

Postdisaster home buyouts and relocation: Integrating context and community concerns into disaster mitigation policy

In the wake of severe natural disasters, survivors whose homes have been destroyed may choose or be forced to relocate. Recently, U.S. states impacted by major natural disasters have attempted to facilitate the large-scale relocation of residents out of areas determined to be at risk for future disasters through the implementation of home buyout programs. While home buyout programs offer many potential benefits as disaster mitigation policy tools, previous studies have suggested that the process of postdisaster relocation may have negative impacts on residents (Blaze & Shwalb, 2009; Hori & Schafer, 2009), and significant gaps exist in our understanding of these programs and their broader impacts.

To date, much of the research on home buyout programs has focused on factors that influence the buyout decision. The literature has suggested that these decisions may be influenced by household or community characteristics such as socioeconomic status (Green & Olshansky, 2012) and degree of damage to housing (Myers, Slack, & Singelmann, 2008). Other studies have suggested that programmatic factors, such as the residents' level of trust in the buyout administrators (de Vries & Fraser, 2012), are influential in the buyout decision. These data are equivocal, and additional research into the buyout decision is needed. At the same time, it is important to note that the decision of whether or not to participate in a buyout is just one issue among many in a complex process. The difficult decision to accept a buyout, for example, has a host of implications that continue to play out over time as communities are altered or dissolved, and new stressors related to relocating and reintegrating into a new community are faced. Limited attention has been given in the literature to the lived experience of residents as they move through the buyout and relocation process. Relatedly, our understanding of the medium- and long-term impacts of buyout-related relocations is extremely limited. These issues must be carefully considered if we are to fully understand the costs and benefits of home buyout programs, and if we are to identify methods for facilitating successful community reintegration for buyout participants.

On October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy struck the east coast of the United States, resulting in massive devastation of coastal communities in its path. In the aftermath of this disaster, New York launched a home buyout program designed to encourage residents to sell their homes to the state and permanently relocate out of the hardest hit areas (Kaplan, 2013; New York State Homes and Community Renewal, 2013). Through this program, residents of some heavily damaged communities in New York City pursued and were offered buyouts, while other communities expressed strong disinterest in the idea of relocating and chose instead to rebuild.

Previous Activities that Inform the Present Study

In 2013, the first author received a Quick Response Grant from the Natural Hazards Center (grant number CMMI1030670) to conduct a mixed methods, comparative study of two demographically similar coastal communities in New York City: one that was actively pursuing a buyout (Oakwood Beach, Staten Island), and one that had rejected the idea of a buyout and had chosen to rebuild (Rockaway Park, Queens). *This study was focused on identifying factors that influenced residents' decision to participate in or reject the home buyout program*, including an examination of the role of community resilience. Results suggested that community resilience moderated the relationship between community of residence and the buyout decision, leading to

opposite responses on the buyout decision. Specifically, higher levels of community resilience were associated with making the majority decision in each community: accepting the buyout in Oakwood Beach, and rejecting the buyout in Rockaway Park. Contextual community factors, including the history of natural disasters, local cultural norms, and place attachment, were instrumental in explaining these different responses. Importantly, although the data suggested that perceptions of the broader community were more influential in the buyout decision than individual-level factors for majority decision makers, individual-level predictors emerged as more influential for minority decision makers (i.e., residents who rejected the buyout in a community that, on the whole, accepted it). This finding raised an additional set of questions regarding factors that contribute to heterogeneity in the buyout decision within communities.

Importantly, *these data were collected before the buyout was implemented, and before residents made their final decision of whether or not to participate in the buyout* (i.e., before residents made their final choice to rebuild or relocate out of the community). During this study (Time 1), residents were recruited to participate in a longitudinal study of the process and impacts of buyout-related relocations for participating households and communities, with approximately 60% (104 of 173) of participants agreeing to be contacted for follow-up studies. The proposed project will build on this initial study by collecting perishable data that can be used to inform disaster policy related to home buyouts and relocation. Specifically, this project will document the early relocation and reintegration phase of the recovery process for homeowners who participated in the original study and were impacted by the buyout program. Additionally, it will document community perspectives on and experiences with New York's home buyout program.

The Proposed Study

At present, policy and practice related to home buyout programs are outpacing research. The proposed project seeks to address this gap by linking community-based research to policy outcomes, and by integrating community experiences and concerns into the national debate on the efficacy and impacts of home buyout programs. Specifically, the SCRA Policy Grant will support the implementation of a second round of interviews (Time 2) that examine participants' experience of the buyout or rebuilding process in the 18 months since the buyout was fully implemented. These interviews will focus on the *experience of the buyout process* and the *early relocation and reintegration phase* for households that relocate (and, for comparison, the early recovery phase for households that chose to rebuild in their original communities), and will include a specific focus on documenting experiences, perceptions, and recommendations that have implications for buyout and postdisaster relocation policy.

Building on an existing dataset from the 2013 study, this study represents a longitudinal exploration into the issue of with whom and in what contexts home buyout programs are successful. Using the State of New York's post-Sandy Home Buyout Program as a case example, we will address the following four research questions.

RQ1: What are the medium-term impacts of home buyout programs for residents who accept buyouts, and what factors facilitate or hinder the successful integration of relocated residents into their new communities?

RQ2: How do households and communities that reject buyouts compare to those that relocate in terms of community resilience, social disruption, and perception of risk?

RQ3: What household- and community-level factors contribute to heterogeneous responses to the buyout decision within neighborhoods?

RQ4: How do communities that are impacted by home buyout programs perceive the value of those programs, and what recommendations do they have for how the programs could be improved?

Research on the experience of home buyout programs and the effects of buyouts over time for residents who relocate has been limited. This research will document the lived experiences of buyout participants in *in the time since the buyout was implemented* (the early post-relocation phase), and explore residents' perceptions of factors that have facilitated or hindered their integration into a new community (RQ1). Also, by continuing to collect data on the recovery process in a demographically similar community that decided to rebuild rather than pursue a buyout (Rockaway Park), this study allows for a comparative assessment of the impacts of buyout-related decisions over time (RQ2). Third, this study will examine factors that contribute to heterogeneous responses in the buyout decision within neighborhoods. This issue will be examined through the inclusion of both participants who made the majority decision in their community (e.g., households that accepted a buyout in a community that, on the whole, opted to accept a buyout) and households that made the minority decision (e.g., households that rejected a buyout in a community that, on the whole, opted to accept a buyout) (RQ3). Finally, this study will document community perspectives on the buyout program as it was implemented in New York and elicit recommendations for how similar programs could be improved in the future (RQ4).

Our ultimate goal in conducting these Time 2 interviews is to document the lived experiences of residents impacted by buyout programs and begin to integrate these community perspectives into the national debate on buyout programs and policies. At present, community perspectives are largely undocumented and unrepresented in these discussions and, in turn, in buyout policies and practices. By collecting these data, actively translating them into policy recommendations, and engaging in outreach to relevant agencies, we will begin to address this gap.

Method

Participants from this study will be recruited from homeowners who participated in the original 2013 study and who agreed to be contacted for future studies. Participants will be contacted by phone, email, and/or mail and asked to participate in the present study. While we would ideally like to reach all participants from the 2013 study who agreed to be contacted, our goal is to successfully recruit 75 participants for the present study. As part of this process, we will also reconnect with leaders of the local community organizations with whom we partnered in the 2013 study.

Data will be collected through phenomenological semi-structured interviews. All participants from the 2013 study who are successfully recruited for this study will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview protocol will be framed by our four research questions. In keeping with phenomenological methodology, the protocol will include

questions pertaining to the details and nature of the participant’s experience, either in the buyout or rebuilding process. Particular attention will be given to participants’ perceptions of life changes that have occurred as a result of Sandy, the relocation, or the rebuilding process, and to reflections on their choices to date, including how those choices have influenced their social support networks and perception of risk. Additionally, interview questions will examine participants’ views on the structure and implementation of the buyout program itself. For example, participants will be asked to reflect on the role of buyout information and leadership in the process, what components of the program were most helpful and most challenging, and what recommendations they would offer for adjusting these programs in the future. Data will be analyzed according to two qualitative methodologies. Qualitative data related to the lived experiences and impacts of buyouts and relocation will be analyzed according to phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), designed to systematically explore and describe the lived experiences of a shared phenomenon. Additional data will be analyzed using grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), selected because of its applicability in exploratory research.

All interviews will be conducted in-person or by phone, at a time and place that is convenient for the participant. Interviews will be designed to take between 30-60 minutes. With the participant’s consent, interviews will be digitally recorded. As support for their time spent participating in this study, interview participants will receive a \$20.00 gift card. Protection of human subjects will be secured through the Institutional Review Board of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. See Table 1 for a project timeline and list of project deliverables.

Table 1. Project Deliverables and Timeline

Project Activity	Month (January 2015 – January 2016)												
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J
Obtain IRB approval	X												
Pretest interview guide		X	X										
Contact and recruit participants from 2013 study		X	X										
Conduct interviews			X	X	X	X							
Transcribe & quality check interview data				X	X	X	X						
Analyze interview data							X	X	X				
Develop policy recommendations and white papers										X	X		
Member check policy documents												X	
Disseminate findings to communities												X	X
Disseminate findings to relevant local, state, and federal agencies													X

Policy Implications

In responding to natural disasters, it is essential that programs and policies reflect and accommodate the strengths and needs of the affected communities (SCRA Task Force for Disaster Community Readiness and Recovery, 2010). In the case of state and federal policies that relate to home buyout programs, more research is needed to understand the implications of these policies at the community level and the impacts on households that are faced with a relocation decision. At a basic level, these policies are establishing the framework for who is (and,

importantly, who is not) eligible for buyouts and other forms of financial assistance in each state. Beyond that, however, they are the source of a great deal of frustration and anxiety among residents, as many must make major decisions about rebuilding or relocating in an atmosphere of policy ambiguity, and without a clear understanding of the costs and benefits associated with participation in a home buyout program.

Just as disasters impact entire communities, disaster policy shapes the programs and options available to residents of disaster-affected communities. This study has the potential to make significant contributions to both the literature and disaster policy by increasing our understanding of postdisaster relocation, specifically relocation that is facilitated through federally funded home buyout programs. These questions will become increasingly important as the effects of climate change are felt in heavily populated areas, and more communities are faced with the prospect of relocation. Further, while the decision to relocate after a disaster is technically an individual or household level decision, our previous research has demonstrated that contextual factors also play a critical role. By collecting data on the lived experiences of residents who are impacted by home buyout programs, we hope to use our understanding of the experience of disaster recovery at the community level to impact the design and implementation of home buyout and relocation policies and programs. If we want to ensure that these policies succeed in their stated goal of assisting residents in the process of recovery, then it is critical that we consider these issues from an ecological perspective and over time.

Dissemination

Dissemination is a key component of this project, as one of our primary goals is to introduce community perspectives and concerns about home buyout programs into state and federal policy discussions on this issue. We will disseminate findings from this study through three channels. Academic dissemination will include conference presentations and the submission of our findings for publication in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. Second, we will disseminate the findings to community groups in our participating communities and the neighboring areas. We will send a summary of pertinent findings to the leaders of our partner community organizations and, if appropriate, give community presentations to highlight findings, discuss themes, and explain how findings may be used to help communities faced with a similar decision in the future. This process will provide additional opportunities for community feedback and discussion, and may inform community action and decision making around disaster mitigation and planning. Third, we will disseminate our findings to relevant policy organizations, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency Region II Office, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the New York State Office of Community Renewal, and the New York State Office of Emergency Management. For this component of the dissemination process, we will prepare and distribute a “white paper” that details the findings and key policy recommendations from the study. If appropriate, we will also give presentations of our findings.

Budget Justification and Timeline

If funding is in place by December of 2014, we will begin outreach for this project in mid-January, 2015, pending Institutional Review Board approval. We anticipate data collection to continue through June 2015, at which time we will begin data analysis. In total, we expect this study to last one year, with an anticipated completion date of January 2016.

Given this timeframe, just over one year will have passed since the first buyouts were executed in Oakwood Beach. Participants who were involved in a buyout will be able to report on their experiences of the buyout and their early resettlement process. In addition, residents of Rockaway Park will be able to reflect on changes that have occurred since Sandy, and since the first round of data were collected in the summer of 2013. All participants will be able to provide data related to measures of community resilience, and to report on current levels of social disruption and perceptions of risk. Participants will also have had time to reflect on their experiences related to the buyout process, and may have recommendations for how to improve buyout programs and policies.

The following budget reflects expected expenses for this study (see Table 2). We are requesting a total of \$4,486.00. Data collection for this study will involve a total of eight trips (including 5 overnight stays) from the first author's current residence (Allentown, PA) to New York City. Travel costs include mileage reimbursement at the current federal rate of \$0.56/mile, tolls, parking, and lodging. A per diem, calculated at the federal rate of \$46 per day, is included. Respondents will receive a gift card in the amount of \$20 for their participation.

Table 2. Proposed Budget

Item	Total Cost
Mileage reimbursement (8 trips @ 249 miles*\$0.56/mi)	\$1,116
Tolls and parking	\$160
Hotel (5 nights @ \$190/night)	\$950
Supplies	\$300
Per diem (\$46/day * 10 days)	\$460
Participant incentives (75 participants @ \$20 each)	\$1500
TOTAL	\$4,486

References

- Blaze, J. T., & Shwalb, D. W. (2009). Resource loss and relocation: A follow-up study of adolescents two years after Hurricane Katrina. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 1(4), 312–322. doi:10.1037/a0017834
- Corbin, J. W., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- De Vries, D. H., & Fraser, J. C. (2012). Citizenship rights and voluntary decision making in post-disaster U.S. floodplain buyout mitigation programs. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 30(1), 1–33.
- Green, T. F., & Olshansky, R. B. (2012). Rebuilding housing in New Orleans: The Road Home Program after the Hurricane Katrina disaster. *Housing Policy Debate*, 22(1), 75–99.
- Hori, M., & Schafer, M. J. (2009). Social costs of displacement in Louisiana after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *Population and Environment*, 31(1-3), 64–86. doi:10.1007/s11111-009-0094-0
- Kaplan, T. (2013, February 3). Cuomo seeking home buyouts in flood zones. *New York Times*.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers, C. A., Slack, T., & Singelmann, J. (2008). Social vulnerability and migration in the wake of disaster: The case of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. *Population and Environment*, 29(6), 271–291. doi:10.1007/s11111-008-0072-y
- New York State Homes and Community Renewal. (2013). *State of New York action plan for Community Development Block Grant program disaster recovery* (p. 61).
- SCRA Task Force for Disaster Community Readiness and Recovery. (2010). *How to help your community recover from disaster: A manual for planning and action*.