

The Gulf Coast one year later: Indices of a social disaster

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One year ago today, in the early morning hours, Hurricane Katrina tore into the Gulf Coast of the US. Upon landfall, the Category 3 hurricane's storm surge caused massive damage in the states of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. The region was pummeled by 145 mile-an-hour winds and waves 28 feet high, resulting in widespread flooding.

Later the same day, the surge overwhelmed the inadequate levee system surrounding the low-lying city of New Orleans, resulting in explosive levee breeches and failure of drainage pumps.

The city was submerged, with at least 100,000 of its poor residents trapped without escape, rescue, medical aid, power, food or potable water. Working class neighborhoods on the east side of the city and south of Lake Ponchartrain, such as those in St. Bernard Parish and the Lower Ninth Ward, were flooded up to the eaves of houses. Many people were forced to hack their way through their attics onto rooftops, where they were stranded in the oppressive heat for days, surrounded by toxic, fetid flood water.

At least 1,836 people died, nearly 1,600 in Louisiana, and hundreds to this day remain listed as missing. More than a million people were displaced from the Gulf Coast region, a quarter of whom have yet to return. Entire communities were obliterated.

One year later, it is impossible to quantify entirely the persistent social misery. Yet much of the disaster *is* quantifiable, and when taken together, the multitude of statistics constitutes an indictment of the political processes and individuals responsible for the current state of affairs.

In the greater New Orleans area alone, Hurricane Katrina destroyed or severely damaged over 200,000 homes. Hundreds of demolitions take place each month, and while permits for renovations and repairs have spiked in the past few months, over 100,000 residents are currently living in cramped and shoddy Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers. Many are waiting on approval for federal assistance and funds to rebuild.

As of last week, not a single rebuilding grant had been issued to New Orleans residents from the \$10.2 billion allocated through the Community Development Block Grant program.

East New Orleans has seen little improvement and in some respects a worsening of conditions since last winter. In approximately half of the Lower Ninth Ward, displaced residents are still restricted to a "look and leave" assessment of their homes. Temporary FEMA trailers did not even arrive in the Lower Ninth until June. Houses are uninhabitable, irreparable or in some cases completely swept away.

The low-income and minority population of the city has been decimated. According to a demographic analysis by the private data firm Claritas, only half of the pre-Katrina population of New Orleans Parish had returned by July. Lower income neighborhoods, not surprisingly, accounted for a disproportionate share of the population loss. The population of St. Bernard Parish, for example, fell from 66,000 one year ago to only 15,000 as of July.

The city's infrastructure remains in shambles. Rat-infested piles of

debris still block the streets, and garbage piles up uncollected in much of the city.

It is worth recalling the words of George W. Bush himself, as he signed the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act last December: "We want to get the debris out of the way," he asserted. "I can't imagine anything more discouraging then to continue to see the piles—and I mean, literally, piles—of debris."

Yet, one year after the storm, New Orleans officials estimate that 24 million cubic yards of debris and 50 thousand ruined structures in the parishes of New Orleans and St. Bernard have yet to be cleared.

Likewise, such basic urban necessities as sewage disposal, water, power, and telecommunications are unavailable to thousands of residents. Electricity has been restored to 60 percent of residences and businesses formerly using it; gas reaches only about 40 percent of structures requiring it.

Where water is available, leaks in the city water lines result in a loss of as much as 70 million gallons a day, as much or more than the amount that reaches homes. According to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the local system pumps over 130 million gallons a day to provide residents with 50 million gallons.

Residents have complained that water pressure is so poor as to allow only a thin trickle from faucets. Consequently, fires as well as lack of sanitation pose significant dangers to residents. In much of the Lower Ninth Ward, water has not been restored.

Administration officials and spokespersons point to the reopening of wealthy and business areas of the city, such as the French Quarter and the Garden District, as evidence that the recovery process is a success. These areas did not see nearly the flooding borne by most residential working class neighborhoods, and were nevertheless deemed highest priority by police and security forces in the days following the levee breeches. The business districts have seen no shortage of funds and well-wishing from Washington.

The New Orleans public school system is crippled, with only 34 schools ready to open this fall. Meanwhile, private and charter schools, which are largely exempt from governmental accountability and teacher certification standards, are booming; 56 now operate in the city.

The proliferation of charter schools within New Orleans—including 33 new ones scheduled to open this fall—is part of a move by the Bush administration to fragment the public education system nationwide, exploiting the destroyed city to set the precedent. Some \$24 million in federal recovery funds have been earmarked for charter schools for this purpose, while public school boards struggle under the weight of excessive damage and debts.

Less than a quarter of child daycare centers have reopened in Orleans Parish, according to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. Nearly all those open as of July are located in the upscale areas such as the Garden District, and many are operating at less than capacity due to staffing shortages.

Public transportation has not made an improvement since January, when

not quite half of urban routes reopened, traversed by only 17 percent of city buses. Until early August, transportation on these lines was provided free of charge.

Thousands of Katrina survivors lack access to medical care, as federal Medicaid waivers for hurricane victims were terminated in June. By state estimates, medical professionals and nurses in the city number less than half of pre-Katrina levels.

The number of hospitals operating in the city also remains at 50 percent of last year's total. Among those permanently closed is Charity Hospital, formerly the largest provider in the entire state and primary medical provider for the poor and uninsured.

Stress-induced heart attacks, strokes, mental illness, substance abuse, family breakups, violence, and other personal hardships which befall Katrina survivors regularly and receive no serious attention from politicians are also symptoms of the chaos.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is extremely common among New Orleans residents, yet no psychiatric centers have reopened in the city. Thousands survived harrowing experiences and witnessed death firsthand, including many young children.

Divorce attorneys in several New Orleans parishes have reported 7 to 10 percent increases in new filings this year, despite significant population declines. Rather than alleviate some of the pressures contributing to divorce, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco recently signed a law requiring couples to wait a year to divorce. This reactionary legislation is, in part, an effort to contain the hemorrhaging of the housing market within working class neighborhoods and reduce the number of separate apartment units needed by the city's population.

Of the displaced Gulf Coast population, an estimated 220,000 evacuees remain in Texas, with 150,000 in Houston alone. Another 84,000 displaced Gulf Coast residents are living in Atlanta, Georgia, and as many as 50,000 may still be staying in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, while intending to rebuild in New Orleans.

Although many want to return, they are either unable to obtain federal aid or cannot afford the sharply higher housing and insurance prices. Rents in New Orleans have risen nearly 40 percent in the last year, following a revision by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development of Fair Market Rent rates for the metro area. As of March, an efficiency rents for \$725 a month, an average one-bedroom costs \$805, and a standard two-bedroom apartment rents for \$940 a month.

Those who were sheltered and eventually evacuated from the New Orleans Convention Center and the Superdome are facing an especially difficult time, trying either to return to New Orleans or re-establish elsewhere. Most of those who sought refuge in the designated emergency shelters during the hurricane were low-income or ill, and were taken to Houston with little or no belongings, beyond a few articles of clothing.

Preliminary results of a Gallup survey indicate that a staggering 59 percent of evacuees in Texas are without employment, and 41 percent subsist somehow in households with monthly incomes of less than \$500. Like evacuees in other areas, most have at least one child in their care, and many are contending with serious health problems.

As Katrina made landfall late last August and was downgraded from a Category 5 to a Category 3 hurricane, public officials expressed relief that New Orleans had escaped the worst. That the storm was not, in fact, a "worst-case scenario" and yet still was sufficient to inflict catastrophic damage revealed the utter decay and inadequacy of the most essential infrastructure in the city, the levee system.

Investigations into the levee failures along the canals in New Orleans revealed that many sections were built with inadequate materials, resulting in silty, erosive soil foundations and embankments, that there were significant gaps in the height of segments, and that steel sheetpile wall supports were not sunk deeply or securely enough to hold the water back during the storm surge.

The Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for the construction of the levees, was undeniably aware of the risks these weaknesses posed, given the number of independent academic studies and computer models that had projected the catastrophic effects a major hurricane would have on the levees. Responding to these warnings was dismissed by policy makers as too expensive.

The failure of the levees, however, was not merely an engineering oversight. Rather, it was a consequence of the cost-benefit mindset within the political establishment that has limited funding for so many basic quality of life programs and safety projects.

In the reconstruction process, levee integrity is again being compromised, with some arguing as before that a system capable of withstanding more than a Category 3 storm is prohibitively expensive.

As thousands of low- and middle-income workers became homeless in a matter of hours, it became obvious that the vast majority of the population was living on the edge of economic disaster without a social safety net.

And while smaller businesses in the region were crippled or ruined, executives and shareholders of some of the world's largest corporations benefited enormously from the destruction. Almost immediately, executives and speculators were rubbing their hands over the profit opportunities promised by the "zone of opportunity" the Bush administration established in the storm-ravaged region. Billions of dollars were funneled to the rich and the super-rich by means of non-competitive reconstruction contracts, deregulation, tax handouts and suspension of wage standards for reconstruction workers.

According to federal audits, the government awarded nearly three-quarters of its reconstruction contracts on a no-bid or limited competition basis. A report released by Congressional Democrats last week emphasized the hundreds of millions of FEMA dollars that were wasted through corporate fraud, including double billing and failure to render services. In one case, FEMA spent \$441 million on 10,777 trailers that remain undelivered in Arkansas.

Big oil companies, barely disguising their glee, raked in combined third-quarter earnings of more than \$40 billion. Destroyed Gulf oil rigs, pipelines, and refineries were seen as a pretext to hike retail gasoline prices to over \$3 a gallon across the country and throw open the government's strategic oil reserves to corporate profiteering.

The casino industry also leapt to capitalize on the storm. Republican Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, the former Republican National Committee chairman, personally led the effort to ease casino restrictions within hours of the disaster. Barbour recently declared that the coast had been "licked clean by the hand of God."

Prior to Katrina, state law prohibited construction of gambling facilities on land; now legislators refer to the Mississippi coast as "the Atlantic City of the South." Since December, three casinos in Biloxi reported revenues of \$780 million—approaching the revenue brought in by the 12 casinos that operated there last year. Harrah's, the largest casino corporation in the world, is planning a \$1 billion dollar expansion of the 30-acre facility it already owns in Biloxi. In the French Quarter of New Orleans, Harrah's threw \$170 million into the construction of a 450-room hotel across the street from its casino, the only on-land casino in the city.

While Congress has allocated \$110 billion in four emergency bills for Katrina rebuilding, the federal government has spent less than half that amount, some \$44 billion. The *Los Angeles Times* recently painted a picture of aid trickling out to those who need it the most.

The *Times* reported that many homeowners and business owners have been waiting "impatiently for promised grants and loans" for months; that of \$10 billion approved for Small Business Administration recovery loans, for example, only 20 percent had reached recipients; that more than 8,000 people in New Orleans and neighboring parishes were still awaiting FEMA trailers; that the Department of Housing and Urban Development had spent only \$100 million of its overall \$17.1 billion congressional

allocation; that FEMA had spent only \$21.9 billion of its \$42.6 billion allocation.

In neighboring Mississippi, where the right-winger Barbour is governor, some 17,000 households have applied for grants of up to \$150,000 to repair their homes, but the state has sent out only about two dozen checks so far.

The \$110 billion allocated, in any event, is less than half the costs of Bush administration tax cuts for the wealthy in 2005 alone, some \$225 billion. Similarly, spending for the so-called war on terror proceeds at a record pace, reaching \$120 billion so far this year. At least \$400 billion will be earmarked or spent on the war before the year is out, and the Pentagon will likely receive close to \$440 billion for fiscal year 2007. The Department of Defense estimates that the US presence in Afghanistan costs about \$18,000 per minute, and the brutal occupation of Iraq costs \$100,000 per minute.

By comparison, the disaster facing the population of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is a distinct non-priority.



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