

The great Katrina migration

In just 14 days, the hurricane scattered as many as 1 million evacuees across the US, the largest dislocation in 150 years.

By [Peter Grier](#), Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / September 12, 2005 at 12:09 pm EDT

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Rhode Island has more than 100 evacuees in Navy housing. Ohio has 20 in Red Cross shelters, plus almost 2,000 staying with relatives or friends. California has 807 families in hotels, while Massachusetts is putting up some 200 individuals at an old military base on Cape Cod.

States on the edge of the devastated area have larger numbers, of course, with 50,000 in Arkansas and 200,000 in Texan shelters and homes.

Two weeks after it blew through the US Gulf Coast, it's clear that hurricane Katrina has resulted in the largest displacement of Americans in 150 years - if not the largest ever. The scale is monumental. It's as if the entire Dust Bowl migration occurred in 14 days, or the dislocations caused by the Civil War took place on fast-forward.

Many evacuees are putting down roots in new areas and say they'll never return. Others face months of a temporary existence before they can go home. Whatever they do, the nation may never be the same, as a smaller New Orleans rises up from its ruins, and bits of Creole culture are seeded from East coast to West.

"This is the biggest resettlement in American history. A whole city has been uprooted," says Stephen Kleinberg, a sociology professor at Rice University in Houston.

If nothing else, the resettlement is already a story in state-to-state generosity. As of Sunday, there were an estimated 374,000 hurricane Katrina refugees in shelters, hotels, homes and other housing in 34 states and the District of Columbia, according to the Red Cross and state relief officials.

The total number of refugees may surpass 1 million, but a large percentage have been absorbed into their own relative's homes, say experts.

In many cases evacuees have ended up in places far from their native Gulf coast. A surprisingly large percentage of them say they like what they see.

Take Arizona. Whether it's the clear weather in the Valley of the Sun, the helpful support, or being far from the reach of hurricanes, many of the hundreds of evacuees brought to Arizona intend to stay.

Vanessa Willis-Nelson beams as she strides out into the noonday sun from the State Fair Exhibit building. Inside, the Arizona Job Services department is holding a two-day job fair for Katrina refugees, many of whom are temporarily living in the adjacent Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

Ms. Willis-Nelson says a lot has happened in the past eight days to contribute to her sunny disposition. She has been offered a job at a local nursing home, and her husband has found work at a local warehouse. This week her family is scheduled to move into a subsidized apartment.

"I ain't ever going back," she says. "Here we have three good meals a day, new clothes, and good medical treatment. You can't get that kind of help in New Orleans."

Besides, the hurricane was the most frightening experience of her life, and she has no desire to ever repeat it. She says her New Orleans home flooded so fast that she was in water up to her neck on the second floor of her home before she knew it. A military helicopter plucked her, her husband, eight children, and two grandchildren from their rooftop. Then they were put on a plane - for the first time in their lives - and landed in Phoenix on Sept. 3.

"We're going to start all over again here," she says. "Thank God for the change."

Timothy Ambrose couldn't agree more. Dressed in a brown Speedo T-shirt, blue jeans, and new white Adidas sneakers, he seems overwhelmed by the help he's received in Arizona.

Two firms at the job fair offered Mr. Ambrose positions. In addition, Red Cross volunteers helped him locate his wife who ended up in Shreveport, La., while he landed in Phoenix.

"I'm here to stay," he says of Arizona. "I like the atmosphere, the beautiful, lovely people here."

From the state of Arizona's point of view, its job fair has been highly successful. Of the approximately 120 evacuees who participated during the fair's first two days, 56 found immediate employment, says Santos Rodriguez, a spokesman for Arizona Job Services.

Many evacuees will return to New Orleans, of course. But the city was already shrinking: from a peak of 630,000 in 1960, its population had declined to 445,000 this year.

"For New Orleans, the big questions hinge around when it is rebuilt: How many people will it be rebuilt for, and who will they be?" says Alan Berube, a fellow in metropolitan policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Texas has long received the largest share of New Orleans' outmigration, notes Mr. Berube. It's true for Katrina evacuees as well. The Lone Star State now has more than half of the shelter-based displaced population.

At Houston's Toyota Center this week, thousands of evacuees came to inquire about jobs, apartments, legal aid, and medical care. At a job fair people were getting help with their résumés, browsing bulletin boards, and slurping free ice cream.

Gaston Duronslet is standing in front of the bulletin board, scanning it for information technology postings. A single dad with three kids, he worked for DuPont in New Orleans before the storm.

His children are already enrolled in Texas schools. He's received an apartment rent-free for a month while he looks for a job. So far, he's been overwhelmed by Texan generosity; noticing his Louisiana license plates, one couple followed him until he stopped at a deli for dinner and paid for his meal. "I've already written New Orleans off," says Mr. Duronslet, whose family has lived there since the mid-1800s.

A big city like Houston is unlikely to be changed very much by an influx of Louisianans. Urban areas in the US are already largely populated by people transplanted from elsewhere. But the smaller the community that receives new residents, the larger the corresponding effect.

"The impact in cities like Houston and Miami won't be very big," says Chris Girard, a professor in the department of sociology and anthropology at Florida International University. "But in rural communities and states that are more homogenous, there will be a much bigger impact and there will be some culture shock."

Baton Rouge, for instance, has always been more staid than its neighbor New Orleans, 80 miles away. It's a "big small town," as one local resident puts it.

But it has suddenly become a big, big town, as thousands of evacuees have moved in.

Many residents have embraced those in need, donating clothes, and volunteering at relief centers. But an undercurrent of suspicion may be arising in the wake of hurricane Katrina. One waiter told a visitor about a "hostage situation" in the city. Stories of car-jackings, looting, and riots are rampant.

"It has settled down a lot over the last few days because there has not been the crime in the street people [expected]," says Rene DeLaune, a retired social worker who will be joining a mental health initiative to target those displaced by the storm.

Still, the sheer number of new residents has meant traffic snarls, long lines at post offices, and barren grocery shelves. Mr. DeLaune says some in town are worried that the new population will take existing jobs.

"This has never happened before [in recent history], that a city has expanded so much so quickly ... people resent that the city might change forever," he says.

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