

# Hurricane Barry and the New Normal

Can we afford to leave the city? Will our insurance cover an out-of-state delivery?

**By Andy Horowitz**

Mr. Horowitz is writing a book on Hurricane Katrina.

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JACKSON, Miss. — Before I left New Orleans on Thursday, in advance of Hurricane Barry, I put a photograph of my grandmother’s family, taken before World War II, into a waterproof bag. I wrote my phone number in permanent marker on the outside, tied it to a life preserver along with a few other things I couldn’t bear to lose and put them in the attic. I trust they will be there when I return home on Monday.

Hurricane Barry wasn’t the Big One, thankfully. But it was a reminder that, in our precarious state, it wouldn’t take an especially big storm to cause big trouble. Any combination of circumstances that once seemed unlikely — a river that stays high into the summer, for example, when a hurricane comes — could reorient our future.

Living with that knowledge has already reoriented our present.

On Wednesday, a regular summer rainstorm flooded my street, causing my wife, well into her third trimester, to miss a doctor’s appointment. The internet told us that a drop in barometric pressure could send her into labor.

The National Weather Service predicted that Hurricane Barry’s storm surge could push the Mississippi River up to 20 feet. That’s higher than the levee in parts of our neighborhood, Algiers.

Later that day, a spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers announced that the National Levee Database had erroneous information, and that the levees might in fact be “eight-tenths of a foot” taller than reported. It struck me as absurd that the federal agency was measuring its own inaccuracies in tenths of a foot, rather than inches. We put an infant car seat in the trunk, just in case, and headed north.

We watched the news from a rented apartment in Jackson, where a friend’s sister-in-law, whom we had never met, volunteered to be on standby to watch our daughter if my wife went into labor. We were comforted by the coincidence that two evacuees from New Orleans, a nurse and a doula, occupied the other half of the duplex.

Most of the national news was blustery as usual, breathlessly reporting on the sort of street flooding we have had to learn to take for granted. The local news, in contrast, was defensive, asserting everything was fine, before they could be sure it would be. And I still haven't heard much about the rest of the region. We didn't regret our decision to leave; my risk tolerance is high enough to live in New Orleans, but not high enough to tough out a tropical storm.

It seems now that we would have been O.K. if we had stayed. We cheered on Saturday as the city caught two breaks: the storm tracked west, and dumped a lot of rain just offshore.

New Orleans survived. We dodged another bullet.

We cannot assume that will always be the case, though. And living with that knowledge takes its toll. By my count, like many places, we are now entering a late round in a national civic game of Russian roulette.

When people praise Louisiana's resilience, they should remember that its lived experience includes, for example: my neighbor who keeps a month's worth of drinking water stored in his house; my friends uptown, who had the means to leave, and would have, if they hadn't needed to weigh the trip against traveling with a week-old baby boy; and the man in the Lower Ninth Ward who told a reporter that he had spent Friday night sleeping in his attic with a chain saw, in case the water came again and he had to cut his way out of the roof.

In New Orleans, this is "the new normal." The phrase often refers to meteorology: more rain, more drought, more fire, less predictability. It was once a truism among scholars that disasters are "not like the crises of everyday life."

But the lines are blurred now: Can we afford to make the trip? Who will care for our child if we have to go to the hospital? Will our insurance cover an out-of-state delivery? Wouldn't it be simpler just to store our old photographs in a waterproof box? These are not questions about the Big One. They are the banalities of life in a changed climate.

"The moment becomes a season," my teacher, the sociologist Kai Erikson wrote in 1995, "the event becomes a condition." Off the Windward Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, another storm is forming.

Andy Horowitz (@andydhorowitz), an assistant professor of history at Tulane, is writing a book on Hurricane Katrina.

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