

# Review of “In Too Deep: Class and Mothering in a Flooded Community”

By Rachel Tolbert Kimbro

University of California Press, 2021, 268 pages. Prices: \$85.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback). <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520377738/in-too-deep>

**Reviewer:** Lori Peek, University of Colorado Boulder

Hurricane Harvey made landfall as a powerful Category 4 storm on August 25, 2017. For three days, rain drenched the Houston metropolitan area and surrounding parts of Texas. More than half of the homes in Houston—where a record-shattering 43 inches of rain fell—sustained some damage. The hurricane resulted in an estimated \$150 billion in economic losses, led to 103 deaths, displaced more than 30,000 residents, and left hundreds of thousands of people without power and other vital services.

Statistics allow us to put a storm of this magnitude in context and to compare it to other catastrophic events. *In Too Deep* serves as an important qualitative complement that reminds us of the complex stories that lie behind the numbers. This book, written by sociologist Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, zooms in to explore the experiences of thirty-six upper-middle class, mostly White, women who lived in the upscale Houston neighborhood of Bayou Oaks during Hurricane Harvey. When the storm happened, Kimbro lived in a home nearby and, years before, her own children had attended elementary school there. After Harvey flooded Bayou Oaks—it was the third time in three years that the neighborhood was inundated—Kimbro sought to understand what happens when caregiving and climate change collide.

*In Too Deep* draws on two rounds of interviews that Kimbro conducted with the 36 participants in the year following the hurricane. Each chapter deftly weaves together insights from environmental sociology, sociology of the family, and gender studies. Kimbro ultimately makes an important contribution to a limited body of literature on how the parenting schemas women use to raise children influence how they cope with disaster. Throughout the book, the concept of intensive mothering—a time and labor heavy, child-centered, emotionally involved, and expert-guided parenting style—takes center stage.

The women of Bayou Oaks mobilized a wide array of resources to curate aspects of their children's lives to provide opportunity and safety. As Kimbro writes, even without the specter of disaster, “increasing economic instability pushes families to engage in ‘security projects,’ meaning actions and strategies that aim to situate their families favorably in an insecure world” (p. 12). The bitter irony is that no place is entirely safe in a time of rapidly intensifying climate-related disasters. As *In Too Deep* poignantly reveals, keeping children in an affluent, but disaster-prone, neighborhood can leave them exposed to untold harm. Kimbro challenges the reader to think carefully about contemporary narratives surrounding what it means to be a “good mother” and the associated pressures that are rapidly morphing in a warming world.

**Received:** October 31, 2023. **Accepted:** November 2, 2023

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oup.com](mailto:journals.permissions@oup.com)

In the process of documenting what mothers do in threatened environments, this book helps to answer one of the questions that emerges after nearly every disaster: *Why do they stay?* Through rich narrative accounts, *In Too Deep* shows how tethered the women were to their communities and children's schools. Attachment to place is a central theme throughout, and the first empirical chapter explains why the study participants chose to live in Bayou Oaks and why they were so deeply committed to the neighborhood. In their quest for the "best possible position socially, geographically, and educationally" (p. 20) for their children, the women made sacrifices and worked to maintain their desired lifestyle in their chosen neighborhood. They dug in deeper, rather than give up in the face of repeated flooding. As the second and third chapters demonstrate in vivid detail, the women threw themselves into disaster preparedness and response efforts with the same vigor and intensity as they parented their children. They moved items above where they expected the floodwaters to rise. Later, after the torrential rains, they spent countless hours mucking out their homes and making them livable again. In the fourth chapter, Kimbro explores how the upper-middle class women were able to navigate the maze of disaster insurance, garner additional economic assets, and draw on extensive social capital to finance and facilitate their recovery in a repetitive loss environment.

Even during non-disaster times, intensive mothering does not come without a cost. While other sociologists have written extensively about the gendered division of labor and the unequal load of parenting in daily life, Kimbro's work is one of only a handful of studies that brings this lens to disaster. Her work documents the difficult consequences of intensive mothering and how crisis amplifies the challenges women face. In particular, the book evokes the notion of a "third shift" where women work in the paid labor market, take the lead in managing household duties and raising children, and then also assume responsibility for disaster preparation and recovery. After Harvey, which was by far the most devastating of the floods the women had to confront, the mothers reported precipitous declines in their emotional and physical health. Most also shared that their marriages were increasingly marked by conflict; a few divorced during the study period, and many others contemplated separating from their spouses.

*In Too Deep* offers a stark sociological reminder that it is impossible to make sense of the decisions that people make without considering how they are socially situated in terms of gender, class status, family structure, and neighborhood location. While the book would have been further strengthened by a more careful consideration of the women's White racial privilege, Kimbro is attentive to systemic biases that mark the disaster recovery process and to the racial inequities that divide Houston.

This is an exceptional book that would work well in many different undergraduate- and graduate-level courses. With each passing disaster, this scholarly account should serve as a clarion call to readers to pay attention to the work that women do on behalf of others. Not only does it matter, it may also provide clues for how we can better ready ourselves for a future more frequently marked by disaster.