

New Orleans evacuees integrate their culture into Houston environment

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Students at Houston's New Orleans West elementary school throw beads and have their own Mardi Gras parade on February 23, 2006. The elementary school is a charter school set up in Houston, Texas, for Hurricane Katrina evacuees. AP Photo/Pat Sullivan

More than a million people fled New Orleans, Louisiana, when Hurricane Katrina flooded the city, killing 1,245 people destroying \$108 billion worth of homes and businesses. Many of the people who fled never went back.

They escaped to Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Birmingham, Alabama; San Antonio and Dallas in Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia. The biggest number headed to Houston, Texas, a 350-mile drive from New Orleans along the Gulf Coast and itself no stranger to hurricanes.

More than 10 years after Hurricane Katrina, many who called the city home in August 2005 are gone. New Orleans is one of the most unique and historic cities in the U.S. Tens of thousands swapped it for Houston, a giant, sprawling city. Today, with a metro area of six million people, Houston is about five times larger than New Orleans.

Estimates vary, but of the 250,000 or so people who arrived in Houston after the storm, up to 100,000 likely stayed permanently.

A New Life

"We call Houston 'New Orleans West,'" said Mtangulizi Sanyika, who left New Orleans after his house flooded and ended up staying in Texas when his wife found a job at a hospital. He is the chairman of the New Orleans Association of Houston, which is planning a series of events to remember the storm.

In 2015, around the 10th anniversary of the disaster, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu visited Atlanta and Houston. He met with the refugees, thanked the cities for their hospitality and boasted about the Big Easy's recovery. "Y'all can come home whenever y'all want," he told former New Orleans residents at a church service.

There is plenty of room. Between 2000 and 2006, New Orleans' population fell by more than half. The city's current population is about 389,600, about 80 percent of the number who lived there in the years before Katrina. The size of the African-American community has declined by about 30 percent, and now just about 97,000 African-American people live there.

Alarming Jobless Picture

In some ways, the city bounced back impressively. However, there is little economic incentive for the New Orleans residents to return. The Texas Organizing Project is a non-profit community group. According to its research, 9.5 percent of African-American Texans are unemployed. Yet it's even harder to find work in New Orleans. Another study, done by Loyola University in 2011, found that 52 percent of working-age African-American men in New Orleans did not have jobs. Also, rising housing prices mean that many people on low incomes cannot afford to live in the city center.

Carl Lindahl is a University of Houston professor. He said that two groups in particular tended not to return. The first group was parents of young children, who felt Houston was safer and had better schools. The second group was the elderly, who believed New Orleans lacked social services.

In the days after the storm, buses took people from New Orleans to the Astrodome, Houston's famed indoor sports arena, which acted as a shelter. Many Houston residents donated time, money or goods to help them. At first, it brought out the best in the city, Lindahl said, but the good will lasted for only about two months. Within a year, people linked the New Orleans people to crime and claimed the murder rate had gone up.

Go Back To New Orleans, Some Say

Lindahl said that some refugees felt overlooked for jobs because they had a New Orleans area code. Twelve months after the disaster, hundreds of white residents demanded the mayor send the "Katrina illegal immigrants" back to Louisiana, Texas Monthly reported.

It took years for people to realize that crime data showed that the refugees did not cause an increase in crime.

In 2005, Lindahl helped start a project in which survivors recorded each others' stories. He asked them why they took part. Some saw it as a form of therapy, while others did it because they were paid. The most common answer was "We want people to know who we are," Lindahl said.

Even a decade after the storm, the exiles remained linked by their common culture, said one of the evacuees, Dallas McNamara, a photographer. “Things like music allowed people to get together,” she said. Bands formed, branches of New Orleans-based churches set up in Houston, and restaurants opened.

Nicer Environment In Houston

“I think people are kind of surprised by how much they like Houston. They have a nicer home; they like the schools. They’re blown away by the amount of driving that they do, but they tend to become pleasantly surprised,” McNamara said. Still, she added there is much she misses about her old city.

For Sanyika, one of the worst parts of Houston is the food. “It’s a very different kind of taste,” he said. “A Texas gumbo doesn’t taste quite the same.”

He misses New Orleans culture but said he is happy in Houston. “You never lose your cultural heritage and roots; you simply learn to integrate them in whatever environment you find yourself in,” he said.

Sanyika still visits New Orleans regularly. “When I leave there is always a sadness,” he said. “New Orleans is in your soul, your heart, your roots. It anchors who you are and you take it with you wherever you go.”

Quiz

- 1 What is the MOST important reason why Mtangulizi Sanyika misses New Orleans?
- (A) He feels as though he has lost his cultural heritage.
 - (B) He says the food in Houston is not as good as the food in New Orleans.
 - (C) He does not enjoy the high amount of driving he has to do.
 - (D) He says the music in New Orleans was more vibrant than the music in Houston.

- 2 How does the article develop the idea that many people found a better quality of life in Houston?
- (A) by focusing solely on the hardships evacuees faced before relocating to Houston
 - (B) by providing examples of the poor quality of life experienced by those living in New Orleans
 - (C) by including quotes from evacuees who have made Houston their home
 - (D) by describing people who were unable to move permanently to Houston

- 3 Read the paragraph from the article.

There is plenty of room. Between 2000 and 2006, New Orleans' population fell by more than half. The city's current population is about 389,600, about 80 percent of the number who lived there in the years before Katrina. The size of the African-American community has declined by about 30 percent, and now just about 97,000 black people live there.

Why does the author include this paragraph in the article?

- (A) to highlight the effect Hurricane Katrina had on the population of Houston
 - (B) to show that New Orleans' population has not recovered from Hurricane Katrina
 - (C) to reveal the challenges associated with relocating people back to New Orleans
 - (D) to illustrate the willingness of evacuees to return to New Orleans
- 4 What purpose is served by including information about Houston residents demanding that their mayor send Katrina evacuees back to Louisiana?
- (A) It demonstrates some of the challenges caused by the mass migration to Houston.
 - (B) It emphasizes the unfavorable effect the evacuees had on Houston.
 - (C) It proves that all the residents of Houston were unwelcoming to the evacuees.
 - (D) It suggests that the evacuees entered Houston illegally.