Crime in post-Katrina Houston: the effects of moral panic on emergency planning

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This study used a mixed methods approach to estimate whether a moral panic occurred after Hurricane Katrina forced the evacuations of more than 250,000 people to Houston, Texas. The study viewed data from the Houston Police Department combined with a qualitative review of references of criminal activity in local print media. In total, over 8,500 lines of text were analysed to discern themes associated with media representations of the influence of evacuees on the city of Houston. There was little evidence of statistically significant increases in crime over the months following the evacuations. There was, however, evidence that evacuees, principally from New Orleans, were blamed for perceived increases in violent crime and lawlessness. There are also significant policy implications for state, local and federal governments. In particular, the policies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency were blamed for at least some of the perceived crime attributed to Katrina evacuees.

Keywords: emergency management, Houston, Hurricane Katrina, moral panic, violent crime

Introduction

Moral panic, as a concept, has enjoyed an intellectual resurgence in recent years. In spite of its roots in the United Kingdom, interest in moral panic as a method of critical analysis in the Americas has burgeoned (Doran, 2008). Though no specific explanation is offered, the interest in moral panic as a conceptual framework loosely corresponds with the 30th anniversary reissue of Stanley Cohen’s seminal work on moral panic (Cohen, 2002), the attacks of 11 September 2001, and other major events including the topic of this study—the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Moral panic is a sociological concept that describes, in part, the emerging influence of the media on society. Generally defined, it refers to the reactions and behaviours of a particular group (usually the group representing the dominant culture) based on the false or exaggerated perception that another group, typically a minority group, poses a threat or menace to society (Cohen, 2002).

Moral panic has been used as a framework to help explain exaggerated fears of child molestation (Jenkins and Gibb, 1998), gang violence (Zatz, 1987) and even obesity (Campos et al., 2006). Despite the explanatory role moral panic has played in a wide range of topics, this literature review revealed that the framework has not been used to explain the media’s role in natural and human-caused emergencies and...
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major disasters. This study is similar to other moral panic studies that seek to understand how media images relate to potential threat or risk by individuals who are perceived as being responsible for the threat. It differs from these studies in so far as it provides a systematic examination of the role of the media in contributing to moral panic and its consequences following natural disaster. It also serves the purpose of offering clarity, assistance and advice to policy makers responsible for managing the emergence of moral panic, which becomes particularly relevant as authorities often exploit such panics in order to achieve personal, political or administrative ends.

The media, as a major source of news and information for the average citizen, creates and instills perceptions through the images and language they select. For this reason, it is particularly important to understand how and why media images of disasters influence and shape public perception, and, therefore, public policy. Accordingly, the phenomenon of moral panic is particularly helpful as an explanatory lens for understanding how public perception influences public decision making. An example of this phenomenon was demonstrated in the fall of 2005 during the relocation of the Hurricane Katrina evacuees to Houston, Texas. Since that disaster, Houstonians, who at least initially were portrayed by the media as generous and welcoming to evacuees from New Orleans and other affected Gulf Coast areas, became fearful of, and angry with, the very same people they had welcomed to their city. Across the United States, reports of Katrina evacuees engaging in violence and corruption proliferated.

This study attempts to determine whether moral panic and the social construction of crime lead to an exaggerated public perception about the social influences of evacuated residents. It was designed to determine what effect moral panic may have had on the city of Houston relative to perceptions of crime and the influx of Hurricane Katrina evacuees in the late summer of 2005. To gauge these potential influences, the study examined a comprehensive selection of print media articles related to Hurricane Katrina that were published in the Houston area in the 19 months following Katrina’s landfall. In total, over 8,500 lines of printed text were reviewed, coded and analysed. In general, evidence suggesting that moral panic occurred in Houston in the 19 months following the evacuation was abundant.

Disasters, crime and other social ill effects

Linking crime and disaster induced migration in the United States poses several challenges. First, the damage and subsequent displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina was unprecedented in US history (Birkland, 2006; Miskel, 2006), making a comparative analysis of previous large-scale US disasters difficult, if not impossible. Hurricanes Andrew, Betsy and Hugo were all destructive, yet they did not produce the damage and displacement on the scale associated with Katrina.

Secondly, the research on disaster-induced migration that does exist tends to focus primarily on developing countries. For example, Badri et al.’s (2006) study on the Manjil earthquake in Iran observed that disaster migrants, particularly the disadvantaged and vulnerable segments of the population, often suffer from long-term
negative social and economic conditions. These include poverty, malnutrition and a precipitous decline in education and employment opportunities. There is also a very real concern about a loss of cultural heritage in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina, and there is some evidence that disaster migration can threaten the social support networks. This, in turn, can cause even greater risk of loss of cultural heritage (Badri et al., 2006). Furthermore, there is no consensus about the necessary timeframe for measuring the long-term consequences of disaster resettlement, and even less is known about socio-economic outcomes stemming from disaster induced migration (Badri et al., 2006). Another factor to consider is that there is a high likelihood that disaster migrants intend to return to their communities (Rofi et al., 2006). This suggests that loss of cultural heritage, in either the disaster location itself or the places where disaster migrants relocate, may be temporary, if it occurs at all. It is likely that the occurrence of the disaster itself becomes part of the cultural identity in affected communities. Accordingly, Rofi et al. (2006) advocate for the development of policies to facilitate the return of dislocated individuals.

While the above studies address some of the problems associated with disaster migration, less is known about the relationship between natural disaster and crime or crime and disaster induced migration. There are notable exceptions, however, that not only shed light on the problems produced by Katrina but also generate an explanatory framework to proceed from. Among those studies that do exist about crime and disaster, there is a tendency to address the myth of lawlessness in disasters. However, there is a broad consensus among scholars that the behaviours of disaster victims are generally pro-social (National Research Council, 2006) and instances of antisocial behaviour are extremely rare. While natural disasters present extensive opportunities for criminal activity, deviant behaviour is almost never realised in emergency situations (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1970; Rodriguez et al., 2007) and as Sylves and Waugh (1996) point out, research has consistently disproved the myth that disasters bring out the worst in people. On the contrary, victims often exhibit altruistic behaviour. Indeed, both the sociological and policy literature is fairly unanimous in their assertion that disasters induce pro-social behaviour. From the standpoint of this literature, persuasive arguments have been consistently constructed demonstrating that during disasters people do not become panicked or unable to act. Rather, they tend to take appropriate actions. This is true even in the absence or direction of authorities. Given the popular misconception of crime and disasters, it may be inferred that those who cling to the myth of crime and lawlessness are apt to perpetuate the myth, not out of malice, but for other reasons.

**Moral panic in perspective**

No discussion of moral panic can begin anywhere other than with Stanley Cohen’s seminal work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972). According to Cohen, moral panic is:
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... a condition, episode, person or groups of persons who emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media. ... Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel, and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight (Cohen, 1972, p. 9).

Since Cohen’s original work, sociologists and policy makers have come to understand that moral panics are not uncommon and often cause a manageable crime or social problem to become one of epic proportions.

Cohen introduced moral panic as a result of his research findings on British gangs during the 1960s in which he discovered that the media disseminated an exaggerated perception that the city of Clacton was being overrun by juvenile hooligans. He further argued that local law enforcement was aware of the media’s propaganda and participated in the subsequent frenzy in a way not entirely dissimilar to the actions of the superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department and Mayor Ray Nagin who, following Hurricane Katrina, publicly, but falsely, claimed that horrific atrocities such as infanticide and brutal paedophilia were occurring at the Superdome (Thevenot and Russell, 2005). The aim of this propaganda, according to Cohen, was to capitalise on exaggerated accounts of crime in order to garner organisational resources, such as increased funding.

Moral panic requires more than media over-representation or exaggeration, though. Panic suggests alarm or fear—fight or flight efforts to deal with a situation perceived to be of crisis proportions. Moral panic also involves the demonisation of a socially marginalised individual or group of people to whom blame for the phenomenon can be attributed (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2008), or in Cohen’s terms, the development of ‘folk devils’. Finally, a classic moral panic involves a public audience that is already primed and sensitised to the effects of the so-called folk devils (Garland, 2008). In essence, moral panic involves drawing the line between the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ and developing a social construction of each that defines the rules about how people are determined to belong to each of these groups. But perhaps more important than segregating people into morally symbolic groups is the ability of crime news to shape colloquial perceptions of crime as a result of the news media actually defining crime (Welch et al., 1997).

Jenna St Cyr (2003) offers a unique perspective on moral panic that is particularly applicable here. St Cyr studied the influence of moral panic on target groups (gang members, in particular) and determined that, as far as the gang moral panic was concerned, those individuals involved in gangs or living in close proximity to them developed specific attitudes and self-perceptions that were largely driven by the moral panic. This concept has important implications for Katrina evacuees—it suggests that the evacuees may eventually stop seeing themselves as victims of circumstances beyond their control. If true, the implications for this study are profound: if conditions of moral panic are present, it may be possible for disaster victims to view themselves as the criminals they are portrayed as being in media reports, which in turn could have serious social implications.
Methodology

The study focused on three questions. Was there a disproportionate media representation of crime attributed to those individuals evacuated from the Gulf Coast as a result of Hurricane Katrina that supports the existence of a moral panic? If there is evidence of a disproportionate media response, what are the key characteristics of the moral panic? Finally, in the event a moral panic occurred, what policy recommendations should local governments consider relative to this phenomenon?

This study used a mixed methods approach that included means testing of pre-and post-Katrina crimes and a content analysis of print media articles. The quantitative approach allowed some determining about whether there were, in fact, differences in a selection of criminal offences. This, in turn, would allow for some informed statements concerning whether the conditions for moral panic were present. This study adopts a three-pronged measure of moral panic that is consistent with Cohen’s (1972, 2002), Goode’s (2008) and Goode and Ben Yehuda’s (1994) key features of moral panic including concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility. In order to make a convincing claim of a post-Katrina moral panic occurring in Houston, this study tested whether there was a) an apparent exaggeration in media reports that lead to b) evidence that public response is one of panic or crisis, and whether c) Hurricane Katrina evacuees were demonised as folk devils. The first step in determining whether these conditions were met was to develop an approximation of whether overall crime occurred at a higher level after the arrival of evacuees compared to crime levels before the storm.

In other words, methodologically speaking, in order to make the claim that an instance of moral panic has taken place, it was essential to know if there was a statistically significant difference in pre- and post-Katrina crime. This study was centrally focused on major crimes, since those were the stories most likely to be covered by print media outlets. Another reason for selecting major crimes—which include murder, rape, aggravated assault, burglary, burglary of a motor vehicle, auto theft and robbery—is that these data were readily and freely available from the City of Houston. In addition, drug and narcotic law violations were examined because a number of media references mentioned the potential influences of gang members from New Orleans relocating to Houston and re-establishing turf and drug trafficking.

In order to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in crime, t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-Katrina crime. Crime data from the City of Houston were available beginning in January 2005. Ideally, data for the full 18 month period prior to the Katrina evacuations may have produced better results, but unfortunately these data were not readily accessible. Furthermore, per capita crime was not considered for two reasons. First, the daily population of the Houston area after the evacuations began was a moving target. Population estimates were available, but accurate population counts were not forthcoming, and even the rough estimates that were available place Katrina evacuee populations anywhere between 40,000 and 250,000 for the time period immediately following the event. Because population cannot be accurately estimated we rejected the use of crime rates.
Second, this study sought to investigate the unanticipated effects of a disaster, which means that local governments would be required to use their existing resource bases, regardless of the population. Adjusting for changes in population may have diluted the results of this study, particularly the quantitative component.

The qualitative component consisted of a content analysis of newspaper articles appearing in the Houston area, largely from the *Houston Chronicle* (approximately 85 per cent of articles), for the 18 month period following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast areas. Print news sources that residents of Houston would likely have access to (but were not necessarily local), such as *USA Today* (7.5 per cent), were also included. The remaining newspaper articles were from smaller press and community papers (approximately 7.5 per cent). While this study focuses on how the media in the Houston area reports on and interprets the effects of evacuation to major metropolitan areas, it is anticipated that understanding media perceptions in Houston will, to some extent, be relevant for policy and planning for other urban areas potentially affected by mass evacuation as a result of natural or human-caused disaster. In essence, this study is a content analysis of this data to try to unearth the way Katrina-related evacuations affected Houstonians’ and others’ view concerning the social implications of the evacuated population on the city of Houston. Understanding various dimensions of the perceptions people have about evacuated populations will help federal, state and local governments and agencies prepare for future natural and human-caused disasters.

Newspaper articles and other print media reports were obtained using Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe. Search terms to identify appropriate articles were ‘Hurricane Katrina’, ‘Houston’ and ‘crime’. It was necessary to eliminate duplicate articles as there were many occurrences where the search resulted in the same article appearing in multiple venues. When this occurred, we selected the venue that was in closest geographic proximity to Houston. In most cases, this resulted in most articles (386) originating from the *Houston Chronicle*. Those articles were compiled into a single text document that was imported into QSR’s N7 software application. This study views a total of 452 newspaper articles consisting of 8,542 lines of text. These lines of data constituted the data for this study.

The selected unit of analysis for this study was a ‘line’ for two reasons. First, the entire dataset consisted of articles that made substantive mention of Hurricane Katrina and crime. Using a line-by-line coding strategy allowed the capture of subtle nuances within each article. For example, while all of the articles discussed crime in some manner, a number also mentioned a variety of social problems associated with the exodus from New Orleans to Houston. A coding strategy that looked at each article as the unit of analysis, for example, would not have likely captured the issue of other social problems or inequities. Second, because of the way the software works, selecting a less sensitive unit of analysis risked what was considered to be an excessive amount of duplicative coding (assigning more than one code to a unit of analysis). This study sought to minimise to the greatest possible extent lines of text with more than one assigned in-vivo code.
The coding of this data followed two stages: in-vivo coding and axial coding. The first layer of coding involved attaching in-vivo, or open, codes to data on a line-by-line basis. For this study, the unit of analysis was each line of text. Codes were developed as they were needed, that is, as new ideas or concepts emerged a new code was created. In total, this strategy resulted in the creation of 145 in-vivo codes. The purpose of using an open-coding strategy was to fracture the lines of text in such a way that they could be analysed and reassembled according to major categories or themes. The next layer of coding involved axial coding, or taking the fractured data and moving them into ‘trees’ or categories, which were the basis for the findings associated with this study.

**Findings**

The quantitative component of this study sought to establish whether there was a significant difference in certain types of crime after the arrival of Katrina evacuees in late August 2005. To determine whether this may have been the case, independent group t-tests were conducted to compare the number of certain crimes for the eight months before and 19 months after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. A simple

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-Katrina evacuation crime in Houston by monthly average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>Sample size, pre- and post-evacuation in months</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
<th>Std. error of the mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>27.75 31.95</td>
<td>5.26 6.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>989.0 948.0</td>
<td>107.05 98.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto theft</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>1708.5 1816.68</td>
<td>126.69 133.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>2228.5 2286.10</td>
<td>197.17 270.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary of a motor vehicle</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>1811.87 1781.58</td>
<td>151.07 179.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug law violations</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>885.75 1059.16</td>
<td>116.76 194.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>71.25 61.95</td>
<td>9.18 13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>904.13 932.95</td>
<td>139.62 97.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total selected offences</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>8 19</td>
<td>8627.00 8920.474</td>
<td>580.22 567.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Authors.*
t-test methodology was selected because the purpose of this study was to estimate whether any differences in crime were significant; it was not necessary to understand how different types of crime interacted with each other, nor was causality of crime an interest for this study. The Bonferroni correction was used to control for an unacceptably high risk of Type I error.

In general, it was determined that there were actual differences in the raw means of each type of crime. For murder, auto theft, burglary, drug law violations and robbery there were increases of varying degrees when comparing pre-Katrina data with that from after the evacuees began arriving in Houston. However, there were mean decreases in aggravated assaults, burglaries of motor vehicles and rape for the same time periods. Overall, for all types of offences selected for this study, there was a mean increase in crime. Table 1 describes these differences in greater detail.

T-test statistics were calculated for each offence individually and for the total number of these selected offences in Houston. In every case, with the exception of narcotics and drug law violations, it was determined that while there were possibly increases in the mean number of offences in some cases, those differences were not statistically significant. Only in the case of narcotics law violations was statistical difference in the mean number of offences detected. In all cases, equal variances based on Levene’s test for equality of variances were assumed. With the Bonferroni correction for multiple t-tests, the critical value for alpha becomes 0.0056. Table 2 describes results of the t-test analysis.

Table 2 T-test results for selected crimes in pre- and post-Katrina Houston

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Significance (2-tailed test)</th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>Std. error difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>−1.672</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>−4.197</td>
<td>2.510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.344</td>
<td>−108.184</td>
<td>42.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto theft</td>
<td>−1.947</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td>−57.605</td>
<td>106.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>−0.542</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.592</td>
<td>−57.605</td>
<td>106.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary of a motor vehicle</td>
<td>0.419</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.679</td>
<td>30.296</td>
<td>72.371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcotics/drug law violations</td>
<td>−2.3363</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>−173.408</td>
<td>74.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1.774</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>9.303</td>
<td>5.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>−0.618</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>−28.822</td>
<td>46.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined selected offences</td>
<td>−1.219</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.234</td>
<td>−293.474</td>
<td>240.675</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors.
Based on these results, it is accepted that while crime did increase in terms of raw numbers, the increase was not an amount beyond the range of statistical certainty, particularly with the Bonferroni correction. In other words, we determined that there was not a statistically significant difference in the average amount of these selected crimes after the Katrina evacuations began compared to before the event. These findings are supported by another study that concluded that while crime was generally on the rise in Houston, the increase began well in advance—a year by some estimates—before the Katrina disaster (Greenblatt, 2007).

Qualitative results

A set of 12 axial codes, or categories, were developed that seemed to provide the best explanation of the qualitative data. This study views five of the top six categories of the 12 axial codes in detail. These codes constitute 68.6 per cent of all data coded. This study does not explore the category ‘systemic problems of the criminal justice system’ because it seemed evident that while this was a problem, it was not directly related to the moral panic situation. The data revealed that nearly a third of the lines of text discussed issues associated with crimes being committed by Katrina evacuees. This is not surprising because of the search terms used to identify the articles for inclusion in the dataset. The balance of the text units were substantively about issues related to hurricane evacuees, but were not necessarily centrally focused on new crimes committed. One of the more interesting finds of this study was that over seven per cent of text units focused on the notion that the federal government was responsible for either causing a crime problem, or paying for the City of Houston’s expenditures associated with an increased justice system need.

Some issues that emerged appeared with less frequency than expected, but were notable in the influence they had on the perception people had about crime. For example, fewer than two per cent of text units were about evacuees with criminal histories who were believed to be committing new crimes, but this was the feature public figures in Texas and Houston were most likely to discuss or have reported in newspaper accounts. In all, just over 92 per cent of lines of text were assigned a code associated with one of the categories noted in Table 3. The remainder did not seem to fit within a large categorical area and as a result were simply classified as ‘other’.

There were a number of specific crimes that emerged as key themes in this area: murder, sex offences including prostitution, and violent offences including assault with weapons and robbery. Interestingly, while fear of crime was a consistent theme, another was the financial burden of the unexpected expansion of the criminal justice and governmental infrastructure in Houston and Texas. As one Houston Chronicle report notes, ‘So far, FEMA has sent Houston $39 million to cover expenses related to housing, non-Medicaid health care, public safety and other needs. [Mayor Bill] White estimates that the city will need $175 million to break even’ (Robinson and Lavine, 2005, p. B1).
## Table 3: Distribution of news media references by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axial code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of lines</th>
<th>Per cent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New crimes</td>
<td>Includes references to new crimes being committed by Katrina evacuees.</td>
<td>2762</td>
<td>32.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>Includes references to difficulties encountered by evacuees or long-time residents of Houston in meeting new or different socio-cultural expectations.</td>
<td>1202</td>
<td>14.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police issues</td>
<td>References to matters that appeared to be the exclusive purview of law enforcement or matters of the allocation or reallocation of police resources.</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>9.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal responsibility</td>
<td>References that suggest that the federal government is responsible for either ameliorating or causing crime and other social problems caused by the evacuation of Katrina-affected people.</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>7.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic problems of the criminal justice system</td>
<td>Includes references to problems associated with the differences between the criminal justice administration in Louisiana and Texas, or to the systemic failures in Louisiana likely caused by the hurricane and its after-effects.</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>6.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation and parole</td>
<td>Includes references to the supervision of probationers and parolees in Louisiana who migrated to Texas and, in particular, the Houston area.</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>5.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>Includes references to gangs establishing territory or committing crimes in Houston.</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic engagement</td>
<td>References to community members working in positive ways to solve crime problems or attend to other social conditions in a concerted effort.</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive effects of evacuees</td>
<td>References to positive contributions of the evacuee population.</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social influences</td>
<td>Includes references to social influences other than crime, including health, housing, education and joblessness.</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees with criminal histories</td>
<td>Includes references to evacuees who have committed crimes in the past, but are not currently on probation or parole; that is, people with criminal histories who have satisfied the terms of their sentences.</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>670</td>
<td>7.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>8542</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Authors.

The majority of references to evacuees and new crimes typically directed blame towards the evacuee population. Only about ten per cent of the references in this category noted the possibility that evacuees were being unfairly blamed for crime in the city of Houston. Table 4 describes the number and rate of references according to in-vivo codes (some have been consolidated for ease of interpretation).
Table 4 Distribution of references related to evacuees and new crimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-vivo code(s)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees blamed for new crimes; evacuees responsible for new crimes; population increase caused increase in crime</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees and sex crimes, including prostitution</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees and violent crime</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees and homicides</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees are criminals</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees unfairly blamed for crime</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1163</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors.

Problems associated with probation and parole supervision, and evacuees with criminal histories

A recurring theme during the year and a half following Katrina’s landfall was that probationers and parolees from New Orleans were not properly supervised when they were evacuated. Early reports suggested that there were around 1,700 unsupervised probationers and parolees, but at the height of the moral panic these reports suggested there were more than 3,000 people who needed to be supervised who were unaccounted for. Newspaper reports that described evacuees as felons, dangerous and ‘freed killers’ were relatively common. For example, one article notes that, ‘Texas officials, who welcomed Katrina evacuees, have spent months sparring with federal and Louisiana officials about the unsupervised parolees and probationers, including men and women paroled for murder, rape, and robbery’ (Sandberg, 2006, p. A1). This same article comments that of the 1,700 people statewide who should have been under supervision according to the Interstate Compact 69 were known sex offenders. Twenty-eight of these were believed to be in the Houston area. Based on newspaper accounts included in the dataset as many as 250,000 individuals were evacuated from New Orleans to Houston in the days and weeks following Katrina’s landfall. Another approximately 150,000 were located in other areas of the state, principally San Antonio and Dallas. This suggests that roughly four per cent of the entire evacuated population were probationers and parolees with four per cent of those being sex offenders. Assuming that 250,000 people were relocated to Houston, by best accounts 28 of those people (0.0112 per cent) were people adjudicated as sex offenders.

Fewer than six per cent of newspaper references discussed difficulties with probation and parole supervision. Fewer than two per cent of the lines of text reviewed made reference to those individuals who possessed a criminal history but were not under supervision. However, among those references where an elected or appointed official in Texas discussed the effect of evacuees, 78 per cent involved some mention of the number of unsupervised parolees or probationers or the number of undetected
criminal offenders in the population. This comment from State Representative Ted Poe (R–Texas) is very telling of this sentiment:

*When Katrina occurred, we got the good, the bad and the ugly from Louisiana. We’ll keep some of the good and some of the bad, but the ugly got to go back. Texas did the neighborly thing by taking in these people. Now... the criminals need to go back to Louisiana* (Johnson, 2006, p. B1).

**Acculturation**

Acculturation, and to a lesser extent transculturation, is commonly used to describe the cultural interaction between Latinos and various dominant cultures in the United States (see Grandis and Bernd, 2000, and Taylor, 1991, as examples). For purposes of this argument, acculturation refers to the interchanges between the evacuated population and the dominant culture of Houston. A number of interesting conflicts arose in this respect. In total, acculturation accounts for approximately 14 per cent of references in the dataset. Some of the more significant dimensions of acculturation include the notion that there was a certain sense of social tension against evacuees (92 references), that there was a pervasive fear of increased crime that came along with the influx of evacuees (85 references), and that, eventually, people in Houston began to experience what was termed ‘Katrina fatigue’ and began referring to evacuees in derogatory terms such as ‘Katricians’ (151 references). Katrina fatigue, or the idea that people across the country grew weary of the frequent discussions about the aftermath of the storm, potentially led to apathy and in some cases hostility about those affected.

Additionally, two dominant themes emerged relative to acculturation: 1) individuals who relocated from New Orleans were used to a lawless existence and that those behaviours and lifestyles would not be tolerated in Houston, and; 2) people from New Orleans who were able to work should obtain jobs or return to New Orleans. Both of these ideas were captured in one article about a town meeting in Houston hosted by Mayor Bill White and Police Chief Harold Hurtt to discuss Katrina related influences on the city:

*Katrina fatigue erupted into anger and frustration Wednesday night, as more than 1,700 west Houston residents urged Mayor Bill White to send evacuees home to New Orleans... many wanted to know when the city planned to cut assistance to evacuees through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Throughout the meeting, White stressed that all Hurricane Katrina evacuees who are ‘able-bodied’ should be working, or actively seeking employment* (Kilday and Villafranka, 2006, p. B1).

The surprise in the tally of acculturation issues was that, contrary to anecdotal evidence, there were few outward references to race as being an issue, particularly where African-American evacuees were concerned. In total, only 14 coded lines of text could be solely attributed to a specific reference about African Americans.
However, this occurrence does not discount the possibility that even though outward references were few, there still may have been disproportionate reporting in the popular media. As one Houston Chronicle reporter noted in his blog:

... if you see a Katrina story in the Chronicle or on television you likely will be looking at a Black face. Initially, sympathy for Katrina victims, no matter what race, was abundant. Now, however, some have been responding viscerally, I think, to seeing stories about Katrina victims, particularly Black people (Jetton, 2005).

Law enforcement and police issues
In the first month after evacuees began arriving in Houston, issues concerning law enforcement were common and dominated the newspapers. In particular, articles during this period of time focused on the issues of resource allocation and reallocation, the use and funding of strategic and tactical operations, and concerns about how the increased police presence would be funded. However, as Table 5 illustrates, as some of the crime problems were thought by the media to be associated with the influx of evacuees, the tone of the articles shifted from planning and strategy to criticism of the police department in general to specific criticism of police leadership and the idea that Police Chief Harold Hurtt was not doing enough to protect Houstonians from the negative influences of the evacuation from the Gulf Coast—and New Orleans in particular.

It is not surprising that the police department in Houston was among the first of city agencies to feel the influence of the exodus out of the Gulf Coast. However, what did seem to be particularly damaging to the police department was the immediate increase in population, which naturally required special patrols. It was also unfortunate timing that the city was faced with what appeared to be a budget shortfall for public safety expenditures. In the weeks before Katrina made landfall,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-vivo code(s)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource allocation and shortage issues</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>66.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special, strategic and tactical operations</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>8.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of police leadership, backlash against chief, and belief that chief responsible for crime increases</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>9.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuees do not trust police</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive effects of policing and establishing trust with evacuees</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police organisational issues</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues including police do not ‘do enough’, reactionary policing and general law enforcement issues</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>812</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Authors.*
the police department was publicly noting what they called ‘an unprecedented amount of police officer retirements’ and what the chief characterised as a lack of long-term planning by his predecessors. The possibility that the city government sought to capitalise on the influx of federal disaster relief aid that came to the city in the days and months following the hurricane cannot be discounted. By emphasising the danger posed by the population increase, combined with the fact that fully one-third of references about police and law enforcement discussed resource shortage and allocation issues, the police set the stage for a moral panic to occur. Couple this with some extraordinary news stories about a relatively small number of notable and very violent crimes (19 articles made mention of one particular offender from New Orleans accused of committing several of the murders in Houston attributed to evacuees in general) and it is possible that the police department created a self-fulfilling prophecy, and thus contributed to a moral panic about the evacuees and the amount of threat they posed to the city of Houston.

**Federal responsibility**

Related to the complex issue of policing in the aftermath of a disaster is the matter of who pays for what. In the United States federal assistance to states for emergencies and disasters is authorised by the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (hereafter the *Stafford Act*). According to Section 401 of the *Stafford Act*, federal disaster relief is not forthcoming until the local and state governments establish that the incident is of such severity and magnitude that response is beyond the capabilities of states and localities and that federal assistance is necessary. In such cases the governor of the state must appeal to the president for a presidential emergency or major disaster declaration. Once issued, state and local governments in disaster-affected areas are eligible to receive a wide range of federal disaster assistance. Generally, the federal government reimburses 75 per cent of the state’s expenses for disaster activities.

Under the *Stafford Act* the role of the federal government is to assist states by coordinating federal assets and by providing technical and advisory assistance. The *Stafford Act* unambiguously intends that the state assumes the leadership role in emergency management. Even in a catastrophic incident, the federal government must relinquish control of the incident as soon as the state is capable of resuming its leadership role.

However, the destruction and confusion of Hurricane Katrina blurred the distinction of who was in charge of the incident. In many instances it appeared to some that the federal government was in charge of response. These circumstances likely caused confusion at the state and local level about who was responsible for doing what. Moreover, the federal cost-share for Hurricane Katrina was increased twice. First it was increased to 90 per cent and later to 100 per cent. The increase in the federal cost-share may have led some to the conclusion that the federal government played the lead role in disaster response.
Evidence from the coded newspaper articles suggests that the local governments believed, unilaterally, that federal agencies would ultimately pick up the tab for disaster relief. There was considerable confusion reported in print media outlets about the reimbursement process. Themes were identified that ranged from the idea that local agencies in Houston identified an almost immediate need for federal reimbursement and financial support to the notion that the federal government was entirely responsible for the cost of recovery from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Though there is merit in discussing these issues individually, for purposes of this article what is interesting is the prevalent idea that not only was the federal government responsible for paying for disaster recovery, it also was in some ways responsible for any crime that occurred as a result of the evacuation.

Two reported events merit discussion. The first concerns the housing reimbursement plan that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had underwritten for the city. The way the plan worked was for FEMA to reimburse the city for housing vouchers for rental units based on the city’s determination of a fair market value for units, primarily apartments. FEMA agreed to pay USD 612 for one bedroom apartments, USD 743 for two bedroom homes and USD 990 for three bedroom units per month. The programme’s requirements virtually guaranteed that less expensive apartments would be rented first. According to reports, the problem was that potential tenants had a harder time finding a residence, in part because FEMA refused to allow them to personally pay rent that exceeded the mandated set sum. ‘If an apartment was USD 640 a month, instead of the set USD 612 rate, FEMA wouldn’t agree to allow tenants to make up the difference’ (Turner, 2006, p. A1). This meant that in order to take advantage of housing assistance, at least early on in the programme, many evacuees ended up moving to less expensive areas that were much more likely to have already been identified as high crime areas.

Another event that garnered local attention was the matter of FEMA’s perceived reluctance to share with the State of Texas the names of federal aid applicants so that aid recipients could be cross-checked against local, state and national databases of wanted persons, individuals with criminal histories and those registered as sex offenders. Of all the issues associated with the response of FEMA this seems to be the one that caused the greatest political upheaval. Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott was critical of what he perceived as FEMA not being responsive to the request by the state to supply the names; FEMA questioned the legality of the State of Texas’s request. In the end, the list was produced and resulted in the arrest of 13 fugitives, some of whom were sex offenders. Assuming that as many as 250,000 people evacuated to Houston after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, even if all 13 fugitives relocated to Houston, this constituted a mere 0.0052 per cent of the evacuated population.

**Conclusion and discussion**

Ample evidence exists to suggest that a moral panic did occur in post-Katrina Houston. This in itself is not entirely surprising, but what is somewhat unexpected is the extent...
Crime in post-Katrina Houston

...
When a large event like Hurricane Katrina takes place the result is suffering on a truly grand scale. For this reason, we believe that it is imperative that local governments are cognisant of the potential risk of moral panic. In this and virtually every case, the moral panic results in the social ostracisation of an entire population of people for no other reason than that their homes and livelihoods were destroyed by an act of nature. What makes moral panic in the wake of natural disaster worse than the types of moral panic identified in other situations is that the marginalised population has, in many cases, not done anything socially wrong or contrary to the customs and mores that guide the dominant culture.

Some strategic policy considerations
This analysis, which uses moral panic as an explanatory framework, offers a powerful critique of media–society relations. However, overcoming the effects of moral panic poses a particularly challenging task. The policy goals subsequently derived from the study involve peeling away the layers of false consciousness that have become enmeshed in society through media sensationalism. It is also important to note that the emergence of the moral panic was not immediate. Initially, Houstonians were generous, welcoming and extraordinarily hospitable. In a way that was consistent with prevailing thought about pro-social behaviour after disasters, as many as 85 per cent of Houston residents donated food, money or time in response to the disaster victims who were relocated to their city (Swartz, 2006 p. 12). It was only after the so-called ‘Katrina fatigue’ set in that media stories depicting evacuees as folk devils proliferated. By early September 2005 the honeymoon was over and the Houston Chronicle was beginning to report that some residents were starting to fear crime:

*E-mails, blogs and callers to the Chronicle wonder why refugees draw such immediate assistance while Houston’s poor continue to suffer. Others fear an increase of crime. Some are blunt. ‘Yes, let’s rush to bring over the looters and destroyers of public and private property,’ wrote a blogger* (Rodriguez and Glenn, 2005, p. A19).

This suggests that there is a limited window of opportunity for officials to stave off the potential damage a moral panic can cause.

From the point of view of the federal government, it would be beneficial for federal policy makers to be aware that they may be held as culpable, rightly or wrongly, for the perceived increase in crime resulting from a disaster or disaster relocation and evacuation. In this time when the implementation of a federal–state disaster response is being developed with the National Incident Management System and the National Response Framework, planning for the more sociological and human responses to disaster would be prudent. Accordingly, policy makers and public officials at all levels of government may want to temper their comments to the media about the effects of disaster and any ensuing evacuation efforts in a way that is more consistent with evidence. Free speech is important, but it is equally important that the information the public receives be accurate and realistic. Political motivations
aside, the media can be an important partner to public officials in disseminating crucial information, and rather than a catalyst for panic the media can—and should—be considered an ally in promoting calm in difficult times. This study, and the many moral panic studies that preceded this one, have demonstrated that the ill effects, including the victimisation and demonisation of undeserving populations, are among the most irresponsible policy decisions that can be made in times of crisis.

State and local agencies can benefit from understanding moral panic in the following ways. First, the agencies can resist the impulse to react to exaggerated claims of crime. This is not to say that agencies should ignore these claims altogether. However, agencies should attempt to provide communities with the most accurate and realistic portrayals of criminal activity. Second, assuming these agencies would not use the situation of moral panic for political or fiduciary gain, the agencies can make use of equipment and staff oriented toward actual crime levels rather than perceived levels. Such a move could conceivably save needed capital and allow local agency responders to realign their activities with the goals of response and recovery.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are limitations to this study that must be disclosed. Some, such as the disparity in the availability of crime data for before and after Katrina crime counts and the issue of population estimates, have already been discussed. It is also important to acknowledge that using print media, specifically newspaper, reports of crime stories may not be the most accurate way to gauge moral panic. As an increasing number of newspapers across the United States close their printing presses, it becomes increasingly obvious that people obtain news through other venues. In this sense, using print media reports as the unit of analysis may have caused us to overlook the role of broadcast journalism and the internet. Even anecdotal reports in our print media dataset suggest that visual images of looting and rioting may have had an effect on how people perceived crime in a way that we were not able to account for.

A key claim of moral panic is that the public and media reaction is disproportionate to the actual phenomenon. Our intention here was to test whether the media in Houston (and perhaps the nation) portrayed the evacuees as folk devils in a way that was disproportionate to their actual involvement in crime. While generally concluding that this was the case, we also recognise that in some ways this claim can be criticised. As Garland (2008) points out, such a claim invites debate as to the empirical nature of crime changes and the methods used to explain those changes. Garland also discusses the potential for moral judgment regarding these claims (Garland, 2008, p. 22). If one single person is victimised as the result of the violent act of a person who was evacuated, is that not one person too many? And if it is, then what is the moral obligation of governments to prevent these types of actions? Statistically, there may be little difference in the amount of crime, including murder, but to those immediately affected, statistics offer little comfort.
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Endnotes

1 Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data were available for the full 18 month time period; however, the data used for this study were pre-UCR counts of crime because they provided the best ‘real-time’ estimate of crime during the moral panic episode. Using UCR data in combination with the data provided by the City of Houston may have resulted in inaccurate counts that could negatively impact the analysis.

References


