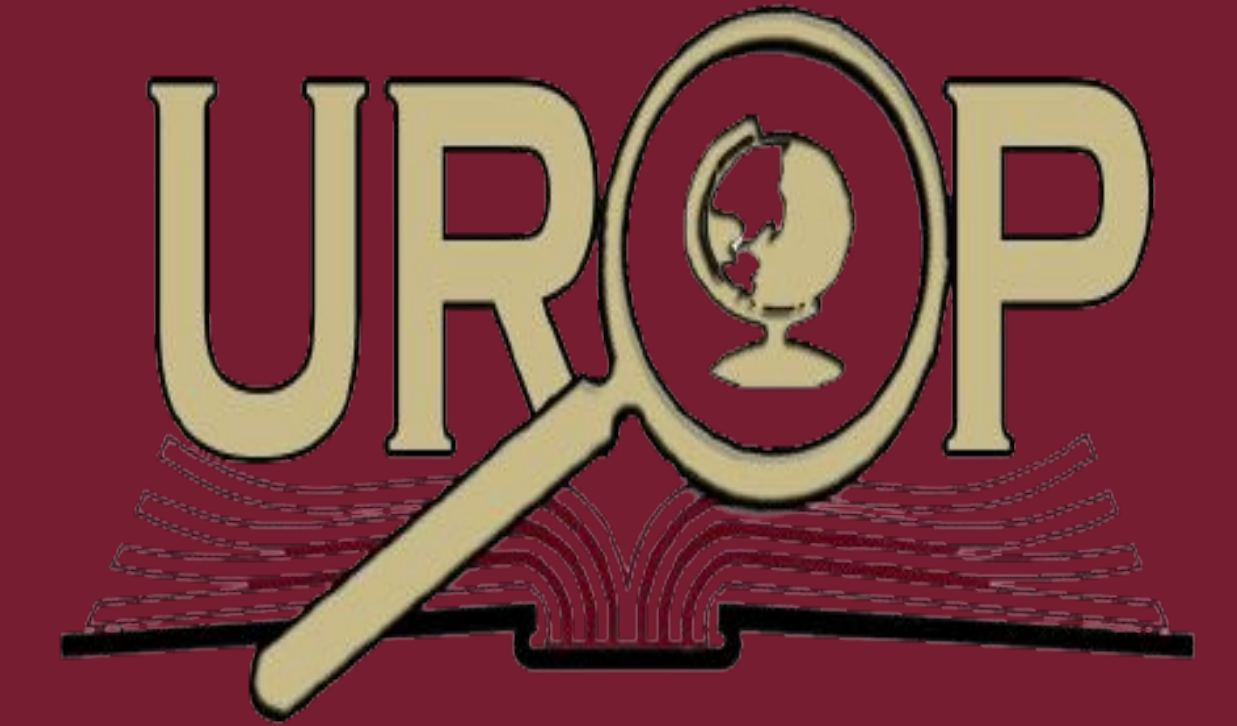




Rebuilding Community After Disaster: Learning from Hurricane Michael and Panama City

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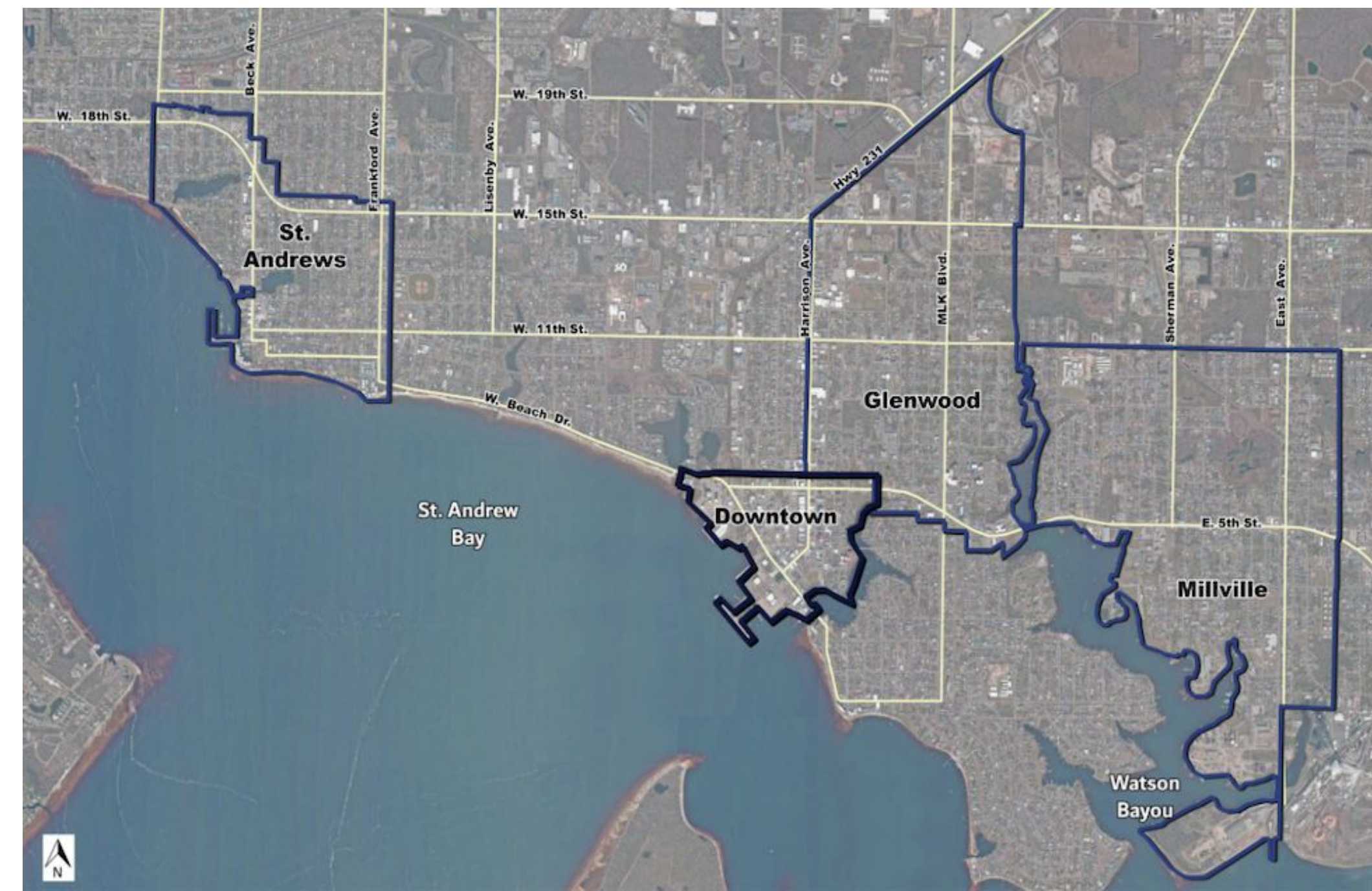


Introduction

Hurricane Michael made landfall on Florida's panhandle as a category 5 hurricane on October 10, 2018. Nearly four years after the Hurricane, the coastal communities of Panama City are still working to rebuild and recover from the destruction of the storm. This research seeks to understand the factors that contribute to vulnerability and resilience of different communities to hurricane impact but also to recovery and rebuilding efforts. Specifically, the research looks at how different communities respond to disasters but also how disasters re/shape communities. Focusing on historically disadvantaged communities commonly referred to as "vulnerable communities" which are often perceived as passive recipients of help during disaster-recovery and how they came together in exercise of agency through acts of community care. Results showed that although traditionally disadvantaged communities are usually worst off during disasters, the sense of community or community coming together is fairly common immediately after a disaster. Recovery and resilience building after a disaster is also a site of contestation to either return to the uneven development or move towards a more just City where the local government as well as organizing of "vulnerable" communities have an important role to play.

Background

- First Category 5 Hurricane to make landfall in the U.S in 26 Years
- First Category 5 Hurricane to hit Florida Panhandle
- Top wind speeds of 160 mph
- Killed 16 in Florida
- First landfall on October 10, 2018, in Mexico Beach



Results

Hurricane Michael Destroyed Entire Community

"The buildings are gone, the landscape was gone, it was pretty much everything that you see completely destroyed. There was a lot of destruction in the area, a lot of trees down. A lot of homes that were destroyed, roofs are top off of people's homes. It was almost as if it was a big trash can. Where everything, it just is piled up with debris, whatever, cars, houses, signs, everything was everywhere. And it was almost as if you didn't know where to start as far as how to get it back. So it really took people for a loop. - Hershey May

Community Organizations and Local Churches as community Anchors

"They play one of the most vital roles. Without having those organizations there's not even a door for you to open. There's no way for you to be connected. We have an extensive network of resources to be able to help people. And so if you're just some guy who just lost his house and you don't know about us (LEAD Coalition), you're a little bit worse off because you have to find these connections and get all these resources yourself." - Kendra Miles

Coming Together After the Storm

"A lot of us didn't know our neighbors personally, before the storm but after that, you know, everybody's on the same page, like, money doesn't matter when you can't access your bank. Like, I ran into some very wealthy folks in Publix who were scrambling to try to buy some food just like everybody else. There were lots of stories of like, community barbecues, like people would work all day and then every night they would all gather at one house and just cookout. I think it broke down those barriers between neighbors" - Taylor Peck

Community Care as Resilience Building

"It's very important. Immediately after the storm after when the hurricane hit, you heard people calling names of people that live in a neighborhood. And because they care, and we were praying together. Things brought out the human side of everybody. I feel like, my desperation to be part of a community is a part of safety, because the safety mechanism, it's about this about the network going off. And I would hope that if there was something tragic that that happens, again, that this is a network that I can rely on." -Elizabeth Hart

Methods

- 24 long-form interviews with members of the Panama City community including citizens, community and organization leaders and city planners.
- Each interview was transcribed via Otter.ia
- Following transcription, interviews were coded via NVivo12 for common themes and ideas.
- Examples of codes include community care practice, compounding impacts of disaster, sense of community and role of churches and organizations were analyzed to form the sub-themes presented here.

Preliminary Analysis

Analysis of interviews makes it clear that Hurricane Michael had a large impact on the sense of community felt by those who survived the disaster. When asked about community participation and community care practice the majority of responses said that the hurricane increased both. Additionally, there were many reports that in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, comradery between neighbors was experienced like never before and then waned following the return of normal operations and services. There were also negative impacts to Panama City's sense of community. Panama City and its surrounding areas lost about 10,000 people which comes with its own set of considerations concerning community ties. Locations that were important to the community were also destroyed by the storm. Over 10 individuals spoke on the significance of the Martin Luther King Recreation Center to community bonding. The center was completely destroyed in the hurricane and as yet to be rebuilt. A lacking sense of community fosters a diminished quality of life and can lead to a number of compounding problems in disaster-stricken areas. It is vital that community-leaders understand how disasters impact the community on a social level and address issues beyond economic recovery.

Additional Research Questions

- What are barriers to community engagement in post-disaster city planning?
- Does a strong sense of community contribute to disaster resiliency?
- How can community care practice be empirically measured in order to track and maintain community strength following hardship?
- How can city planning directly develop a close-knit community following disaster?



References

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