



Background

Queenstown and Ramsville, North Carolina are located in eastern North Carolina. The towns, separated by a river, share a long history but maintain separate identities.

In 1999, flooding following a severe hurricane decimated both towns. Queenstown was completely destroyed, and more than 40% of Ramsville was flooded as well. The flood had disproportionate impacts on African Americans in both towns, affecting the sense of community and identity that is so important in rural North Carolina.

Project Objectives

- Explore the ways the African American communities of Queenstown and Ramsville responded to flooding after the hurricane.
- Understand the communities' efforts to rebuild and reclaim their identities.
- Consider the various health impacts of the flood.
- Provide recommendations to the communities for ways to further improve the quality of life for African Americans in Ramsville and Queenstown.



Methods

An action-oriented community diagnosis (AOCD) was conducted during a seven-month period. The purpose of an AOCD is to identify a community's strengths, resources, and challenges, and to develop creative ways to approach the challenges. Over the course of the project, research team members collected data and worked to gain entrée within the communities.

Three qualitative data collection methods were used to assess the strengths and challenges facing the communities: participant observation field notes; semi-structured interviews with community residents and service providers; and secondary data sources such as historical archives and technical documents. Data were analyzed using a transcript-based analysis approach to determine patterns of meaning related to community and identity.

The student researchers were guided by two community preceptors, who work and live in Ramsville and Queenstown. The preceptors facilitated the team's introduction to the communities and provided assistance throughout the project.

Interviewees

The research team conducted 42 interviews, gathering basic demographic information from the interviewees:

- **Town of Residence:** 9 Queenstown / 26 Ramsville / 7 Other
- **Race:** 35 African American / 7 White
- **Average Age:** 51 years
- **Sex:** 22 Male / 20 Female
- **Interview Group:** 24 Community Members / 18 Service Providers

The Flood

"The flood changed our souls."



In the fall of 1999, two severe hurricanes hit North Carolina within a week, overwhelming the towns of Ramsville and Queenstown. Torrential rain, a swollen river, and Queenstown's poor drainage system caused the entire town to flood. More than 40% of Ramsville flooded as well. The waters peaked at 42 feet above sea level and did not recede for 10 days—Queenstown was declared a national disaster area, and the entire population was left homeless.

Rebuilding

Despite the fact that 6,500 Queenstown and Ramsville residents were displaced, losing homes and possessions, community members received a great deal of support in the aftermath of the flood. Today, more than seven years later, the majority of homes have been rebuilt and long-term revitalization efforts continue. A museum will soon open in Queenstown, commemorating the town's rich history and the impacts of the flood. Some residents now refer to the flood as "a blessing" for the towns.



Results

When asked about the impacts of the flood on Ramsville and Queenstown, interviewees indicated differences among areas within the communities based on a confluence of demographic factors. Elderly and low income residents were particularly hard hit, and the flooding was worse in African American neighborhoods. This may be due, in part, to the fact that Queenstown (a historically African American town) is situated on very low-lying, flood-prone land—the land given to African Americans post-slavery. Additionally, those already suffering from poor health saw significant negative health impacts, although all residents were impacted.

In discussions about flood effects, interviewees specifically mentioned the following:

- High levels of stress (including PTSD);
- Increase in chronic illness (stroke, hypertension);
- Increase in negative health behaviors (drug use);
- Cumulatively higher death rates (heart attacks);
- Greater incidence of mental health issues; and
- Changes in social networks and helping relationships.

Many of these health impacts have continued to affect the communities in the years since the flood. These widespread effects are difficult for health practitioners to address, particularly those related to stress and mental health, and point to a need for increased services.

For the African American communities of Queenstown and Ramsville, health outcomes have become uniquely linked to experiencing changes to place and identity following a natural disaster.



Recommendations

Disaster preparedness planning should include:

1. Clear communication and dissemination of county and city-wide disaster management plans;
2. Individual-level preparedness (e.g., awareness of disaster plans, having prescription drugs on hand);
3. Identification of vulnerable populations, including tailoring disaster preparedness plans to address diverse constituencies within a community;
4. Targeted health and mental health services (e.g., anticipating increases in intimate partner violence, stress-mediated and related chronic illnesses, PTSD);
5. Anticipation of stigma associated with mental health, tailoring mental health responses to these issues; and
6. Facilitating social network disaster preparedness planning (e.g., encouraging networks to devise plans).

Moving Forward

The action-oriented community diagnosis focused on identifying strengths and challenges of Ramsville and Queenstown; the strengths can be built upon to address the challenges as a collective unit of solution.

Community Strengths

A number of interviewees considered one of the communities' most important strengths to be the resilience of the towns and of the community members, as illustrated by Queenstown. A service provider noted:

"The tradition of Queenstown—of being an incorporated black town and that—was shown in their choice to come back after the flood. There is something intangible about the historical significance of the town, and that seems to be a glue that...holds [people] together."



Community Challenges

Despite the importance of community cohesion and identity within the African American communities of Ramsville and Queenstown, residents are still faced with the challenge of living in a flood plain. A community member commented:

"The river flooding...it's always at the back of peoples' minds. If there's another flood, the same thing will happen. How do you start over when everything you had is gone?"

Community Solutions

1. Improve cooperation between local governments;
2. Establish a long-term commitment to economic recovery; and
3. Recognize and utilize the uniqueness of the communities, including their assets and challenges.

Privacy

To protect the identity of the communities involved in this research, the pseudonyms of Queenstown and Ramsville, North Carolina are used and the hurricane that affected the two towns is not named.

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