Why Do People Stay When a Hurricane Comes?

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Hurricane Florence is currently battering the Carolina coast. A weakened yet still severe storm, experts expect flooding, high winds and torrential rains in the area, possibly for days. After issuing a mandatory evacuation order, Gov. Roy Cooper of North Carolina warned, "If you wait until conditions get bad, it may be too late to get out safely." Tens of thousands of Carolinians scrambled to leave. Others, however, stayed put and are weathering the storm.

One local fisherman told television reporters: "I was born and raised right here. I'm a local and it takes a little more than a storm to run us out." He continued, "I'm going to stick it out. Me and my family gonna batten down the hatches and see what's left when it blows over."

That outlook is typical of many in coastal communities who habitually remain behind and in harm's way when hurricanes make landfall in the United States. The rest of us are routinely left with a deceptively straightforward question: Why do they choose to stay?

It's not a simple question, nor is it a neutral one, and how one answers it typically reflects a particular sense of what counts as appropriate behavior during a crisis and what makes for a responsible, or even "good," person.

With my collaborators MarYam Hamedani, Hazel Markus, Hilary Bergsieker and Liyam Eloul, I conducted a psychological study of Hurricane Katrina survivors and relief workers, as well as Americans who watched the disaster from afar. We found that outside observers — and even the relief workers providing aid — viewed those who evacuated as "self-reliant" and "hard-working," while they denigrated those who stayed behind, calling them "lazy," "negligent" and "stubborn."