

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Howard University Researchers Visit St. Thomas And Puerto Rico To Evaluate Emotional Impact Of Hurricanes

Disaster Recovery / **Published On June 09, 2019 08:12 AM /**

Staff **June 09, 2019**



After Hurricane Katrina, the impact of natural disasters on communities of color became the leading concentration of research for Howard University Associate Professor Terri Adams-Fuller, Ph.D., and four student research assistants. Recently, Adams-Fuller and two of the four Ph.D. students – Cassandra Jean and Kenya Goods, visited San Juan and Loiza, Puerto Rico and Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. With the support of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Cooperative Science Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology, and the Program for International Research and Education (NSF PIRE) grant, the team learned about the

impact of the weather hazard information on the decision-making practices of the residents of St. Thomas and Puerto Rico, and the emotional toll of the disasters on the residents and emergency personnel.

[\[Survey: What was your experience during and after Hurricanes Irma and Maria?\]](#)

"We were interested in learning about how the disaster has impacted their personal and professional lives. Additionally, we were examining the impact of the NOAA forecast of the hurricane on the first responders and emergency managers," said Adams-Fuller. "This work is part of a growing body of research we have been engaged in at Howard University's NOAA Cooperative Science Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology, and the work that is supported by the NSF PIRE (Program for International Research and Education) grant."

During the trip, the team examined an individual's general risk perceptions of hurricanes; how an individual's risk perceptions have changed as a function of experiencing Hurricanes Irma and Maria; and the impact of the hurricanes on the lives of the victims of these storms.

"We have learned that people of these islands are still suffering from the trauma of dealing with the aftermath of both Hurricanes Irma and Maria. It's hard to see and hear of the scars from daily conversations. Yet, once we got residents into sharing information about their lives in the focus groups and interviews, it became evident through their descriptions of lived experiences, both past and present that they are still impacted heavily," said Adams-Fuller.



Professor and Researcher Terri Adams-Fuller, Ph.D., with student research Cassandra Jean with University of the Virgin Islands representative discussing the aftermath - courtesy of Dr. Adams-Fuller

Adams-Fuller is also the deputy director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology (NCAS-M) at Howard University and recently co-authored a book, *Policing in Natural Disasters: Stress, Resilience, and the Challenges of Emergency Management*, published by Temple University Press. Her research focus and book stemmed from watching the horrors unfold from the Hurricane Katrina disaster and researching the aftermath in layers.

"That set the course for my research career. Every year since the disaster, I have focused my attention on the impact of disasters on the public and first responders," said Adams-Fuller. "This has led me to collect data with my students over the years on a variety of disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, an earthquake in Chile, the Fukushima Disaster in Japan, and some of the major tornadoes in the U.S." All disasters that are noted in her book.

For third-year doctoral student Jean, she chose to pursue her Ph.D. in sociology and criminology at the Howard University Graduate School because she felt that as a student of color, her research interests would be catered to, supported and challenged by the rigorous program and exceptional professors.

"I was concerned with the outcome of the 2017 Hurricane season," said Jean, who noticed the affects it had on the underserved and working class, specifically after the storms passed.

"Catering to this interest, I presented [my] research idea to Dr. Terri Adams-Fuller for my dissertation. [Also] as a NOAA Cooperative Science Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology Fellow, I knew that I would be supported in my endeavor and that we had an opportunity to conduct monumental research, amplifying the voices of those who were directly impacted," said Jean.

During the visit, she gained a greater understanding of the extent that Hurricanes Maria and Irma had on the citizens. She is further focused on the emergency response and management of St. Thomas, Puerto Rico and even Houston in relation to their recovery processes to better understand their approach to risk management and decision-making, as well as the emotional response of hurricane survivors.

The team collected data in both St. Thomas and Puerto Rico because both islands suffered a great deal of damage, and the hurricanes drastically altered the lives of its victims. According to Adams-Fuller, St. Thomas became a priority after noticing the lack of attention the island received; and although the public has heard more about the challenges suffered by the island of Puerto Rico, there was still much to learn about how the residents and first responders continue to cope with the aftermath of the disaster.

"It is important to make sure that we hear the voices of the victims of hurricanes to respectfully acknowledge their pain and suffering and to learn as much as we can from their experiences," said Adams-Fuller.

Upon their return on June 4, the researchers recognized that there's more to do for the people of the islands.

"We learned that some of the citizens in Puerto Rico may have believed that since most of the island was not severely impacted by Hurricane Irma, they assumed that Hurricane Maria was not going to be as impactful. However, this insight is based on limited data and we plan to do more interviews and surveys to validate this finding. It should be noted that St. Thomas was seriously impacted by both storms. Puerto Rico sent many of their supplies to help the island after Hurricane Irma, which in turn reduced their access to supplies during Hurricane Maria."

She further added that while the weather forecasts were accurate, the information shared with the public was not always instructive enough for people to really take proper protective actions. "However, representatives from the National Weather Service have indicated that this is something they are working on."

Written by Imani Pope-Johns on Howard University's website. Republished by The Consortium.

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