities and 68 of them were nursing home residents (National Council on Disability, 2006). Some nursing home officials left residents behind, rather than stay to find them evacuation transport (National Council on Disability, 2006). These officials abandoned their residents, with the result of many residents drowning still in their beds (National Council on Disability, 2006).

This neglect exemplifies the horrific abuses nursing home residents, many of whom have disabilities, often experience. 30 percent of nursing homes in the United States had been cited for abuses as of 2005, but this figure may be quite conservative, given the low rates of people reporting abuse (National Council on Disability, 2006). Most nursing homes in Louisiana had been cited for abuses within the six years leading up to Katrina (National Council on Disability, 2006). The abuses against nursing home residents both before and during Katrina illustrate the relentless ageism and ableism in the United States.

Shelter

People with disabilities' struggles to find evacuation transportation was similar to the challenges surrounding shelter. People with disabilities had more limited access to shelter than people without disabilities. Many general shelters refused to admit people with disabilities, in part because the American Red Cross had decided to reject people with disabilities, on the basis that they did not have enough supplies to care for them along with everyone else (National Council on Disability, 2006). This exemplifies the continuing construction of people with disabilities as being more burdensome than other people. It also shows some of the persisting notions of people with disabilities as being less important than people without disabilities. The strategy for following this policy varied from shelter to shelter; some officials chose to simply turn them away, while others sent them to shelters specifically created for people with disabilities, which were not operated by the Red Cross. These special needs shelters, which housed 9,600 people at peak occupancy, were designed for people with severe medical needs who could not get help elsewhere, not for individuals with visible disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2006). Furthermore, general shelters were legally required to shelter people with disabilities, whether or not alternative shelters were available (National Council on Disability, 2006). The inability to enter general shelters separated many people with disabilities from their families and put them in more vulnerable situations (National Council on Disability). The instability of shelter was especially dangerous since people with disabilities have a higher probability of experiencing sexual violence than those without disabilities (Lord, 2010, p. 120).

Even those shelters that admitted people with disabilities failed to provide equitable care. Some officials placed people with disabilities in separate areas from the rest of the population, even when their disabilities in no way justified isolation (National Council on Disability, 2006). Many shelters also failed to provide accessible medical care, restrooms, and food (National

Council on Disability, 2006). Limited supplies caused problems with access to crucial medical care for people with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2006). The lack of supplies and accessible care demonstrates the lack of consideration planners gave to people with disabilities.

Reconstruction

The injustices precipitated by Katrina continued throughout the reconstruction process. Both short-term and long-term housing posed challenges to many people with disabilities following the hurricane. The steps leading up to FEMA trailers were insurmountable for many people with mobility impairments, and some struggled to access their kitchen or bathroom once inside the trailer, since there was not enough space for a wheelchair to make a turn (National Council on Disability, 2006). While long-term housing proved scarce for everyone in New Orleans following Katrina, accessible housing was especially difficult to find (National Council on Disability, 2006). FEMA guidelines required that reconstructed houses should be raised three feet. These houses typically only had steps to reach the elevated house, not ramps, which made them inaccessible to many people with mobility impairments (National Council on Disability, 2006).

Healthcare, education, and economic wellbeing also remained challenging in the years following Katrina. Many people with disabilities lost caregivers, assistive devices, service animals, and government aid during the storm (Davies & Hemmeter, 2010; Lord, 2010, p. 120; National Council on Disability, 2006). Twelve percent of the children left homeless after Katrina had some type of disability. These children were often unable to enroll in new schools, due to a lack of documentation about both their housing and their disability. Even if a student was admitted, schools often refused to provide additional services without documentation of his or her disability (National Council on Disability, 2006). Financial security also proved challenging

after Katrina for many people with disabilities, which was one of the largest groups depending on government aid during the reconstruction of areas impacted by the hurricane (Chappell et al., 2007, p 361). A loss of jobs and of documents necessary for accessing government programs like Medicaid created even higher financial instability in the population of people with disabilities.

Decision-Making Processes

Most of the injustices experienced by people with disabilities during and following Katrina could have been averted by better planning. Following the structural invisibility of disability, plans overlooked the needs of people with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2006). This is typical of disaster preparedness and emergency response systems, which generally assume that evacuees have no mobility or sensory impairments (Lord, 2010, p. 119). A key cause of this disregard for different needs is the absence of people with disabilities in decision-making positions (Lord, 2010, p. 119). If they were included in disaster planning and reconstruction design projects, the disastrous problems with information accessibility, evacuation, shelter, and reconstruction could have been identified and ameliorated before Katrina hit. People with disabilities had little, if any, say in disaster planning. This in itself constitutes an environmental injustice, as the Delegates of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit defined access to decision-making processes as a key principle of environmental justice (1991).

Discussion

Given the lack of access to both decision making before Katrina and to environmental benefits, such as transportation and shelter, during Katrina, it is surprising that environmental justice literature has generally failed to articulate the role disability plays in a person's

environmental experience. Structural ableism is evidenced in widespread inaccessible infrastructure across the country and in the discrimination people with disabilities face both in every day and disaster situations. Since the Environmental Justice Movement has focused heavily on the ways structural racism shapes a person's relationship to environmental benefits and hazards, it should not be difficult to extend that framework to include people with disabilities (Pulido, 2000).

A long history of abuse and neglect of people with disabilities has normalized discrimination and made the challenges people with disabilities face invisible. While these struggles became more apparent when exacerbated by Katrina, little has changed in the ten years since the hurricane made landfall. Although the New Orleans government made several agreements to include accessibility as a criterion in its reconstruction efforts, infrastructure continues to pose many challenges to people with mobility impairments (Disability Rights Online News, 2007; National Council on Disability, 2006). Information dissemination has also been slightly improved, with television stations' provision of more accessible emergency information, a modernized Emergency Alert System, and new regulations surrounding the accessibility of emergency information (National Council on Disability, 2006). However, these improvements do not represent the changes that will be necessary to compensate for the disproportionate impact faced by people with disabilities during Katrina or to prevent similar results should another disaster like Katrina occur. On a smaller scale, Hurricane Sandy in 2012 showed that changes made after Katrina were insufficient. While the 68 deaths of nursing home residents during Katrina should have evidenced the importance of early evacuation of institutions, 4,000 residents remained in flooded nursing homes for several days during Sandy (DeBerry, 2012). Nursing homes still lack emergency plans and adequate supplies for sheltering

their residents during hurricanes (DeBerry, 2012). While some lessons may have been learned from the disastrous impact of Katrina on people with disabilities, it seems that the pattern of neglect regarding people with disabilities will continue to cycle without a reduction of the structural ableism in the United States.

The environmental justice framework offers a powerful perspective through which to frame the argument for increasing awareness of the struggles faced by people with disabilities. The framework's ability to address both the obvious inequalities between groups, such as the high mortality rates people with disabilities suffered during Katrina, and the structures behind these disproportions allows for a deeper analysis than other frameworks could offer. By including people with disabilities in the Environmental Justice Movement, activists would be able to expose the deep inequities existing between people with disabilities and those without. The movement's focus on access to decision-making processes is also essential to the promotion of the rights of people with disabilities. Their exclusion from emergency planning caused untold suffering that could have been averted by consultation with any organization focusing on people with disabilities. By adopting an environmental justice framework to discuss people with disabilities' environmental experience, researchers and activists could more fully articulate the systemic ableism in this country and promote equitable access to both decision making and environmental benefits for people with disabilities.

Conclusion

The lethal injustices committed against people with disabilities during Hurricane Katrina are reflective of the much larger structures limiting people with disabilities. The exclusion of people with disabilities from environmental decision making before the hurricane, from services

necessary for surviving Katrina, and from reconstruction efforts demonstrate the widespread disregard and contempt for people with disabilities. When resources became scarce, laws protecting people with disabilities were openly ignored, revealing the prevalence of the construction of people with disabilities as inferior and burdensome. It is paramount that environmental justice advocates acknowledge the disproportionate burdens borne by people with disabilities and promote their inclusion in environmental decision-making processes in order to avoid further disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

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