CHAPTER 28

Lessons from Katrina:*

Structural Racism as a Recipe for Disaster

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Introduction

Racial segregation and concentrated poverty are two major challenges to community economic development efforts. And while such patterns of uneven development play out at the local level, they are increasingly the result of national, if not international, forces largely beyond the control of local actors. Consequently, state and federal policies are increasingly important in shaping the quality of life in the nation's neighborhoods. These realities are driven home by what are often mistakenly viewed solely as natural disasters, like floods, fires, and hurricanes. Though natural events, these phenomena become human disasters because of political and economic conditions that precede and follow their occurrence. Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region, constitutes a case in point.

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Pre-Katrina New Orleans

Pre-Katrina New Orleans, like most major U.S. cities, was characterized by extreme levels of poverty and racial segregation. The local poverty rate was high, and poor residents were heavily concentrated.

New Orleans' poverty rate in 2000 was 28 percent.[1] By 2007, the poverty rate in New Orleans was 22.6 percent. This decline reflected the outmigration of many poor people rather than an enrichment of the local population. The number of high-poverty census tracts (tracts where 40 percent or more of the residents are poor) grew from 30 in 1980 to 49 in 2000. The number of people living in these tracts increased from 96,417 to 108,419. Pre-Katrina, the black poverty rate of 35 percent was more than three times the white rate of 11 percent, and 43 percent of poor blacks lived in poor neighborhoods.[2]

New Orleans has long been highly segregated. According to two common indicators of racial segregation—the Index of Dissimilarity and Isolation—the city is one of the 10 or 15 most racially segregated among the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas, although structural racism in New Orleans is very similar to that of other cities. As a Brookings Institution report summarized, "By 2000, the city of New Orleans had become highly segregated by race and had developed high concentrations of poverty. . . . [B]lacks and whites were living in quite literally different worlds before the storm hit."[3]

Like New Orleans, other big cities throughout the United States all contain large numbers of poor people, many neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and highly segregated housing patterns. Why is this? What are the consequences? We need to understand the history and the legacy of inequality, and we need to know why generations of Americans have been and continue to be cut off from opportunity.[4]

The most fundamental challenge was posed by john powell and his colleagues at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, who asserted in reference to Katrina:

> Questions about why African Americans are more likely than whites to be poor, and why poor African Americans are more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty, are questions that were neither asked nor answered. . . . There was little critical discussion of how historical patterns of segregation contributed to the racial layout of the city, and how structures worked together to produce racial disparities and economic inequality. . . . [B]roadening how we think and talk about race is critically important to making sense of today's world. Doing so also raises critical questions about the shrinking middle class, our anemic investment in public space, the meaning of merit in a purported meritocracy, and the promises and failures of the American experiment—all of which concern every American. Once we are able to discuss race and racism in these broad terms, we will be able to construct

> a response not only to the damage wrought by Katrina, but also to that which occurs across the country every day. . . . [Katrina] created an opportunity for reexamining the connections between race and class, and deciphering precisely how race has been inscribed spatially into our metropolitan areas. In short, it has provided a rare chance to discuss the links between race, equity, justice and democracy. Race, as a transformative tool, can and should be applied to more than just the rebuilding effort in New Orleans. Racialized poverty, segregation, and the decaying infrastructure of our central cities are common problems plaguing urban areas nationwide. Used properly, race allows us to examine how institutional failings affect everyone, and enables us to reimagine a society where democracy and democratic ideals are not constricted and undermined by structural arrangements.[5]

Structural Racism

Racial disparities and poverty are not the result primarily of individual actions, as the reigning culture-of-poverty theory asserts.[6] They are the cumulative result of a long history of institutional arrangements and structures that have produced current realities. We can start with the 250 years of African-American slavery and the longer-term effects that status had on wealth creation, family life, and white attitudes toward—as well as treatment of—blacks. Following the secession by 11 Southern states (including Louisiana) and a bloody civil war that ended the secession, the defeated states (selectively) asserted a claim of "states' rights" as a means of limiting federal intervention. Afterward, a century of legal segregation throughout the South—overturned by the Civil Rights Movement and several court rulings—ensued, with less formal barriers at work in other parts of the country. Progressive federal policies promulgated during the New Deal were racially discriminatory. When introduced, even the Social Security system categorically excluded two occupations, courtesy of Southern members of Congress: farmworkers and domestics. Not coincidentally, these were occupations dominated by African Americans and other racial minorities. Federal housing programs reinforced patterns of residential segregation and provided minimal home ownership assistance to minority households. The GI Bill following World War II similarly provided relatively little education and housing assistance to minorities, compared with the massive benefits whites secured from this program. When African Americans received these federal benefits, they were still often effectively denied by educational institutions, housing providers, and employers.[7]

This is not "just history"—and in any case, history has clear and powerful continuing impacts. "Redlining" by lending institutions and insurance companies is still all too common. School conditions for black and white students are very different, and the landmark school desegregation decision

Brown v. Board of Education notwithstanding, K–12 schools are segregated all over the country. Housing and employment discrimination is rife. Exclusionary zoning regulations, racial steering by real estate agents, federally subsidized highways, and tax breaks for homeowners as well as suburban business development prop up the system. The criminal justice system—incarceration rates, sentencing patterns, the laws themselves—reflects extreme racial disparities.[8] Concentrated poverty and racial segregation severely reduce opportunity of all types. As sociologist Douglas Massey, coauthor of the classic *American Apartheid*, observes: "Any process that concentrates poverty within racially isolated neighborhoods will simultaneously increase the odds of socioeconomic failure."[9]

The racial segregation and concentration of poverty resulting from these forces shaped development in New Orleans and metropolitan areas around the country. One consequence is that in New Orleans, those with means left when they knew the storm was coming: They had access to personal transportation or plane and train fare, money for temporary housing, and in some cases second homes.

Two examples are revealing. Patients in one hospital were saved when a doctor who knew Al Gore contacted the former Vice President, who was able to cut through government red tape and charter two planes that took the patients to safety. In another instance, guests trapped in one luxury New Orleans hotel were saved when that chain hired a fleet of buses to get them out. This is what is meant by the catchphrase "social capital"—a resource most unevenly distributed by class and race. Various processes of racial segregation have resulted in middle- and upper-income whites being concentrated in the outlying (and in New Orleans, literally higher) suburban communities. Blacks were concentrated in the low-lying central city, where the flooding was most severe. The central city communities had difficulty escaping: After the storm, police in the West Bank city of Gretna blocked a bridge from New Orleans, preventing large numbers of African-American evacuees from leaving the deluged city.[10]

Infrastructure and Uneven Development

Urban policy expert James Carr observed that if the city of New Orleans had been a more diverse community, it may well have had the political clout to secure the levees long ago.[11] Long before Katrina, officials knew the protective levees surrounding the city were inadequate, leaving it vulnerable to precisely the type of disaster that occurred on August 29. But whether it is the levees in New Orleans, the bridges in San Francisco, or urban public schools, such public services are generally viewed as expenses to be minimized rather than essential investments to be maximized to enhance quality of life. In its 2009 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, the American Society of Civil Engineers assessed 15 infrastructure categories and gave the nation a "D" for its maintenance efforts, noting there had been little change

in the condition of America's roads, bridges, drinking-water systems, and other public works since its 2005 Report Card and asserting that a $2.2 trillion investment is needed over the next five years in order to meet adequate conditions.[12] The consequences have not been and will not be race- or class-neutral. Low-income people and people of color are disproportionately dependent on public transportation to get to work and to shop; on local police to keep their neighborhoods safe; and on emergency services of all types. They have fewer private resources to serve as cushions in times of stress—including not only outside forces like hurricanes, but personal disasters such as sudden unemployment, unexpected illness or injury, or other vagaries of modern life.[13]

While there is still individual racism, incompetence by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other public and private bureaucracies, government corruption, and other forms of malfeasance and misfeasance,[14] by far the most potent force in creating these extreme disparities is institutional racism—"color-blind racism," as it is often termed[15]—something that most black people understand and experience, but most white people do not. Consequently, it should have been no surprise when Katrina hit New Orleans that the areas damaged were 45.8 percent black—compared to 26.4 percent black in undamaged areas—and that 20.9 percent of the households in damaged areas were poor, compared to 15.3 percent in undamaged areas.

New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region generally, like virtually all U.S. metropolitan areas, experience many costs of racism, concentrated poverty, and uneven development. These forces may shape, and hinder, redevelopment efforts in and around New Orleans as well as other communities seeking paths to prosperity for their citizens. Inequities associated with race, class, gender, and other socially constructed markers are not inevitable. They reflect the conscious choices made by political and economic decision makers and implemented by public and private institutions. Different choices are available in a post-Katrina world.

Earlier U.S. Disasters

Not all past U.S. disasters were so poorly handled by government. While there were mistakes as well as positive lessons to be learned, a look at the Chicago Fire of 1871, the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, the 1927 Mississippi flood, the 1930s Dustbowl, and Hurricane Andrew in 1992 is highly instructive, showing the importance of a comprehensive revitalization approach to recovery, rather than simple rebuilding; involvement of the affected persons in their own recovery; the importance of oversight and accountability; the need for ecological balance; and the appropriate division between private and public sector responsibilities. Recovery in some instances focused on restoring the status quo, in others on true reform—depending on who was in the decision-making role.[16] Recovery in New Orleans, no doubt, has been and will be a contested process. A brief examination of key areas illustrates these dynamics.

The Impact of Katrina on Housing, Economic Development, Education, and Health

As noted throughout this book, building healthy communities means examining transformative options. Disasters can be cradles of innovation for this transformation. The next section describes housing, economic development, education, and health immediately after Katrina.

Housing

Housing and re-housing (temporary and permanent) is critical for access to jobs, family life, household finances, schools, and availability of community facilities. The extent of destruction (of both privately owned as well as public and assisted housing) was unprecedented—a National Low Income Housing Coalition analysis showed 302,405 housing units seriously damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, 73 percent of all units in the jurisdictions studied. Slightly under half (47 percent) were rental units, 71 percent affordable to low-income households. Of the 103,019 occupied public or assisted units (including privately owned units rented by Section 8 voucher holders) in the Katrina-affected areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, 41,161 were damaged, 15,199 so severely as to render them uninhabitable.[17]

The government—national, state, local—largely botched efforts at relocation and replacement housing.[18] In the scramble to find shelter for displaced people as they were dispersed to cities across the county, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) encouraged local public housing authorities to give admission priority to evacuees over people on the waiting lists—thereby pitting one needy group against another, a predictable situation at a time when there are 4.5 million more extremely low-income households in the United States than there are affordable rental units.[19]

FEMA initially responded to the hurricanes by ordering trailers, providing them rent-free for up to 18 months. Other FEMA housing relief programs provided funding for emergency shelters and cash grants to individuals for rental assistance, home repairs, and other personal costs. FEMA ordered 300,000 travel trailers and mobile homes, but placed them mostly in trailer camps that became known as "FEMAvilles," removed from transportation, jobs, schools, health care, and shopping.[20] Remarkably, the agency was able to install only 500 units a day, even though it had a waiting list of 40,000 evacuees in Louisiana alone.[21] In a field near Hope, Arkansas, news images of thousands of trailers awaiting delivery and installation sinking into the mud became a symbol of FEMA's incompetence.[22] Trailer parks were met with not-in-my-back-yard resistance by some parish governments in Louisiana and by neighbors in New Orleans.[23] And, of course, trailers are structurally unsuited for hurricane-prone areas.

Yet another expensive and contentious form of temporary housing was hotel and motel rooms, first organized by the Red Cross and then taken over by FEMA. At the peak of hotel usage, FEMA reported paying for 85,000 rooms

a night.[24] FEMA's repeated attempts to end the hotel program and compel the evacuees to move elsewhere, when there were no alternative quarters available, resulted in widespread public outcry and lawsuits.[25] A Louisiana-based federal judge issued a temporary restraining order enjoining FEMA from proceeding with its Dec. 15, 2005 hotel assistance deadline, calling FEMA's actions "numbingly insensitive" and "unduly callous."[26] In late November 2006, a federal judge ordered FEMA to restore housing assistance and pay back rent to at least 11,000 families, calling the agency's cutoff unconstitutional and "Kafkaesque"[27]—a decision FEMA got reversed on appeal.

Not surprisingly, homelessness has increased in New Orleans: 1 in 25 of the city's estimated early 2008 population of 302,000.[28] And the storms resulted in a loss of beds for the homeless—2,800 before the storm, 2,000 in mid-2008; and 60 percent of the city's homeless persons said their condition was due to Katrina.[29]

Another aspect of the housing problem has been salvaging, rebuilding, and reoccupying New Orleans' damaged homes—determining what houses or parts of houses are salvageable; how to carry out the salvage and rebuilding work expeditiously and economically; who will do the work; and how to do it in a way that does not endanger the health and safety of those carrying out these tasks. The options have included "deconstructing" homes rather than bulldozing them—deconstructing entails careful dismantling in order to reuse the building materials, provide skilled employment, and reduce landfill dumping.[30]

Much of the initial focus was on homeowners to the exclusion of renters, who disproportionately occupied the region's poor neighborhoods. The New Orleans public housing program was in poor shape before the storms; HUD placed the city's Housing Authority in receivership in 2002, and there has been considerable pressure not to replace or renovate damaged and destroyed units. Instead, there is pressure to redevelop those public housing projects, which had been 100 percent black, into upscale neighborhoods—for entirely different uses and users.[31] Louisiana Congressman Richard Baker was quoted a few days after the storm as saying, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did it."[32] HUD vastly added to the city's housing problems with its decision to demolish more than 4,500 public housing apartments in four developments—a move characterized as "the most prominent skirmish in the larger battle over the post-Katrina balance of whites and blacks in New Orleans and how decisions on rebuilding shape the city's demographic future."[33] In response, the *New York Times* architecture critic pleaded for restoration of New Orleans' housing projects. He observed: "Built at the height of the New Deal, the city's public housing projects have little in common with the dehumanizing superblocks and grim plazas that have long been an emblem of urban poverty. Modestly scaled, they include some of the best public housing built in the United States. . . . [T]he notion [of dynamiting the projects] is stupefying."[34] In papers filed with the court (in support of a suit challenging the demolition plan), MIT Architecture Professor John Fernandez, following inspection of 140 apartments, concluded:

> No structural or non-structural damage was found that could reasonably warrant any cost-effective building demolition. . . . [R]eplacement of these buildings with contemporary construction would yield buildings of lower quality and shorter lifetime duration; the original construction methods and materials of these projects are far superior in their resistance to hurricane conditions than typical new construction, and with renovation and regular maintenance, the lifetimes of the buildings in all four projects promise decades of continued service that may be extended indefinitely.[35]

As of March 2009, most of the demolition has taken place, and rebuilding plans for mixed-use, mixed-income developments would produce just 3,300 subsidized units. Civil rights attorney and Loyola University of New Orleans Law School Professor Bill Quigley noted that:

> The housing authority's own documents show that [for the four projects] Lafitte could be repaired for $20 million, even completely overhauled for $85 million while the estimate for demolition and rebuilding many fewer units will cost over $100 million. St. Bernard could be repaired for $41 million, substantially modernized for $130 million while demolition and rebuilding less units will cost $197 million. B.W. Cooper could be substantially renovated for $135 million compared to $221 million to demolish and rebuild less units. Their own insurance company reported that it would take less than $5000 each to repair each of the C.J. Peete apartments.[36]

Obviously, what's taking place is conscious, planned land use/user change to reduce the number of low-income families in New Orleans.

But the overall problem is massive, making the levee problem pale in comparison.[37] The housing problems of the Gulf Coast include the daunting challenge to restore not only housing, but health care, schools, jobs, and commercial establishments.[38] Hurricanes Katrina and Rita highlighted a larger problem. The United States does not take housing problems seriously enough and has yet to implement a right to decent, affordable housing.[39] Fundamental to the future of housing in the Gulf Coast has been the question of who has the right to return. As Sheila Crowley, President of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, notes, "While policymakers have been dithering, the modern-day carpetbaggers have moved in. Speculators are buying up property at bargain prices, and multinational corporations are getting richer off of FEMA contracts."[40] Long-time residents sometimes do not have clear title to properties handed down through the generations. Evacuees in far-off places sold their homes to take what looked like a windfall of needed immediate cash—usually well below what a knowledgeable on-site seller could command—for their homes.[41]

The centrality of housing to racial issues after Katrina has been vividly illustrated in many ways. For example, the National Fair Housing Alliance found that black evacuees were treated less favorably than white evacuees in their attempts to obtain housing. Using standard "paired tester" techniques,

the Alliance revealed the litany of standard discriminatory housing market practices in two-thirds of their tests: Some landlords represented to black home seekers that vacant livable units were unavailable or unlivable, while showing several homes to whites; black home seekers were charged more rent and higher deposits than their white counterparts; rental agents failed to return messages to African-American home seekers while returning the calls of their white counterparts; rental agents offered special inducements like lower security deposits to white home seekers, while failing to offer the same to their black counterparts.[42]

As an example of post-Katrina housing discrimination, St. Bernard Parish, right outside New Orleans, passed an ordinance in September 2006 barring single-family homeowners from renting their home to anyone except a blood relative without special permission from the Parish Council. Given St. Bernard's history and reputation as a segregated, predominantly white community, the motives for this extraordinary measure were not hard to decipher. Nearly 93 percent of the parish's owner-occupied housing is white-occupied, and potentially thousands of homeowners who left the parish after Katrina may have wanted to rent out their otherwise empty homes. The Council cited the need to "maintain the integrity and stability of established neighborhoods as centers of family values and activities." One of the supportive councilors remarked, "We don't want to change the aesthetics of the neighborhood." The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, represented by attorneys from the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and Relman & Dane law firm, immediately filed a motion in federal District Court for a temporary injunction, claiming a clear violation of the Fair Housing Act. Under the resultant Consent Order, the parish agreed to permanently rescind the ordinance and to follow the Fair Housing Act. But the Parish then instituted a one-year moratorium on all construction of multifamily housing units with five or more units. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana ruled in March 2009 that the Parish Council's purpose and intent in enacting the moratorium was racially discriminatory, and that the moratorium had an unjustified discriminatory impact on potential African-American renters. The Court ordered the Parish and Council to rescind the moratorium and stated it would entertain evidence of damages and consider whether the Parish and Council should be held in contempt for violating a previous Order not to discriminate.[43]

Yet another civil rights/fair housing suit was filed in November 2008: a class action against the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Louisiana Recovery Authority, alleging that the federally funded $11 billion Road Home program discriminates against African-American homeowners in New Orleans. The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center and the National Fair Housing Alliance brought the suit and are being represented by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and a Washington, D.C., law firm, Cohen Milstein. The discrimination alleged pertains to the formula used to determine grants to homeowners for repair of their damaged homes, which, based on historical and structural workings of the housing market, leaves black homeowners with smaller awards than white homeowners and with insufficient funds to rebuild.[44]

Economic Development

Economic development is the forefront of rebuilding efforts. In pre-Katrina New Orleans, the local economy polarized professionals and low-income workers.[45] New Orleans—traditionally a tripartite economy based on the port, oil, and tourism—saw stagnant employment growth during the 1980s and 1990s, thus forcing the city to register substantial job losses in port-related industries and manufacturing.[46] The city did, however, gain jobs in health care, tourism-related industries, legal services, social services, and education.[47] The metropolitan area lost more than 200,000 jobs in the wake of the storms; in November 2005, the unemployment rate in the New Orleans area was a staggering 17.5 percent. At the end of 2008, the unemployment rate was 5.4 percent according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But this amount reflects the large number of people who left New Orleans following Katrina rather than any significant number of jobs that were replaced or created after the storm.

Rebuilding economically has been hampered by multiple failures on the part of the U.S. Small Business Administration and FEMA—as well as the failure of insurance companies to make prompt and full payment, followed by the withdrawal of several key companies from the area with respect to writing new policies. Government cleanup and construction contracts went to firms from Texas and Arkansas instead of to local firms. Uneven, racially related access to credit—residential as well as commercial—continues to be a serious problem. In 2004, African Americans received just 15 percent of all market-rate home loans written in the New Orleans metropolitan statistical area, where they comprised 34 percent of the population—leaving them to rely on high-cost, often predatory lending. Had they received market-rate mortgages in proportion to their population, they would have received 4,269 additional loans worth $458 million. A further important element in the lending picture is the location of bank branches: Local branches are generally found to boost small business lending, but there are far fewer bank branches in low-income and minority neighborhoods—as an extreme example, the predominantly minority, lower-income Lower Ninth Ward and St. Claude neighborhoods of New Orleans have just one branch, while bank branches are clustered around the French Quarter tourist hub and predominantly white neighborhoods across the city. "It is clear," that "the financial sector . . . has yet to address the inequalities between minorities and whites that were magnified by the hurricanes' damage."[48]

Other economic development problems include delays and difficulties in rebuilding public works in the state, due to antagonism between state and federal officials and to indecisiveness by local officials about what to rebuild, where, and how.[49] Accounts of crime against day workers, mostly immigrants with vulnerable status who are reluctant to contact the police, can lead to reduction of this important workforce. These laborers are known on the streets as "walking ATMs," and they are robbed and beaten with alarming frequency.[50] Day laborers doing reconstruction work often get cheated by contractors.[51] Unfortunately, and inexplicably, the economic stimulus bill signed by President Obama in mid-February 2009 will yield the lowest job

employment benefits for Louisiana's 2nd Congressional District—which includes New Orleans—among all 435 districts in the country.[52]

Education

For families with K–12 children, schools are almost as important as housing. Before the storm, the city's school system was one of worst in the country. Michael Casserly of the Council of the Great City Schools observed, "Before Katrina's onslaught, the children of New Orleans were isolated racially, economically, academically and politically in public schools that were financed inadequately, maintained poorly, and governed ineptly."[53] The damage to the educational enterprise on August 29 was enormous: over two-fifths of the system's schools (disproportionately those in low-income, African-American neighborhoods) sustained severe wind and flooding damage. Many schools were beyond repair, and almost as many suffered moderate damage. Tens of thousands of K–12 students wound up in different school districts and different states, thus disrupting their curriculum and teacher-student and peer relationships. A great many students missed months of formal education. The U.S. Dept. of Education estimated that some 372,000 students—preschool through college—were displaced from the states hit by the storms. Louisiana alone estimated that some 105,000 of its students were dislocated and not attending their home schools—creating sudden and severe burdens on the receiving school systems, such as overcrowded classrooms.[54]

A major change in the New Orleans public school system has been state takeover of a large portion of the system and a shift to charter schools—a controversial move and one that has been pushed as a more general goal by market-oriented advocates in the education reform field.[55] An ancillary result (some claim, a goal) is weakening of the teachers' union; the district's teachers were furloughed in the weeks immediately following Katrina, and their right to return to the system on a seniority basis was replaced by state authority to hire and place teachers in the schools it had seized.[56]

A more recent phenomenon has been a steep rise in violence and misbehavior in the reopened schools, due largely to the return of teenagers without accompanying parents. Some parents, for a variety of reasons—many of them job-related—have chosen to remain at least temporarily, but possibly permanently, in the cities to which they were evacuated. They gave in to their children's entreaties to return to friends and a familiar environment, making do as best they can with respect to sleeping and eating arrangements. Alarmingly, one New Orleans high school, where up to a fifth of the 775 students live without parents, is described as having "at least 25 security guards, at the entrance, up the stairs, and outside classes. The school has a metal detector, four police officers and four police cruisers on the sidewalk." A student observed, "We have a lot of security guards and not enough teachers," and one student added, "It's like you're in jail. You have people watching you all the time."[57] One can only imagine the long-range impact of this schooling crisis on the future lives of thousands of angry, lonely, deracinated teens. The new focus on "the school-to-prison

pipeline" around the country certainly has taken root here. As Michael Casserly observed:

> New Orleans is not the only city . . . in which our poorest children are concentrated and isolated in such a way. . . . And it is not the only one that embodies the nation's neglect of its poor. One can see the same pattern in many other cities across the country—if one is only willing to open one's eyes. And, in other cities, we run the same risk . . . whatever the next storm, wherever the next levees.[58]

Health

Another critical service is public health. A range of political, economic, and social forces have contributed to health-care challenges in New Orleans. A United Health Foundation report noted that

> before the storms hit, Louisiana ranked lowest overall in the country. . . . It numbered among the five worst states for infant mortality, cancer deaths, prevalence of smoking, and premature deaths. . . . Louisianans also had among the nation's highest rates of cardiovascular deaths, motor vehicle deaths, occupational fatalities, infectious diseases, and violent crime.[59]

The city's historic absence of a manufacturing sector prevented the development of a strong labor movement with its demands for health-care benefits. Cultural patterns (*Laissez les bon temps rouler*—"let the good times roll") and the high-calorie, high-cholesterol local cuisine were contributing factors to the local health picture.

The storms created their own public health problems—notably, toxins from damage to buildings and vehicles; brackish, sewage-contaminated floodwater; decomposing bodies; vermin; and many other sources.[60] But, as was the case with the schools, New Orleans was a community at risk well before August 29. This majority-black city with extreme levels of poverty produced a de facto caste system of health care that provided unequal, lesser treatment for the poor, the uneducated, the homeless, the immigrant, the uninsured, and others who are disenfranchised.

Higher rates of illness among evacuees were reported, especially among children. Displaced children who lived in the state's biggest trailer park were found to have rates of anemia, due to poor diets, four times the national average.[61] Mental health problems have been rife, with a notable rise in suicides. A study of trailer park residents reported a rate of major depression more than seven times the national rate of 6.7 percent, and 20 percent reported having contemplated suicide.[62]

As of early 2008, more than 40,000 trailers still were being used by families displaced by Katrina.[63] The FEMA trailers pose serious health perils to occupants from high-formaldehyde-emitting particleboard and composite wood, which cause serious eye, lung, and nose irritation; and the Gulf's hot, humid climate increases the rate at which these toxic, carcinogenic vapors are released. The vast majority of the trailers FEMA ordered were built very

quickly, likely with poor quality control.[64] Most disturbingly, FEMA knew of and suppressed warnings from its own health workers about these hazards—the agency stopped testing occupied trailers after discovering formaldehyde levels 75 times the U.S.-recommended safety threshold for workplaces, and more stringent standards likely are appropriate for tight living spaces where occupants (many of whom are children) reside.[65] Many families have brought damage suits against the trailer manufacturers, although the effort to combine them into a class action was rejected by a federal judge, due to the wide variety of trailer models involved.[66] Equally disturbing, FEMA sold nearly 11,000 trailers no longer needed for short-term emergency use through online auctions and an additional 864 trailers to resident evacuees, thus ensuring the spread and longer-term impact of this known toxicity.[67]

In sum, the medical problems and the disparate racial impact on health were predictable. This is just one of the many areas in which poverty and race in our society compound vulnerability.

Lessons from Katrina

Government assistance to New Orleans came in the form of debris removal, levee repair, and upgrading waterway infrastructure by FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, while local government attempted to establish long-term rebuilding of the New Orleans infrastructure. But the more detailed rebuilding work has occurred through the help of churches and community organizers, after many residents accused local government planners of remaking New Orleans for the wealthy.[68] Specifically, Mayor C. Ray Nagin's original revitalization plan—introduced in November 2005 and developed under the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) commission and in conjunction with the Urban Land Institute—brought waves of criticism from residents. Most notably criticized was the "green-dot plan," which proposed replacing many homes with parks.[69] The criticism was followed by an outpouring of community activism and overshadowed efforts by the BNOB commission to revitalize the city.[70] Cynthia Willard-Lewis, a city councilwoman for the Lower Ninth Ward, reported to the *Times-Picayune* that the green-dots made her African-American constituents "flash back to the civil rights era, thinking they would need to fight for equal access all over again."[71]

In the aftermath of Katrina, there was an elaborate "community engagement" process involving evacuees in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas (with satellite gatherings in 16 other diasporic cities with a substantial, but lesser number of evacuees). Produced by America Speaks, the process was designed to generate a comprehensive "bottom-up" rebuilding plan.[72] New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin appointed Edward Blakely, a highly regarded urban planner and former Chair of the University of California–Berkeley Urban Planning Department, as "executive director for recovery management" for his city.[73]

The rebuilding process will continue for many years to come. Katrina teaches us the essential elements of disaster recovery, as noted in the

cursory review above of past major disasters. To most, it is readily apparent that the key to avoiding the kind of devastation that happened as a result of Hurricane Katrina is planning. To do this right, there must be, first, a comprehensive revitalization approach to recovery as opposed to simple rebuilding. Second, there must be a democratic and fully inclusive planning process that involves the affected persons and other stakeholders in their own recovery. Third, there must be public, private, and grassroots oversight and accountability. Fourth, there must be ecological balance. Fifth, there must be appropriate division of responsibilities between the public and private sectors.

What happened in New Orleans is not as unique as is often claimed and in fact reflects the same racial segregation, concentration of poverty, and disregard for infrastructure that are common across American cities. All segments of the community must be at the table when making future planning decisions, including disaster planning. Planning team members cannot be only the heads of major corporations, banks, and the like, nor can they be only the mayor and his or her friends. Representatives of all communities (racial, ethnic, income, geographic) should be involved in planning the city's and region's future. Furthermore, planning must be more "bottom up" than "top down." The Center for Social Inclusion, a national policy advocacy organization working to dismantle structural racism and build opportunity for all, observes that rebuilding policies in New Orleans do not adequately address any of the present structural barriers. "Race is fundamentally tied to the way we build communities and we are all made vulnerable for it."[74] PolicyLink, a national action and research institute seeking to advance social and economic equity, shares this goal to create an equitable society and defines equity as "just and fair inclusion" in which everyone can participate and prosper.

Equity considerations must be front and center, not simply hoped-for outcomes of private sector economic growth and expansion of the local growth machine. Equitable development has become the hallmark for progressive groups when it comes to community economic development and related issues. What then is the future of New Orleans—and, by extension, America's metropolitan areas?

A story in the *Wall Street Journal* was pretty blatant:

> Despite the disaster that has overwhelmed New Orleans, the city's monied, mostly white elite is hanging on and maneuvering to play a role in the recovery when the floodwaters of Katrina are gone. . . . The power elite of New Orleans—whether they are still in the city or have moved temporarily to enclaves such as Destin, Fla., and Vail, Colo.—insist the remade city won't simply restore the old order. . . . The new city must be something very different, Mr. Reiss [chairman of the city's Regional Transit Authority, who helicoptered in an Israeli security company to guard his Audubon Place house and those of his neighbors] says, with better services

and fewer poor people. . . "Those who want to see the city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically."[75]

In response to the *Journal* article, lawyer and planner Peter Marcuse explained that "the principle guiding the planning efforts should not simply be subservience to the desires of the 'monied, mostly white elite,' sweeping the area's past problems under the table and its poorer residents out the door."[76] Rather, the process should provide true democratic participation of all those affected by the disaster (involving evacuees who have not returned as well as returnees to New Orleans) and equitable distribution of costs and benefits. That latter goal speaks to economic development for the poor, a true safety net, fair compensation for what has been lost. Going forward, "the goals should . . . be moving towards making the cities and region affected a model of what American communities should and could be."[77] New Orleans has shown many signs of recovery since the hurricane. By December 2008, the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center reported that the city's population had reached 73.7 percent of pre-Katrina levels, using the number of households that actively received mail to report the statistic.[78]

Community Economic Development in New Orleans—Moving Forward

Despite former Regional Transit Authority chairman James Reiss's assumption that many desired a city with better services and fewer poor people, groups of progressive New Orleanians had other plans and seized the opportunity for meaningful democratic civic engagement.

In light of the frustration toward federal and local government, neighborhood-based organizations gathered to generate recovery and to help communities become self-sufficient. For example, community members of the Broadmoor neighborhood, which was home to more than 7,000 residents before Katrina hit, held community meetings to discuss making land use changes, creating social service centers, promoting incentives for police and firefighters to purchase homes, and restoring libraries and schools.[79] Broadmoor was one of the neighborhoods replaced by a green dot in Mayor Nagin's original Bring New Orleans Back plans. The neighborhood's demographics pre-Katrina were 68 percent African-American and 48 percent owner-occupied homes; salaries ranged from poverty to six-figure incomes.[80] Since Katrina, membership in the Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA) has increased from 200 to 600 members.[81] The BIA received help from the architectural firm Eskew, Dumez and Ripple and graduate students from Harvard University. Organizing community plans required a lot of grunt

work by BIA members, who took many telephone calls and held meetings with Army Corps engineers and collected hard data regarding how many former residents were planning to return.[82]

In addition to community leaders, nonprofit organizations have also played a large role in rebuilding New Orleans. New Orleans' Preservation Resource Center (PRC), for example, held workshops on removing mold, provided cleaning supplies, and launched online groups that reported neighborhood conditions to returning homeowners.[83] PRC, which focuses on preserving historic neighborhoods, has helped restore 72 historic homes owned by low-income and elderly individuals.[84] Habitat for Humanity purchased eight acres in the Upper Ninth Ward to create the Musicians' Village, which provides homeownership opportunities for local musicians. The project, which received funding from Harry Conick, Jr., and Branford Marsalis, had constructed 70 homes as of December 2007.[85]

As evidenced by the Musicians' Village, strong ties to arts and culture allowed the entertainment industry to play a vital role in the economic development of New Orleans. In January 2008, a total of 875 arts-related businesses with Dunn & Bradstreet numbers employed 4,994 people.[86] Nationally, nonprofit arts and culture organizations generate $166.2 billion, which supports 5.7 million full-time jobs.[87] An increase in arts-related jobs also increases tourism; research conducted by Americans for the Arts shows that nonlocal attendees of an event spent an average of $40.19 per person in addition to the cost of admission; locals spent an average of $19.53 per person. The additional expenditure by the nonlocal attendee was typically for transportation, lodging, and meals.[88]

In April 2007, Mayor Nagin and Recovery Director Edward Blakely introduced a new (and more inclusive) redevelopment plan in response to the November 2005 public outcry. The recovery plan provides $316 million for projects in 17 redevelopment zones—transferring many of the areas that were last targeted with green dots into investment areas.[89] The plan also preserves money for citywide projects.[90] The Lower Ninth Ward is targeted for the largest investment—$145 million for building of businesses, mixed-use development, and shopping malls.[91]

Conclusion

Racial segregation and concentrated poverty are persistent realities in U.S. cities and major barriers to community economic development. But as is often the case, traumatic events shed light on progressive future possibilities. Hurricane Katrina may well be a case in point. All Americans could not help seeing the color of the faces most tragically affected by the storm. Coupled with the subsequent nationwide financial and economic crises, the importance of the nation's infrastructure has become increasingly apparent. Community economic development has long been and will likely continue to be contested terrain. But there are transformative opportunities available, should we so choose.

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Center for Social Inclusion: http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org

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