

Hurricane Katrina: a calamity compounded by poverty and neglect

Joseph Kay
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The enormous devastation wreaked upon parts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama by Hurricane Katrina is only beginning to come to light, even as the situation in New Orleans grows worse by the hour. Large parts of the coastal regions of these states along the Gulf of Mexico have experienced extensive flooding, destruction of buildings and homes, and loss of life.

As the toll mounts, it becomes increasingly clear that the city of New Orleans was remarkably unprepared for such a disaster. That the city of over one million was spared the direct hit which many at first feared, and nevertheless experienced such massive damage, only underscores the fact that the systems protecting the city are entirely inadequate. One can only speculate as to the effects on the city if the hurricane had passed only ten miles west of where it did.

Damage estimates are in the tens of billions of dollars. At least one million people in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama are without electrical power, and officials say it may take weeks to fully restore service to all affected regions. Clean drinking water is scarce, and the flood waters covering city streets are contaminated with gas from ruptured gas lines, chemicals and human waste, raising a serious danger of infectious disease.

The reports in the media paint a tragic and even hellish picture. Hundreds and perhaps thousands in New Orleans were forced to retreat to their roofs, often by hacking through their attic ceilings using hatchets and knives. Many are still stranded. There have been scattered reports of bodies floating in the flood waters, particularly on the east side of New Orleans and in the adjacent St Bernard Parish, where some 40,000 homes were flooded.

Parts of Mississippi on the Gulf coast were hit by the center of the hurricane and destroyed. Entire neighborhoods were obliterated. Where there were once houses, now there is only debris and the scattered belongings of residents.

An official with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said Tuesday that at least 115 people in Mississippi were killed by the hurricane. Vincent Creel, an official from Biloxi, told Reuters that the death toll is "going to be in the hundreds." He added, "[Hurricane] Camille was 200, and we're looking at a lot more than that."

No estimates of fatalities in the New Orleans metropolitan area have been released.

Many Mississippi residents along the coast were trapped in their homes and swept away by a 30-foot surge that accompanied the hurricane. "This is our tsunami," said the mayor of Biloxi, A.J. Holloway, referring to the giant tsunami that devastated Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other parts of South Asia last December.

After the storm had passed, many in New Orleans who thought their homes had escaped relatively unharmed watched with astonishment as the water levels rose throughout Monday and Tuesday. While initial reports on Monday suggested that the city was lucky to have escaped a direct hit from the hurricane, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco told a news

conference on Tuesday, "The devastation is greater than our worst fears. It's totally overwhelming."

Sometime on Monday, a levee on the 17th Street Canal, near Lake Pontchartrain on the north side, ruptured, flooding much of the city. According to a report in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, "The breach sent a churning sea of water from Lake Pontchartrain coursing across Lakeview and into Mid-City, Carrollton, Gentilly, City Park and neighborhoods farther south and east." Water continued to rise throughout Tuesday and showed no signs of stopping.

Flood waters covered the city's famous French Quarter, which escaped serious damage during the initial impact of the hurricane and is on higher ground than much of the city. Late on Tuesday the Associated Press was reporting that a second levee had burst, increasing the flow of water into the city. It is unclear how long it will take to plug the levees, including a 200 foot-wide hole in the 17th Street Canal, which, like the water that surrounds most of New Orleans, is at a higher elevation than most of the city itself.

The mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, estimated that 80 percent of the city was flooded. "Our city is in a state of devastation," he told a local television station. "With some sections of our city, the water is as deep as seven meters... It's almost like a nightmare that I hope we wake up from."

Nagin said that the number of deaths was unknown but "significant." Later he said that rescue workers were bypassing the bodies of the dead as they pushed on to search for stranded survivors.

By Tuesday afternoon, the rising waters in New Orleans had reached the Superdome, where it was a meter deep. During the storm, the Superdome served as a refuge for some 10,000 New Orleans residents, most of them poor, disabled or without transportation and therefore unable to follow evacuation orders. Since the storm, thousands more have taken shelter there, and are now unable to leave because of the dangerous conditions that still prevail outside.

The Superdome has been without power or air conditioning since early Monday morning. As many as 30,000 people are crammed into close, hot and extremely humid quarters. There were reports Tuesday afternoon that one person jumped to his death from the concourse of the stadium.

The flooding is also threatening hospitals holding patients whose lives are dependent on electrical generators, which will fail if the water rises much further. State officials have announced plans to evacuate 500 people, but the evacuation itself poses serious risks to the patients.

It is not known when most of those who have fled the city will be able to return. The dangers arising from the hot weather and the rising water include pollution from oil refineries and contamination from dead bodies, including those from flooded cemeteries. The disease-bearing mosquito population is growing, and water is covering downed power lines. Officials have also warned of an infestation of fire ants and poisonous water snakes. Ivor van Heerden, deputy director for the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, told CNN that the city is "a wilderness."

The social component of a natural disaster

The devastation caused by the hurricane has taken its toll on all sections of the population in these southern states. Some of the most severe damage in Mississippi was inflicted on the beach-front houses of the wealthy. In New Orleans, the flooding from ruptured levees has been indiscriminate.

However, as is so often the case with natural disasters, those most affected, and least able to recover, are the poor.

One of the hardest hit sections of New Orleans is also one of the poorest: the Lower Ninth Ward, on the eastern side of the city bordering St. Bernard Parish and the Mississippi River. The storm overpowered levees protecting the region, producing floods 20 feet high. Hundreds of people were rescued from their rooftops, while many were still stranded on Tuesday afternoon.

“Look, look man, it’s gone,” the *Times-Picayune* quoted City Council President Oliver Thomas, referring to the Lower Ninth Ward. “This is crazy. Nothing like this has ever happened.” It is unlikely that many of the trailers and small, one-story homes that populate the area will survive without massive damage.

Many residents of this ward were among the 100,000 in the city who lacked a car or other means of leaving the city. According to the 2000 US census, the Lower Ninth Ward has a poverty level of 36.4 percent. A quarter of households have an annual income of less than \$10,000, while half live on less than \$20,000. Over half of the population in the ward is categorized as “not in the labor force,” mainly because they have ceased looking for work.

Historically, the Lower Ninth Ward was one of the last regions of the city to be occupied because of its poor drainage system and its position on what was originally a cypress swamp. Those who settled there were mainly poor African-Americans and immigrant laborers with no other place to go.

In 1965, the Lower Ninth Ward was devastated by Hurricane Betsy, which caused 81 deaths in New Orleans, mainly in this area of the city. That disaster prompted calls for greater protection from the dangers posed by the adjacent Mississippi River. However, as has become clear from the present catastrophe, the systems that were put in place were entirely inadequate.

The differential impact of the hurricane will also become apparent as residents attempt to salvage what is left of their homes and rebuild. Property insurance does not generally cover losses from floods, meaning that many will be without resources to replace what has been lost. Though the federal government provides insurance for flood losses, many, and in particular the poorer residents, do not have this coverage. Particularly in Alabama and Mississippi, relatively few people have insurance to cover flood damage.

Estimates on insured losses as a result of Hurricane Katrina range from \$9 billion to \$25 billion, while total losses—insured and uninsured—are likely to be twice that level.

Lack of preparation

As always with a devastating event like Hurricane Katrina, voices are raised claiming that nothing could have been done to prevent the catastrophe. Such declarations are thoroughly false. While it would have been impossible to prevent all damage from the hurricane, there were definite measures that could have been taken to minimize the impact.

That such steps were not taken is despite the fact that the areas

devastated by Katrina lie along a path that has repeatedly suffered massive hurricane damage in the past. New Orleans is particularly vulnerable. It lies below sea level, surrounded on three sides by water—the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain—from which it is protected only by a network of levees and pumps. For years scientists and engineers have warned that a major hurricane could inflict catastrophic damage on the city.

After Hurricane Betsy, the levee system was modified to withstand the force of a category three hurricane, but Katrina, when it hit land, was stronger—a category four storm. It was only a matter of time before a category four or five storm hit the city, but government officials failed to commit the resources necessary to shore up the levee system to withstand an event of that magnitude, including raising the height of the barriers to prevent the sort of flooding that occurred in the Lower Ninth Ward.

The city depends on pumps to push water uphill, away from the city and back into the surrounding lake and river. However, these pumps operate on electricity, which has been entirely cut off since the hurricane struck. The pumps have apparently ceased operating.

According to an article in the *New Orleans CityBusiness*, from February 7, 2005, the US Army Corps of Engineers “identified millions of dollars in flood and hurricane protection projects in the New Orleans district,” however “chances are... most projects will not be funded in the president’s 2006 fiscal year budget.”

The article noted that between 2001 and 2005, the amount spent on such projects declined from \$147 million to \$82 million. “Unfunded projects include widening drainage canals, flood-proofing bridges and building pumping stations in Orleans and Jefferson parishes.”

Officials have deemed a revamping of the levee system to protect the city against a category four or five storm prohibitively expensive, but the cost would have been far less than the damages caused by Hurricane Katrina. That these resources have not been marshaled to address the pressing needs of social infrastructure in New Orleans is due to the fact that the priorities of the government and the American ruling class lie on an entirely different plane.

The attempts by the city to evacuate the population likewise demonstrated the lack of preparation in addressing the needs of the residents, particularly the poorest sections. In spite of an enormous traffic backlog, most residents with transportation were able to get out before the storm hit. But many of those without transportation were left stranded.

In 2002, the *Times-Picayune* wrote a series entitled “Washed Away,” in which it discussed what would happen in the event of a major hurricane. “100,000 people without transportation will be especially threatened,” the newspaper wrote. “A large population of low-income residents do not own cars and would have to depend on an untested emergency public transportation system to evacuate them.”

The lack of preparation for the city’s poor was revealed in an article that appeared in Tuesday’s *Wall Street Journal*, which was otherwise devoted to extolling the efficiency of the city’s evacuation measures. “Mayor Nagin urged churches Sunday morning to arrange evacuations for those who might not have access to a car. He mentioned Amtrak and Greyhound as possibilities... The mayor encouraged people leaving the city to pick up anyone they knew who didn’t have means to evacuate, but acknowledged that many poor New Orleans residents lacked a clear way to get out.”

Even in the first days after the hurricane, it has become clear that the tragedy could have been much reduced if adequate measure had been put in place. As we learn more about the events, there will no doubt be further revelations regarding the social components of this disaster.



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