

Environment, Disaster and Race After Katrina

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The southern United States has a long history of coping with weather related disasters and a legacy of institutionalized racism against African Americans. Hurricane Katrina hit the region in a particularly vulnerable place, pushing right up against an industrial corridor running from New Orleans to Baton Rouge popularly known as “Cancer Alley,” a place that is host to both numerous petrochemical complexes and many poor African American communities that have long complained of environmental disparities. It is no coincidence that the storm’s most dramatic effects were felt in a city where black reliance on public transit was four times higher than that for whites, and where the public plans for evacuation were tragically deficient.

How consequential is racial inequality in environmental conditions? A Southern California study estimating lifetime cancer risk from air toxins shows, for example, that risk declines as income rises, but is still around 50 percent higher at all income levels for African Americans, Latinos and Asians. And lead poisoning, commonly triggered by conditions in older housing, is five times more common among Black children than white children.

Disaster Vulnerability and Environmental Justice

The social dynamics that underlie the disproportionate environmental hazards faced by low-income communities and minorities also play out in the arena of disaster prevention, mitigation, and recovery. In a sense, environmental justice is about slow-motion disasters—and disasters reveal environmental injustice in a fast-forward mode. Both revolve around the axes of disparities of wealth and power.

Lack of wealth heightens the risks that individuals and communities face for three reasons. First, it translates into a lack of purchasing power to secure private alternatives to public provision of a clean and safe environment for all. Second, it translates into less ability to withstand shocks (such as health bills and property damage) that wealth would cushion. Third, it translates through the “shadow prices” of cost-benefit analysis into public policies that place a lower

priority on protecting “less valuable” people and their assets. In the aftermath of Katrina, there is an added risk that transfers could turn New Orleans into a little more than a theme park for affluent tourists. In the vicious circle of disaster vulnerability, those with less wealth face greater risks, and when disaster strikes, their wealth is further sapped.

But risk is not just about money: even middle-class African Americans, Latinos, and Asians face elevated environmental risks. This reflects systematic differences in power and the legacy of racial discrimination. Power also shows up in private decisions by firms choosing where to site hazards and how much to invest in environmental protection: their choices are constrained not only by government regulations, but also by informal governance exercised by mobilized communities, civil society, and the press (see Pargal *et al.* 1997; Boyce 2004). In both public and private arenas, then, power disparities drive outcome disparities—and the resulting patterns reflect race and ethnicity as well as wealth.¹

Why? Land, Markets, and Power

The power explanation suggests that low-income people and communities of color are systematically disadvantaged in the political decision-making process. This argument can incorporate the other explanations: what seems to be rational land use, after



all, may be predetermined by political processes that designate disenfranchised communities as sacrifice zones (see Pulido 2000; Boone and Modarres 1999; Wright 2005). Indeed, land use decisions often build on accumulated disadvantage.

In the largely Latino community of Kettleman City in California's Central Valley, for example, an effort to place a toxic waste incinerator in a landfill already proximate to the city was viewed as building on existing dis-amenities but added insult to injury for an already overburdened community (Cole and Foster 2001). Likewise, income is a marker of political power as well as of market strength.

The interplay of land use, income, and power means that certain variables used in statistical analyses—such as zoning and household wealth—carry multiple explanations. To demonstrate convincingly that power is behind siting decisions requires the inclusion of some variables that are directly and irrefutably connected to power differentials.

The most important of these variables is race.² Disparate patterns by race, particularly when one has controlled for income and other variables involved in the land-use and market-dynamics explanations, most clearly point to the role of unequal influence and racial discrimination. Racially disparate outcomes are

also important in their own right. They can result from processes that are not so much a direct exercise of power as essentially embedded in the nature of our urban form, including housing segregation and real estate steering, informal methods that exclude communities from decision-making processes (including less provision of information regarding health risks), the past placement of hazards (which justifies new hazards as rational land use), and other forms of less direct “institutionalized” or “structural” racism (see Feagin and Feagin 1986; *Institute on Race and Poverty* 2002). And it is precisely racialized risk that has galvanized a movement for environmental equity rooted in civil rights law and activism. Race and racism therefore are at the heart of the evidentiary debate.

It is Not Just Hazards

Environmental and transportation justice are at the heart of emergency preparedness and emergency response. The former provides a guidepost to who is most likely to be vulnerable to the disaster itself, and the latter provides information about who will need the most help when disaster strikes. It is to the intersection of disaster vulnerability with race, income, and other social characteristics that we now turn.

Race and Ethnicity

- Damaged areas were 45.8 percent African American, undamaged areas only 26.4 percent. For the city of New Orleans alone, these figures were 75 percent and 46.2 percent, respectively.
- Before Katrina, the city had 475,000 people with about 67 percent African American. Current estimates indicate that soon the population will be only 350,000 with only 35 to 40 percent black.
- Approximately 24,000 legal permanent residents, 72,000 legal temporary residents, and an estimated 20,000 to 35,000 undocumented immigrants may have been affected by Katrina (*Woods and Lewis 2005, 8*).
- Around the time of Katrina, poor blacks were much less likely to have access to cars than even poor whites, 53 versus 17 percent (*Dyson 2006, 145*).

Poverty

- Damaged areas had 20.9 percent of households living below the federal poverty line, undamaged areas only 15.3 percent. For the city of New Orleans alone, these figures were 29.2 percent and 24.7 percent, respectively.
- In the city of New Orleans, before Katrina hit, women had much higher poverty rates than men, with 2004 figures of 25.9 percent and 20 percent (*Gault et al. 2005*).
- Damaged areas had 45.7 percent renter-occupied households, undamaged areas only 30.9 percent.

Relief and Recovery

The inequities before and during a disaster are often played out further in the period after a disaster. Many minorities and the poor have had greater difficulties recovering from disasters due to less insurance, lower incomes, fewer savings, more unemployment, less access to communication channels and information, and the intensification of existing poverty (*Bolin and Bolton 1986; Bolin and Stanford 1998; Cooper and Laughy 1994; Hewitt 1997; Peacock et al. 1997; Tierney 1988*). For example, after Hurricane Andrew (which struck Florida and Louisiana in 1992) Blacks and non-Cuban Hispanics were more likely than Whites to receive inadequate settlement amounts, and black neighborhoods were less likely to have insurance with major companies, a fact that may have been connected to redlining (*Peacock and Girard 1997*).³

Studies have also addressed racial, class, and ethnic differences in who receives disaster recovery assistance. Bolin and Bolton (1986) concluded that the Blacks, who had lower income than Whites in their study, needed multiple aid sources to deal with large losses because they did not receive enough support from fewer sources. Blacks were also less likely than Whites to receive Small Business Administration (SBA) loans, more likely to use interfaith disaster

services, and tended to recover economically more slowly. Following the 1997 Grand Forks flood in North Dakota, flood relief was geared away from migrant workers, hurting primarily Hispanic single mothers (*Enarson and Fordham 2001*).

Upper middle-class victims in several disasters have been more likely to receive assistance than minorities and the poor because they knew how to navigate the relief system, fill out the forms, and work within the government bureaucracy (*Aptekar 1990; Fotbergill 2004; Rovai 1994*). In addition, poorer victims had more trouble making trips to the disaster assistance centers following Hurricane Andrew because of transportation, child care, and work difficulties (*Dash et al. 1997*). Furthermore, the traditional nuclear family model used by some relief programs left poor, minority women at a disadvantage (*Morrow and Enarson 1996*).

Housing continues to be a significant issue for low-income and minority disaster victims in the recovery period. Past research has found that housing assistance favors middle-class victims, particularly homeowners. Of course, helping homeowners is important and may be especially critical for middle-class black and Latino families. Such families have much lower homeownership rates but, as noted

Where is New Orleans East?

by Beverly Wright

The telephone began ringing very early in the morning of November 19, 2005, for a former New Orleans resident who had, like most of her family and friends, lost her home and possessions to Katrina. They were all told that it was the storm surge that had destroyed the levees that flooded their homes and 80 percent of the city. But two and a half months after hurricane winds had buffeted the city, it was a policy surge that seemed about to complete what Katrina had begun.

The phone was ringing because today was the day that the Bring New Orleans Back Commission would unveil a report it had commissioned from the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit organization that includes real estate professionals, academics, and others with expertise in land issues. The word on the street was that the plans did not look good for eastern New Orleans. New Orleans East, like the Lower Ninth Ward, lies below the industrial canal and is also predominantly African American. The similarities, though significant, completely dissipate for education and income. Where the Lower Ninth Ward has been portrayed as black and poor, New Orleans East has hardly been portrayed at all.

New Orleans East was a community where most of the city's black professionals, school teachers and administrators, famous musicians (from hip-hop to jazz), businessmen, and politicians lived. It was an area primarily of homeowners with flood insurance. It represented nearly 40 percent of the city's tax base, but the Urban Land Institute plan included a map showing most of New Orleans East being relegated to parks and green space or subject to a building moratorium until neighborhoods proved viability.

In the aftermath of Katrina, New Orleans East evacuees and their friends have learned that all of their education and money did not shield them from natural disasters, the neglect of the levee system and coastal wetlands erosion, and the ways in which public policy decisions reinforce the legacy of race. Their community was literally wiped off the map with no regard for the social, economic, and financial impact this decision would have on those affected. Worried residents are still waiting to see what will emerge with regard to levee protection, SBA loans, insurance settlements, and land buyouts. Will race, once again, be a factor that colors the decision-making process?

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earlier, tend to have more of their net worth tied up in home equity than their white counterparts do. Still, including renters prominently in the relief mix is part of a more racially equitable approach.

Legal residency is another critical issue in disaster recovery. Following disasters, many undocumented immigrants, unsure about the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) policy, avoid recovery assistance for fear of deportation (*Subervi-Velez et al. 1992; Bolin 1993; Cooper and Laughby 1994; Yelvington 1997*). Muñiz (2006) offers anecdotal evidence that this was an issue in Katrina as well. She also shows how the occasional assumption that Latino residents were undocumented rather than legal residents sometimes led FEMA to fail to offer appropriate information about housing assistance to eligible individuals.⁴

In addition, the non-traditional family structures

of immigrant households can be a challenge for disaster officials. Following Hurricane Andrew, FEMA was not prepared for some of south Florida's family structures, particularly Haitian families, who often had several families in one household—FEMA's temporary assistance was set up for nuclear families with one head of household (*Morrow 1997*).

Post-Katrina events have done little to stir new confidence among those fence line communities that have been subject to pollution releases from nearby chemical facilities, or living near the potentially dangerous transit corridors discussed.

Preventing a "Second Disaster"

The amount of debris left behind by Katrina—an estimated 22 million tons—is staggering (*Griggs 2005, 12A*). More than half, 12 million tons, is in Orleans Parish. In addition to wood debris, EPA and



LDEQ officials estimate that from 140,000 to 160,000 homes in Louisiana may need to be demolished and disposed (*EPA and Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality 2005*). These homes include over one million pieces of “white goods”—such as refrigerators, stoves, and freezers—that require disposal.

An additional 350,000 automobiles must be drained of oil and gasoline and then recycled; 60,000 boats must be staged and maybe destroyed; and 300,000 underground fuel tanks and 42,000 tons of hazardous waste must be collected and properly disposed (*Varney and Moller 2005*).

Hurricane Katrina exposed for the entire nation the legacy of a discriminatory system and its consequences. Yet it also raised opportunities for civil rights, environmental, labor, and environmental justice organizations to advocate for processes of relief, recovery, and rebuilding that could address the socioeconomic and environmental inequalities that have plagued the region. Put simply, the aftermath of Katrina can become a time of important change for Americans—if we confront the contradictions between our democratic ideals and the injustices that Katrina laid bare.

Sadly, this opportunity is in danger of being lost. The risks are no surprise: without good government, disaster opens the door to predators. In coastal Thailand, for example, land grabbers quickly arrived on the scene in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami to take advantage of the local residents’

weakened circumstances. There is a distinct risk in New Orleans that asset transfers could turn the city into little more than a theme park for affluent tourists, and many in the low-income neighborhoods ravaged by the hurricane worry that federal, state, and local officials will not prioritize their neighborhoods for clean up and reconstruction.

Beyond Katrina

The failure to learn from past experience is also at work elsewhere in the system. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development responded to the Northridge quake by developing a very effective program that quickly provided vouchers for permanent housing to the poorest victims and allowed these to be used anywhere in the state; but this effort, curiously enough, was not duplicated in the Katrina case.

Moreover, ongoing policy seems headed in the wrong direction. The U.S. EPA, for example, has reversed course from the two previous administrations by seeking to take the focus off race in regulatory enforcement activities and to diminish the annual collection of pollution emission data that researchers, communities, and industries use to monitor firm-level environmental performance. Katrina opened a window on a dark side of America – the economic and environmental vulnerability of low-income people and communities of color. We can close that window, or we can use the new view to chart a better, healthier, and more equitable future for us all.

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Interior of a New Orleans home
September, 2005.

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Endnotes

- 1 The purchasing-power advantages of high-wealth individuals and communities are compounded when they wield disproportionate political power; conversely, the disadvantages of low-wealth people are compounded when they belong to politically disenfranchised racial and ethnic groups (Boyce 1994).
 - 2 Other power-related variables have been explored in the literature, including home ownership (which is also an indicator of wealth but also highly associated with community engagement and political influence), voting turnout, and recency of immigration.
 - 3 In the Coalinga, California, 1983 earthquake, whites faced more damage to their workplaces than Latinos because whites worked downtown and Latinos in agriculture (Bolin and Bolton 1986). Hispanics, however, were unlikely to have household insurance, and they were more likely to have moved more frequently after the disaster than whites. After the Northridge earthquake, many Latinos faced political and cultural marginalization, and limited housing and employment opportunities, which impacted their ability to successfully recover in the long term (Bolin and Stanford 1998).
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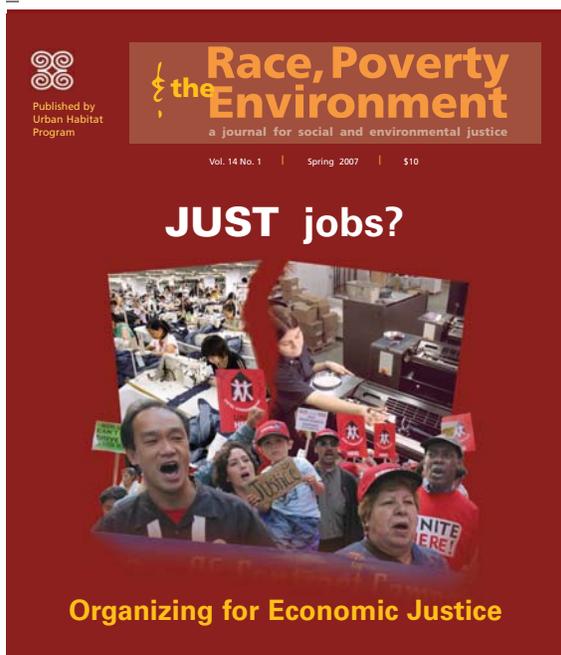
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