The most effective way to reduce communities’ exposure to flood risk is to buy out residents who live in flood-prone areas. Yet residents rarely wish to relocate because of flood risk. In the end, do people benefit from taking buyouts? This is a particularly salient question for African-American communities, many of which were historically limited to swampy and flood-prone areas.

It is important that planners understand more about the experiences of buyout participants and identify racially disparate outcomes so that floodplain property acquisition programs can be amended as needed.

I use a comparative case study to look at the effect of floodplain buyout program participation on long-term economic wellbeing.

After Hurricane Floyd in 1999, communities in Eastern North Carolina had to make difficult decisions:

- In Princeville, North Carolina, a historic African-American community decided against participating in a buyout program, instead rebuilding in place.
- In Kinston, North Carolina, the city/county purchased 97% of the properties in Lincoln City, an African-American neighborhood. The most effective way to reduce communities’ exposure to flood risk is to buy out residents who live in flood-prone areas.

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In both Kinston and Princeville, individuals struggled with higher cost of housing as rebuilding necessitated new mortgages. Need-based subsidies for the poor were described as very generous in Princeville.

In Princeville, the decision to rebuild in place did not solve any of the town’s economic issues, but did not make anything worse, either. Princeville’s central point of pride, that it was the first town chartered by African Americans, remains an asset.

In Kinston, the social networks that supported economic security were lost when the buyout occurred. Neighbors had shared food, rides to work, and parenting. Local businesses that had employed local people closed. Those that have reopened are not owned by people from the community.

We can enhance our understanding of hazard mitigation through the lens of community development. Large relocation programs should plan for redevelopment of small businesses, housing solutions for buyout participants and renters, new commuting solutions, increased cost of property taxes, possible housing market distortions and sustaining social cohesion.

Planners need to confront the ethical issue that floodplain acquisition programs are most feasible in areas with low home values, which results in moving vulnerable communities to reduce collective exposure to risk. The individual flood risk reduction benefit may or may not be realized in an individual homeowner’s lifetime.

My next steps are to validate findings with further interviews, analyze data on home pricing and mortgage defaults, and draft an article to share with researchers and practitioners. My dissertation on economic resilience will include and build on this work.

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