



# Opportunity and the Gulf Coast

## Six Months After Hurricane Katrina

*Our government's flawed response to Hurricane Katrina reflected a profound abandonment of the American values of opportunity—equal treatment, economic security and mobility, a voice in decisions that affect us, shared responsibility for each other, and a chance to start over after misfortune or missteps. The recovery process has similarly failed to uphold those values, in ways that reflect larger problems of unequal opportunity in our country. As we rebuild the region, opportunity—precarious in many Gulf Coast communities before the storm as a result of high rates of poverty, low wages, under-funded schools, and inadequate access to housing and health care—must be fully restored.*

*Crucial to that process are the leadership and full participation of Gulf Coast residents who were most abandoned during the storm—low-income people and people of color. Empowering their voices in the rebuilding process is essential to ensuring opportunity for all.*

*Many aspects of opportunity were denied before Katrina hit and have been lacking in the months since the disaster. They include:*

### **Mobility**

Americans believe that everyone who works hard should be able to advance and participate fully in the economic, political, and cultural life of the nation—that is, any child in America should be able to fulfill his or her full potential, and economic status at birth (or gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality) should not predetermine ultimate achievements. Unfortunately, people displaced by Katrina are now much less able to achieve their goals and enjoy the same level of mobility as other Americans.

- A vast number of schools remain closed for the 136,000 school-age children displaced by the hurricane.<sup>1</sup>
- The New Orleans Metro area has resumed operations in only 61% of public schools, but less than 10% are operating in the St. Bernard Parish as of January 25, 2006.<sup>2</sup>
- All affected areas had lower than average rates of homeownership before the storm, reflecting financial disadvantage and potential impact on the rate of return to those areas.<sup>3</sup>

### **Equality**

True opportunity requires that we all have equal access to the benefits, burdens, and responsibilities of our society regardless of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or other aspects of what we look like or where we come from. Hurricane Katrina exposed yawning gaps of inequality between more advantaged and less advantaged groups that are likely to grow absent conscious efforts to ameliorate them.

- Nearly one million people who suffered most of the storm's damage were concentrated in a few, disproportionately poor and racially segregated areas. Overall, the flooding and structural damage in all 14 counties affected an estimated 2.5 million people.<sup>4</sup>
- Of all households affected by the storm 19% did not have an available vehicle, meaning that hundreds of thousands of people relied on public or pre-arranged transportation in order to survive.<sup>5</sup>
- Almost 50,000 residents of the three hardest-hit counties spoke a language other than English at

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home, which may have limited their ability to respond to government warnings.<sup>6</sup>

- Across the affected states, local companies and small businesses are being passed over for lucrative contracts and multi-million dollar opportunities are being outsourced to large out-of-state companies.<sup>7</sup>
- A recent study by the National Fair Housing Alliance designed to test opportunities for Katrina evacuees found that in about two of three phone inquiries and three of five in-person visits, whites received more favorable treatment than African Americans.<sup>8</sup>

### Security

Americans believe that we are all entitled to a basic level of education, economic well-being, health care, and other protections necessary to human dignity. Without this security, it is impossible to access society's other rights and responsibilities or to enjoy full opportunity. Unfortunately, many of those displaced by Hurricane Katrina still face tremendous insecurity in many aspects of their lives.

- A random survey of evacuees in Houston shelters found that over half had no health insurance, and

even more relied on public health services for care.<sup>9</sup>

- 76% of them had children under 18 with them in the shelter.<sup>10</sup>
- More than one-fifth of those surveyed had to care for someone who was physically unable to leave.<sup>11</sup>
- Although two-thirds of those surveyed were employed prior to the hurricane, less than half of those surveyed had total household incomes of less than \$20,000 in the prior year.<sup>12</sup> According to the 2000 Census, the Gulf Coast states had some of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Mississippi was second, Louisiana was third, and Alabama was sixth.<sup>13</sup>
- Furthermore, the rate of poverty among the displaced is estimated to be at 21%, almost twice the national rate.<sup>14</sup>
- In New Orleans alone, 15% of all families lived below the poverty level in 2003, yet female headed households were almost twice as likely to live below the poverty level in the same time period.<sup>15</sup> Thousands are still in shelters, hundreds of thousands are seeking help from FEMA in the form of temporary trailer homes and housing assistance payments.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The rebuilding efforts will require special attention to our neighbors, families, and fellow Americans in the Gulf Coast states whose lives were torn apart by Hurricane Katrina and by government's inattention to protecting opportunity for all Americans.

- *Adequate, safe, and affordable housing must be provided for displaced families, affording stable access to schools, jobs and services.*
- *Public transportation should be fully resumed and expanded to new areas so that returning evacuees may participate and thrive in their communities.*
- *Health care must be provided for everyone returning to storm-damaged areas, with particular attention to the existing deficit in health care facilities.*

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- *Outreach efforts to eligible voters who were displaced must be a priority of state and federal agencies so that they can exercise their right to vote and help decide the outcome of elections during this time of rebuilding.*

Hurricane Katrina showed us that when some people fall behind, we all fall behind. The recovery process has begun, but how it continues will be a testament to America's commitment to upholding the ideals and values that are intrinsic to the American Dream.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> "Katrina Index," Brookings Institution, updated February 1, 2005, [http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/200512\\_katrinaindex.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/200512_katrinaindex.htm), accessed 2/24/06.

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey 2004, [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?\\_bm=y&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2004\\_EST\\_G00\\_DP3&-geo\\_id=16000US2255000&-ds\\_name=&-redoLog=false](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-qr_name=ACS_2004_EST_G00_DP3&-geo_id=16000US2255000&-ds_name=&-redoLog=false), accessed 2/24/06.

<sup>7</sup> Eaton, Leslie, "After Hurricanes Comes Tempests Over Cleanups," *New York Times*, 2/24/06.

<sup>8</sup> National Fair Housing Alliance, Report on Housing Discrimination Against Hurricane Katrina Survivors, <http://www.nationalfairhousing.org/index.php>.

<sup>9</sup> The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health, "Survey of Katrina Evacuees," [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/katrina\\_poll091605.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/katrina_poll091605.pdf), accessed 2/24/06.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2005.