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Storm Will Have a Long-Term Emotional Effect on Some, Experts Say

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

Once the hard work of physical survival is complete, another kind of flood will begin, carrying with it remembered images of bloated bodies, rotting sewage and neighbors ragged with hunger, some turning desperate.

Psychologists who study disasters say that the social anarchy, and the scale and duration of the watery assault on New Orleans and surrounding areas, will have an emotional impact that could last far beyond this hurricane season, and the next, for many residents.

In addition to the initial shock and loss, the subsequent flooding has left tens of thousands of people with the profound sense of being trapped, stalked or helpless, in a kind of nightmare version of their own hometown.

"I don't know that we've seen anything like this," said Lee Clarke, a sociologist at Rutgers University and author of the forthcoming book "Worst Cases," a history of disasters. "It is outside our experience in some ways; the possibility that an entire modern city might be undone by a natural disaster."

Over the years, researchers who have studied communities shattered by earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and tornadoes find that, in the months after the disaster strikes, most people recover from the mental shock, often by losing themselves in rebuilding and helping others.

In the first six months after the disaster, some 80 percent have shaken off disabling feelings of sadness, grief or heightened fear. After a year, only about 3 percent to 5 percent suffer from the chronic irritability, recurring flashbacks of the disaster and hair-trigger panic over reminders of the ordeal that characterize post-traumatic stress disorder.

"The story of disaster recovery is ordinarily one of remarkable emotional resilience," said Charles Marmar, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco.

But the floodwater did not bring the people of New Orleans together in the same way earthquakes or fires often do. It drove most of them out. And in the apparent absence of any functioning authority to coordinate security and rescue efforts, those left behind lapsed into a kind of corrosive social anarchy that will color their already painful memories with shame or horror, experts say.

When caught in frightening situations without clear rules, most people look to others around

them for guidance in how to behave, psychologists say. The rules that normally restrain people's actions - "Do not break into a store and steal a plasma TV," for example - fall by the wayside when hundreds of other people are ignoring them. And in a variety of experiments, researchers have shown that a single leader can drive group behavior.

"That person may do something good, like rush to help in an emergency, and others follow," said Suzanne Yates, a psychologist at Lehman College in the Bronx. "But if people start looting, and nothing happens to them, you get a kind of cascade, and a new norm of behavior is established, which makes it more crucial for those in authority to take some control."

It does not take long for misdemeanors to become major crimes.

"Our experiments have shown that you can get people to commit immoral acts one step at a time," said Elliot Aronson, a psychologist at the University of California in Santa Cruz, in an e-mail message. "People who would never dream of stealing a TV set might be inclined to do so if they first stole some water, bread, cereal, milk and so on."

In an analysis of the 1977 blackout in New York City, researchers at the New York State Psychiatric Institute concluded that small-time criminals began the looting but that "within two hours," the researchers wrote, "it became apparent that the situation was not going to end quickly, and thousands of otherwise law-abiding citizens joined in what was to become the largest collective theft in history."

In that situation, however, hunger, thirst and fear were not driving people to take the basic necessities of life, which was part of the situation in New Orleans.

In the long recovery ahead for New Orleans, law-abiding residents who went beyond small acts of self-preservation to larger transgressions might have more than water damage to repair. "We know from studies of soldiers that people who are perpetrators of what they consider to be atrocious acts need tremendous compassion from others to reclaim and re-own their humanity," Dr. Marmar said.

In studies of several gulf parishes in the wake of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Jeanne Hurlbert, a sociologist at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and her colleagues found a clear link between people's mental health and the kinds of social relationships they had. Those in clans in which friends and family spend much of their time together reported fewer symptoms of depression in the weeks after the disaster than those who had looser networks, with friends in several social circles.

"But you're now looking a situation in which, when people return, they may have to find work," and more wide-ranging connections will be crucial, Dr. Hurlbert said. "Both close ties and these extended relationships will be very important, and it's likely the people who have both who will do best."

The ability of the city as a whole to recover is difficult to predict. Thousands of people in and around New Orleans have thrown themselves into the rescue effort. Private boat owners from up and down the coast have been helping to evacuate people, and people throughout the Gulf Coast region are working in emergency depots or providing floors for flood victims to sleep on. Yet underlying problems the city had before the disaster might frustrate the effort

even of those most committed to help.

The poverty rate in New Orleans is more than 40 percent, about three times the national rate, said Steve Kroll-Smith, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro who just moved from New Orleans after many years there. "There are huge divisions by race and class in New Orleans, and everyone who lives there knows it," he said. "The truth is that people living in the Garden District got out and those in the Ninth Ward and other poor neighborhoods didn't, and now this combination of rage and poverty is bubbling to the surface."

In time perhaps the memory of this now-sodden city will be what brings together the evacuated and the abandoned, the well-off and the unlucky, in common purpose. Unlike a fire or earthquake, which reduce many buildings to rubble, a long period of flooding usually leaves many structures intact but uninhabitable, deeply familiar but permanently altered, like a loved one who is alive but unable to speak or interact, psychologists say. And there is an overpowering desire to make those buildings whole, to bring them back.

Children in particular feel this loss deeply, experts say. They often look for a toy or a coloring book, something to provide a connection to their former life. After this flood, anything they find will be ruined, a confirmation of their current desperation.

"People don't know until something like this comes along how much the shape of their house, the texture of their house, the mood of their neighborhood, are important parts of who they are," said Kai Erikson, a sociologist at Yale. "People take all of this so much for granted that when they return and the house is gone or not habitable it disorients them, makes them more lonely and more afraid, and they don't know why.

"This is true of public spaces and streets, too," Dr. Erikson continued. "You have no idea how much they mean to you until they are gone or permanently altered."