

# AFTERMATH

Two natural disasters, roughly a century apart, devastate a pair of American port cities.

One quickly regained its position as a center of global commerce. The other became a cautionary tale on how not to manage a disaster.

UNC Greensboro sociology professor Steve Kroll-Smith examines how market forces, class, and race combined to produce two different outcomes in “Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster.”

The book, due in July, is his second on Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans in 2005. The first, 2015’s “Left to Chance: Hurricane Katrina and the Story of Two New Orleans Neighborhoods,” was co-written with University of New Orleans sociology professors Vern Baxter and Pam Jenkins.

“Before we finished that first book, I had started to look at the San Francisco earthquake,” he says. “These were two iconic cities, and I thought a comparison might be worth the effort.”

San Francisco, Dr. Kroll-Smith says, “recovered miraculously” following the earthquake, which killed 3,000 people and resulted in fires that torched large swaths of the city.

“San Francisco at that time was the most powerful banking center in the West,” he says. “It was also the main port of call for trade between the U.S. and Asia. So the Roosevelt administration made it a top priority to get the city back up and running.”

New Orleans, while generating a good deal of tourism revenue, isn’t a major financial center, Kroll-Smith says. “New Orleans is not the port city it used to be, and in some ways it was viewed as market expendable.”

The city is predominantly African American, and Kroll-Smith believes that race and socioeconomics were factors in the slow response from federal authorities after Katrina.

An estimated 1,800 people died because of the storm, including more than 1,500 in Louisiana.

With funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, he and his colleagues spent four years studying recovery in New Orleans. In “Left to Chance,” they focused on two mostly African American neighborhoods, one working class, the other middle class.


More people in the middle-class neighborhood were able to evacuate prior to Katrina’s arrival, and were able to apply for assistance more easily as a result, Kroll-Smith says. Still, relief wasn’t made very accessible for anybody.

“It became a real feat of gymnastics to jump through the necessary hoops to get the money set aside for rebuilding your house, buying new furniture,” he says. “The administration of relief itself became a significant stressor in people’s lives.”

Last year, Hurricanes Harvey and Maria devastated Houston and Puerto Rico, causing hundreds of billions in damage. The coming years, Kroll-Smith says, will likely bring similar catastrophes.

“Katrina was in a lot of ways a school marm, in that she had a lot to teach us about what we can anticipate in terms of severity of storms, and in terms of how unprepared we are for a relief effort,” he says. “I don’t think those lessons were learned, quite frankly. And we need to think of more than infrastructure recovery, as important as that is. There are psychological and social traumas. It’s far harder to recover a self than to recover a structure.”

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Kroll-Smith says disasters create “fissures” in society. “You see what actually makes people tick, what keeps things hanging together.”