

Full Length Research Paper

New normal in violence: Perspectives on US Gulf Region (New Orleans) post-disaster recovery

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Violence is a public health risk and important concern for stakeholders in disaster-vulnerable Gulf region of the United States. Disaster-prone communities like New Orleans have recorded a higher rate of violence (violent and property crime) and this experience is potentially becoming a 'new normal' for the residents and the community as a whole. The concept of new normal in individual and community resilience is an important subject in recovery from disasters and adverse events. This paper reviews various factors which can help individuals and community to bounce back from traumatic events and also evaluates the mental states that adversely affect the general condition and psyche of the affected people post-disasters. While there are no formulas that can relieve the stress and adverse impact of violence and trauma, the paper tries to highlight the important positive mental states and attitudes that may help in dealing effectively with post-disaster grief feelings and bouncing back from adversities.

Key words: Disaster, traumatic, new-normal, bounce-back, New Orleans, resilience, positive mentality, victims, affected people, violence.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is a public health issue that is fast becoming a major concern for all the stakeholders (Haegerich and Dahlberg, 2011), especially in disaster-prone communities in the Gulf of Mexico of United States (Dembert and Simmer, 2000; DeSalvo et al., 2007; Dimanche and Lepetic, 1999). Statistics have shown that disaster, among other factors, contributes to various spates of instabilities that have been witnessed in various communities in the US Gulf Coast. With respect to New Orleans, a city that is recovering from one of the most destructive natural disaster (hurricane Katrina) in the history of United States, the increased rate of violence is a source of concern for the residents, as well as millions of tourists that visit the city on daily basis (Dembert and Simmer, 2000; DeSalvo et al., 2007; Dimanche and Lepetic, 1999; Fullerton et al., 2003; Hawkins and Maurer, 2011). The year 2013 has been a relatively better year for the crescent city in terms of property and violent crimes.

According to the data produced by the cityrating.com, the crime statistics in New Orleans should be taking a downward trend when compared to the previous statistics for the previous 11 years (Tables 1 and 2). In fact, the crime rate for 2013 is expected to be significantly lower than that of year 2010 (Figure 2), a year in which the violent crime rate was more than the national violent crime rate average by above 80% (Figure 1). The property crime rate was equally higher in New Orleans than the national property crime rate average by more than 21% (Figure 1). Also, in 2010, the violent crime rate for New Orleans was higher than the violent crime rate in the state of Louisiana by approximately 33% (Figure 4), while property crime rate was lower than the state's by approximately 3% (Figure 3).

"New Normal" is a concept that is mentioned repeatedly in discussion about community resilience following disasters in the Gulf Coast region (Abrams et al., 2004; Colten

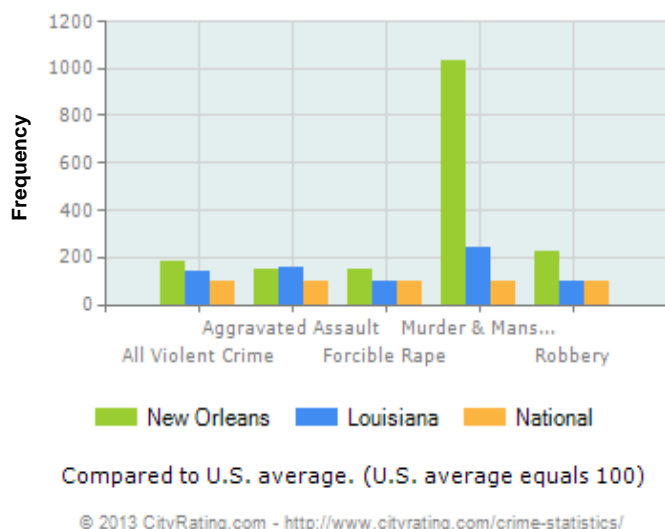
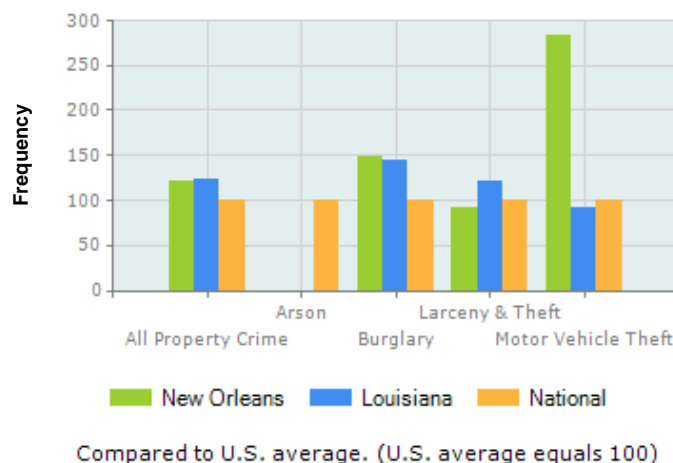
Table 1. New Orleans crime statistics summary report.

| 2010 Crime (Actual data)* | Incidents |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Aggravated assault | 1,321 |
| Arson | N/A |
| Burglary | 3,695 |
| Forcible rape | 144 |
| Larceny and theft | 6,540 |
| Motor vehicle theft | 2,410 |
| Murder and manslaughter | 175 |
| Robbery | 953 |
| Crime rate (total incidents) | 18,576 |
| Property crime | 12,645 |
| Violent crime | 2,593 |

Table 2. New Orleans crime statistics summary report 2013

| 2013 Crime (Projected data)* | Incidents |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Aggravated assault | 902 |
| Arson | 0 |
| Burglary | 3,586 |
| Forcible rape | 46 |
| Larceny and theft | 1,411 |
| Motor vehicle theft | 0 |
| Murder and manslaughter | 155 |
| Robbery | 118 |
| Crime rate (total incidents) | 10,546 |
| Property crime | 4,615 |
| Violent crime | 1,221 |

Source: (c) 2013 CityRating.com-<http://www.cityrating.com/crime-statistics/>

**Figure 1.** 2010 New Orleans violent crime comparison.**Figure 2.** 2010 New Orleans property crime comparison.

Source: CityRating.com – <http://www.cityrating.com/crime-statistics/>

et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2008; Rhodes et al., 2010; Smoyak, 2006; Steury et al., 2004). Different spates of disaster and calamitous events befalling a community can have a potentially could have a long lasting adverse impact on the healthy and social well-being of the residents of these communities. These disasters could be in the form of a personal traumatic event affecting an individual in a family or a communal adverse event affecting group of people within the community with the same common interests. Overall, these events leave behind indelible scars in the lives of the affected people. How well the respective individual or community fares depend on their coping mechanisms and the resources available at their disposal to positively activate these mechanisms (Dembert and Simmer, 2000a; Dembert and Simmer, 2000b; Peacock et al., 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2006; Tak et al., 2007; Williams et al., 1999).

Most experts and specialists in the field of community resilience, crisis intervention and disaster management have conducted, analyzed and reported several findings on the resilience of the people and the resources available for community to build back after a disaster, be it man-made or natural (Armour, 2002; Boin and McConnell, 2007; Colten and Sumpster, 2009; Curtis et al., 2010; Hawkins and Maurer, 2011; Jonkman et al., 2009; Leavitt and Kiefer, 2006; Luft, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2008a; Norris et al., 2008b). However, further studies are needed to be conducted to analyze these resilient factors based on the reactions and feelings of the victims and not only from the prism of the conventional societal postulations on disaster recovery. society (Adams et al., 2009; Aldrich and Benson, 2008; Chamlee-wright and Storr, 2009; Eisen, 2002; Fullerton et al., 2003a, b).

In as much as being resilient and bouncing back from a disaster or traumatic event depicts positive reaction and

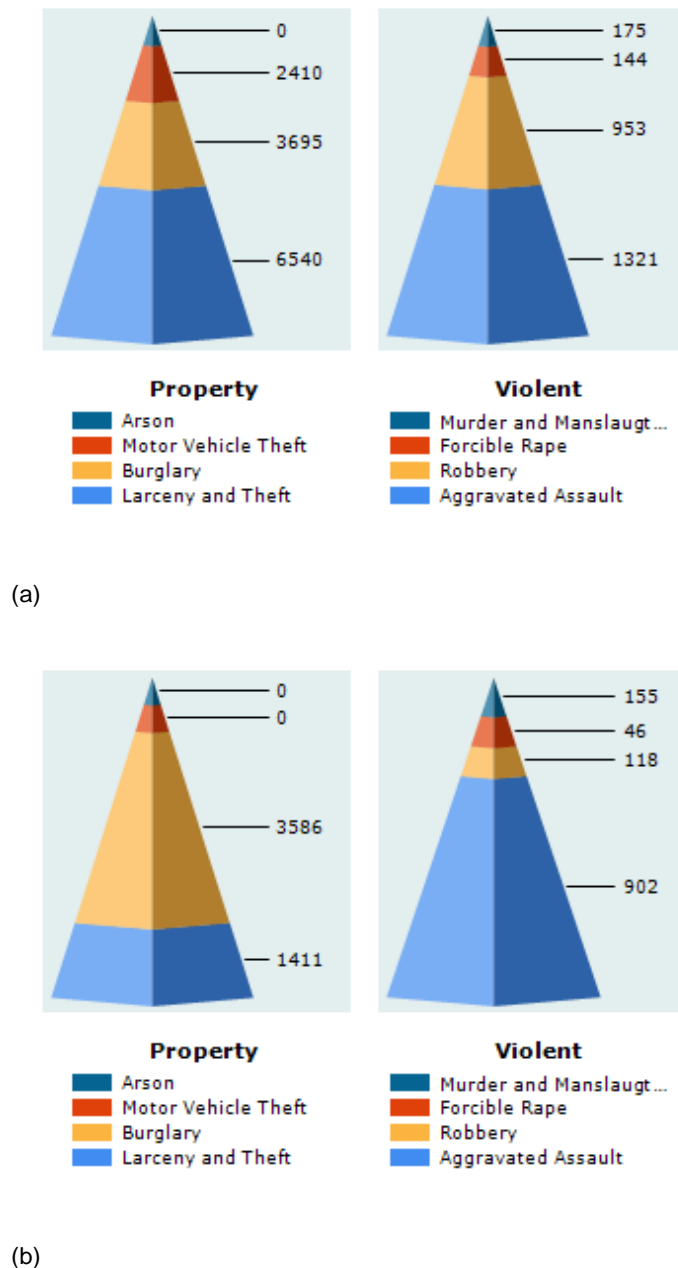


Figure 3. (a) New Orleans 2010 crime and (b) 2013 crime (projected).

Source: CityRating.com – <http://www.cityrating.com/crime-statistics/>

response to these events, it is important to emphasize that situations or status-quo might not be as the same again (Abrams et al., 2004a, b; Aldrich and Benson, 2008; Cefalu et al., 2006; Eisen, 2002a, 2b; Osofsky, 2008a, b; Smoyak, 2006a, b). Situations might become better or worse, but the status quo can only be imagined or lived in the memory. Especially if the traumatic event is as a result of human negligence, wickedness or a man-made disaster, then it might take some time for the wound to heal, even after measures are put in place to

prevent re-occurrence (Hawkins and Maurer, 2011; Osofsky, 2008; Procopio and Procopio, 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2006).

However, several studies have shown that healing might be easier to activate when the traumatic event is due to a natural disaster and not a man-made or man-inflicted disaster (Smoyak, 2006; Steury et al., 2004; Tanaka, 1996; Tierney, 2007). Victims tend to ask questions (sometimes after a long period after the occurrence of the disaster) querying the occurrence of the event in the first place, even after several mitigation plans and relief measures have been put in place to reduce the casualties and fatalities following the disaster (Abrams et al., 2004; Luft, 2009; Silver et al., 2011; Smoyak, 2006; Tak et al., 2007; Williams et al., 1999).

This article focuses on reactions of affected people post-disaster in the gulf coast region, concentrating on the ways they have adjusted their lives and mental beliefs relative to the disaster. In addition, this paper attempts to answer some important questions (1) Will things ever be the same again after a traumatic event? and (2) What are the effective ways and appropriate mental states of responding to unpleasant and traumatic events? (Aldrich and Benson, 2008; Armour, 2002; Green et al., 2007; Kronenberg et al., 2010; Williams et al., 1999). These lingering questions are the reasons the concept of new normal is very important during discussion and counseling of victims and communities that have witnessed traumatic events and large scale disasters with a resultant violent episode in one form or another.

The goals and expectation of all the stakeholders following disaster and violence are for circumstances to normalize and become better. However, in some cases, especially among people with fatality outcome, situation might become worse, resulting in varying clinical symptoms of anxiety, fear, *Post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) and different forms of psychiatric disorders depending on the effect and impact of the events on their psyche, well-being and mental functioning (Kronenberg et al., 2010; Osofsky, 2008; Silver et al., 2011; Tak et al., 2007; Tanaka, 1996).

There is the need for the counselors and the stakeholders to ensure that the concept of new normal in violence is included in the discussion when they hold sessions with victims and discuss the subject of resilience with communities (Kiefer and Montjoy, 2006; Leavitt and Kiefer, 2006; Li et al., 2010; Smoyak, 2006). Communities need to be informed and counseled on the importance of moving on from the memories and stigma of the traumatic experiences. They need repeated encouragements as they gradually face the stark realities of the consequences of these adverse events on their mental orientation and psyche, which by all means is not a very easy state of mind to achieve. (Luft, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2006; Olshansky et al., 2008; Osofsky, 2008)

Sometimes, the cases of PTSD and anxiety disorder

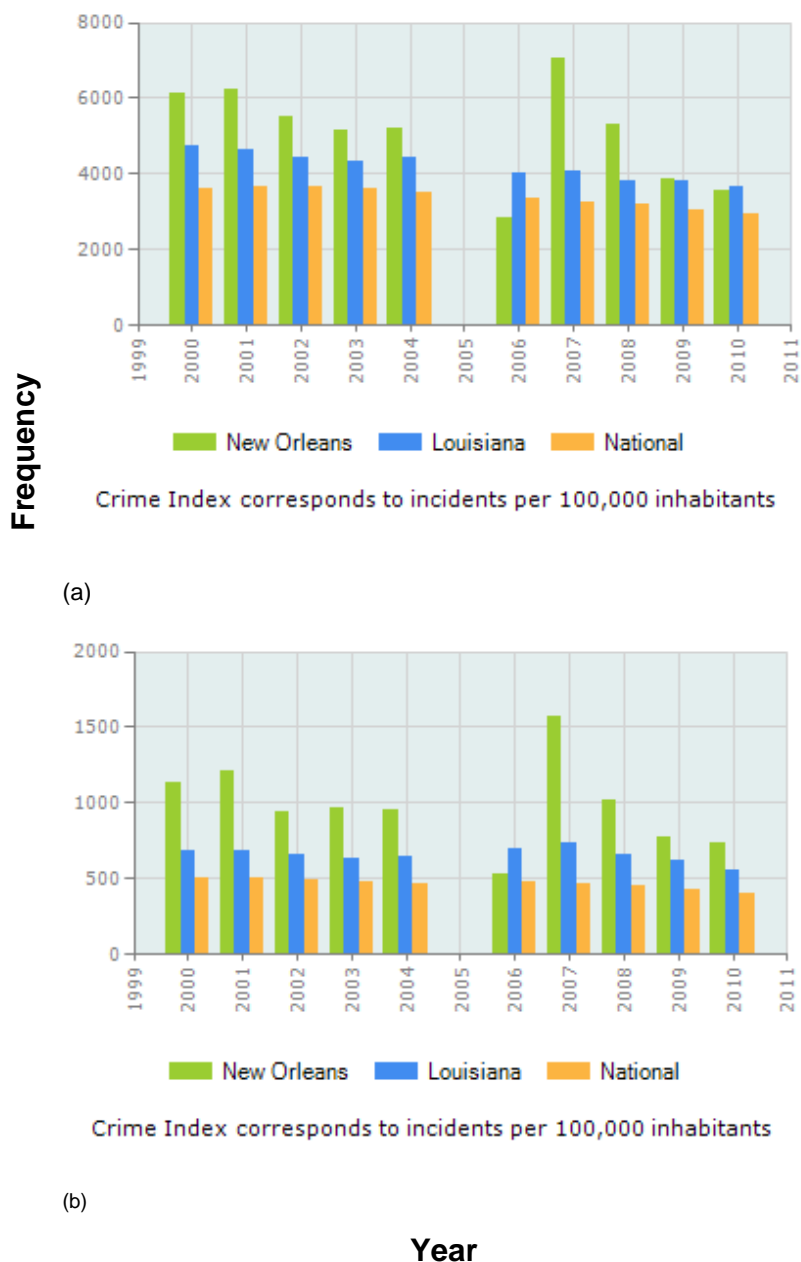


Figure 4. (a) New Orleans property crime index and (b) violent crime index.

abound because people affected adversely by violence cannot grapple with the concept of facing the reality after the events. People are so used to their ways of life or having their loved ones around them, that it becomes very difficult to fathom a life without them, more so, if they were violently taken away from them. This, sometimes becomes very difficult for the affected people to adapt to and move on without their loved ones to start a new life different from what they are used to in the past before the violence (Airriess et al., 2008; Corrigan, 2008; Osofsky, 2008a, 2008b; Williams et al., 1999a, b). There have

been cases of violence where victims and affected people have declared 'that was not what it used to be before the disaster struck', or 'they cannot imagine life without their loved ones'. In as much as these are facts, counselors need to let them realize the current facts and realities as well. Affected people need to know "that those thoughts about the past cling them to the past, and they have to change their orientations and think of the present and the future with a focus on how they can make the best use of the opportunities (Congleton, 2006; Dunlap et al., 2007; Harrauld, 2006; Williams et al., 1999).

The hard truth remains that no communities or individuals ever wish the occurrence of adverse events, but when these events do happen, victims have to project positively and endeavor to live with it and make the best of the situation (Abrams et al., 2004; Armour, 2002; Eisen, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2006; Silver et al., 2011; Sobel and Leeson, 2010; Tierney, 2007).

No doubt, these are easier said than done, but it is the reality with which affected people have to live with post-disaster and post-violence, if they want to advance from the doldrums of regrets and shackles of anxiety and become more optimistically focused on a new dawn of reality and hope (Peacock et al., 2007; Procopio and Procopio, 2007; Quarantelli, 2005; Williams et al., 1999).

When people are encouraged and advised to face reality and become pragmatic post-violence, it is akin to transporting them to a new environment where they have to start all over again without any supporting resources and this in itself can be a form of stress in their recovery phase and efforts. But counselors need to emphasize these choices to people pre-disaster and the earlier they can attune themselves to these ideas, the easier and better it will be to apply, cope and adapt into the new life, a post-violence life (Abrams et al., 2004; Cigler, 2007; Colten et al., 2008; Harrauld, 2006). The concept of new normal is important as an integral component of communities' resilience in that it utilizes all the resources needed and available for bouncing back from violence and adapting into a new reality of life in the community (Boin and McConnell, 2007; Boin, 2009; BondGraham, 2007; Chamlee-wright and Storr, 2009; Cigler, 2007; Norris et al., 2008). Several factors and principles have been put forward to help communities and individuals embrace the concept of new normal as a positive tool for healing following a traumatic event and violent experience. However, it is difficult to generalize these factors and principles because communities and individuals do not react to the same situations with the same response. But some cogent points still need to be outlined as recipe for or bane of healing, depending on the reactions of people post-violence (Armour, 2002; Dunlap et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2010; Jonkman et al., 2009; Kronenberg et al., 2010; Silver et al., 2011; Tanaka, 1996).

Self-forgiveness

As humans, people are prone to making mistakes occasionally as they go about their daily activities. Some of these mistakes could be as a result of the decisions that were made directly by them (victims) or indirectly made by others and come back to affect them (affected people) (Armour, 2002; Harrauld, 2006; Nigg et al., 2010). It is a more difficult burden and more traumatic when these decisions result in adverse events which may potentially affect them directly or indirectly. Most of the time, people find it difficult to forgive themselves and live

with the question of 'should have, would have and could have' for the rest of their lives (Leavitt and Kiefer, 2006; Li et al., 2010; Litman, 2006; Silver et al., 2011; Tak et al., 2007). These attitudes have the tendency to hinder the process of healing following adverse events (Armour, 2002; Cefalu et al., 2006; Fullerton et al., 2003).

Self-condemnation and self-guilt worsen the grieving periods and if not taken care of adequately, can transition to acute stress disorder and eventually post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Adams et al., 2009; Boin, 2009; Fullerton et al., 2003). Different literatures have shown that self-condemnation aggravates the phases of grieving and prevents individuals and communities from bouncing back adequately post-disaster and after a violent experience (Armour, 2002; Fullerton et al., 2003; Kronenberg et al., 2010; Olshansky et al., 2008; Silver et al., 2011). When traumatic events occur, looking back on the decisions that resulted in the event should only be because of a re-assessment and analysis, with the goal of using the result as tools to bounce back from the adverse event. Conversely, the introspection should not be used as an avenue to plunge further into abyss of self-condemnation and guilty conscience. Self-forgiveness also offers a unique internal resource to heal the psyche of the victims' sordid past, re-orient the mind-set to face the reality and position the shattered mentality to accept the resultant reality after the violence. It also helps to heal the wound of the mind and confront without shame, any regret that may come up during the healing process (Armour, 2002; Curtis et al., 2010; Fullerton et al., 2003).

The blame game

People tend to find answers to knotty situations in life by identifying the culprit in order to ascribe the blame on them. Sometimes, this gives solace to people's quest when answers are matched with troubling question of 'why us? or why me?'. These feelings of arriving at answers have the tendency to bring closure to adverse events, especially when these events are least understood. Most of the times, when people do not know what is going on or happening to them, they look back and start to blame others as the culprit for the adverse events (Armour, 2002; Dembert and Simmer, 2000; DeSalvo et al., 2007; Silver et al., 2011; Tak et al., 2007; Williams et al., 1999). Sometimes these notions are true especially with man-made disasters and violent crimes, otherwise they are hard to fathom in cases of natural disasters. Blaming oneself or others sometimes can be a form of hindrance to healing from violence and other adverse experiences. With respect to man-made disaster, especially in cases where the culprits have not been identified, affected people feel that justice has not been served until the cases are solved, thus living with hurt feelings for a long time, as long as the cases are still on-going and until they feel justice has been served. Closure

is a positive feeling, because it enables affected people to move past the adverse events and move-on with their lives (Abrams et al., 2004; Armour, 2002; Eisen, 2002). Counselors should be wary of classifying physical-cum societal closure with the mental-cum mind closure. They are absolutely different. The latter proffers more benefits to the victims and it is more important as it helps healing and rebuilds a confident mentality. This which can help the affected people overcome grief and move towards focusing on the positive aspects of the present and the future (Abrams et al., 2004; Osofsky, 2008; Smoyak, 2006).

Accepting the situation

This is one of the most difficult things to do after the occurrence of adverse events. People often ask these popular questions of 'why me?', 'where do we go from here?' or 'where do we start from?'. Relative to experiencing the pain of adverse events, the concept of new normal can serve as a new vista for clients to transcend into a new life. Accepting the situation is an integral component of the concept of new normal, as it entails accepting and substituting the new situation as a replacement for the status quo and looking forward to the future with a renewed hope (Abrams et al., 2004; Eisen, 2002; Williams et al., 1999). Sometimes, people who accept the reality end up becoming better in managing adverse situation and can become more successful as individual or community than they might have been or planned to be with their conditions pre-disaster. Though different people have different results from accepting their new post-disaster situation and experience, generalization might be difficult as a result of availability and utilization of resources, and the internal milieu of the victims. However, many lessons might be learnt from the confidence and attitude with which successful people have turned their adverse experiences and backgrounds to enviable assets and lifestyles in the community (Abrams et al., 2004).

Change what you can and live with the rest

This is similar to the 'accepting the situation' mentality only that some conditions and situations after the experience of a violent episode are not final; the damage can still be mitigated and in some cases reversed to the preferred pre-disaster state. In these peculiar instances where reversal is a possibility and preferred, it is advisable for the affected people to strive towards achieving the preferred state so that they do not live to regret their decisions of decline or giving-up attitude in the future (Eisen, 2002). However, if the pre-disaster condition is unattainable, then there is no point grieving over what cannot be changed, the victims will have to adopt and embrace the post-disaster situation as the new normal and live with it. The feeling that 'we did everything

possible or tried our best' sometimes offers closure to the grieving individual and community. This can help to accelerate the process of healing and transitioning from the adverse experiences into the preferred future (Eisen, 2002).

Sharing thoughts with others in similar situation

In order to fully comprehend and accept the concepts of new normal in violence, affected people need to understand that their situations are not peculiar and unique to themselves alone. Several people across the globe and sometimes in their immediate neighborhoods might have experienced similar circumstances, are going through or will go through the same, similar or even worse situations than they are going through or experiencing presently (BondGraham, 2007; Dembert and Simmer, 2000; Williams et al., 1999). Knowing this reality offers some reassurances that they are not alone in their plights and can find solace by sharing their experiences with others. When they find this cohort with similar adverse experiences and are able to share their thoughts from a different perspective as peculiar to their situations, studies have shown that affected people thrive better from the encounter and heal faster. They receive encouragements just by the hearing from and listening to other affected people having a sense of belonging that some other people out there actually understand their current plights and states of mind (Williams et al., 1999). Sometimes, the stories can be shameful and difficult for the affected people to share, especially when they blame themselves as responsible for the violent adverse events.

Counselors need to encourage the affected people and victims to look beyond their senses of shame and guilt and bare their thoughts without any form of condemnation, so as to allow their healing process to begin on time and proceed without alterations (Fullerton et al., 2003a, b). This approach is effective where there is a robust social and family support and understanding. Having someone or a cohort who understands their situations also confers a form of insurance to the affected people, because they can consult with them during the process of healing, especially during those times when relapses into the past seem incessant, uncontrollable and going forward becomes difficult (Hawkins and Maurer, 2011; Jonkman et al., 2009; Osofsky, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2010).

Finding strengths from others' stories and experiences

Sometimes, affected people can learn from instructions in addition to learning from previous experiences. When it is not feasible for the affected people to find a cohort they can share their thoughts with, counselors can encourage them to use other resources in different media to learn

from similar stories or the same stories expressed in different perspectives, as these sources can be a conduits for them to find strengths and rays of hope in their situation post-violence and disaster (Abrams et al., 2004; Corrigan, 2008; Curtis et al., 2010). Some-times, it is difficult for affected people to have the initiative and fortitude to advance following traumatic experiences; however results from different studies and researches by experts can offer concrete ideas that have been proven and tested to help people in difficult situations overcome their moments of sadness and move-on with their lives (Cefalu et al., 2006; Williams et al., 1999). The new normal in violence of other people already documented in the media can inspire the new normal for people who are currently experiencing similar situation. The goal of new normal concept is to prescribe for the affected people the better alternatives and options of moving on and living peacefully following adverse events (Abrams et al., 2004; Chamlee-wright and Storr, 2009; Harrauld, 2006). Nevertheless, when there are no supports and reassurances that this concept of 'new normal in violence is pragmatic and effective, the entire efforts can end up in futility, as the affected people might not see any reasons or connections to continue and be positive-minded following a traumatic or violent experience (Dembert and Simmer, 2000; DeSalvo et al., 2007; Dunlap et al., 2007). Consequently, there is the need for consistency and patience on the part of the counselors to make sure that these people are carried along with the concept and that they understood the need to advance and transit to a better state from their grieving situation.

Overcoming the doctrine of fatalism

One of the beliefs that limit the inculcation of the concepts of new normal in violence is the tenets of fatalism or fate. This is a belief in which people conclude that 'change is beyond them' and 'what will happen will definitely happen' and 'they cannot do anything about it'. People with this belief believe they are powerless in determining their fates and well-being (Jonkman et al., 2009; Rhodes et al., 2010; Steury et al., 2004; Tanaka, 1996). This belief contradicts the principles of new normal and invalidates the need for affected people to move on with the hope of making the best opportunity of their new condition post-disaster. When the affected people operate with this mentality, they deny themselves the opportunity of turning their adverse conditions into a better experience that can be beneficial to them, their loved ones and the society in general. Fatalism is just a way of saying that the affected people are helpless and hopeless as nothing good can come from their adverse situations, other than waiting for another wind of tragedy to blow their way irrespective of their aversions to these events (Osofsky, 2008; Tanaka, 1996; Tierney, 2007). But on the contrary, cases of better times and days have

been documented over the span of human existence following different adverse events and various hopeless situations have metamorphosed into inspirational tales when affected people re-oriented themselves and refused to be defined by the adverse events. (Abrams et al., 2004; Boin, 2009; Li et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2008). So, there is the need to encourage affected people post-disaster to be optimistic about their situations and cling to the positive attitude of achieving their hopes and aspirations in life, no matter how terrible and traumatic the adverse event. Every person wants to be happy and have peace of mind, but the belief that people are powerless does not bring happiness nor does it give a lasting peace to the mind, the reason the concept of new normal and its positive tools need to be elaborated so that affected people and communities can utilize its tools to bounce-back following traumatic and violent experiences (Kronenberg et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2008; Sobel and Leeson, 2010)

Developing a positive perspective to life

This is an important principle in the concept of new normal in violence. It is the bedrock and foundation of the new normal concept. It is the sole reason why affected people conclude that they can give life a second shot or that they deserve a second chance depending on the circumstances, irrespective of what they have passed through in the first place or faced in the not too distant past (Abrams et al., 2004; Osofsky, 2008; Smoyak, 2006). It is an attitude that declares that the past experiences do not define them, rather, they define their lives based on the new choices and decisions they take and make following a traumatic experiences and post-disaster. This attitude is the engine that utilizes all the other factors and combines them as a component in availing the affected people the best options of bouncing back post-disaster. It is also the trigger for living with the new normal principle as a tool to adapt to the new situation following deleterious and violent experiences. Having positive mentality helps the principle of new normal to thrive and become actualized (Armour, 2002; Eisen, 2002; Elliott et al., 2010; Fullerton et al., 2003). The alternative is not an option as it worsens the conditions of the affected people and can translate into more moribund complications which will require more resources to manage. So, it is the onus of the stakeholders to stress these important factors to the people following adverse events. It is a viable choice of adapting into the reality and effective in commencing the healing process (Armour, 2002; Smoyak, 2006; Steury et al., 2004). A limitation of this perspective was the inability to conduct a statistical analysis to highlight the associations between crime and violence indices between New Orleans, state of Louisiana and the national data. This is because the exact state and national records were not available at this

time. Future research will include detail analysis of the rate of violence in the city and a comparison with the rate in other big cities across the country.

Conclusion

The concept of new normal in violence is important and valuable especially in a city like New Orleans with a considerable high rate of property and violent crime. This is necessary and important in breaking the jinx and trends of incessant and unnecessary violence, especially on the background of previous violence, a popular premise for violence in the city. It is also helpful in the discussion relating to community resilience and it should be given more emphasis when discussing resilience following a traumatic or disastrous event (Abrams et al., 2004; Smoyak, 2006; Williams et al., 1999). With all the aforementioned tools, the concept can become vital resources for affected communities and people in bouncing back from their adverse experiences into a profitable and benevolent future. This concept entails the belief that situations can become better and that all hopes are neither dashed nor lost following adverse events (Abrams et al., 2004; Armour, 2002; Boin and McConnell, 2007; Williams et al., 1999). Nevertheless, it stresses and imbues the ability to assess situations as they are and concentrate on the positive elements with a renewed hope for a better future. It is a second chance principle and opportunity that will be beneficial to the affected people, because it helps them to navigate their tumultuous present into peaceful future of hope and aspiration, irrespective of the scars from previous events (Abrams et al., 2004; Armour, 2002; Colten and Sumpter, 2009; Peacock et al., 2007; Quarantelli, 2005; Smoyak, 2006). A violence-free community is the right for every citizen and the responsibility of all the stakeholders. More importantly, the state of mind of the victims, if positive, can contribute significantly to the healing process

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