

KATRINA AND THE LEAST AMONG US
A Ten Year Retrospective
by Fred Kammer, SJ



New Orleans Residents on Rooftop Signaling for Help after Hurricane Katrina

Katrina’s tenth anniversary (August 29, 2005) brings many important stories about levees, wetlands, demography, entrepreneurs, venture capital, corruption convictions, and resiliency. JSRI’s interests and Gospel focus on the “least among us” cause us to examine in this article what happened—or not—in terms of poverty, housing availability, criminal justice, schools, healthcare, and Latino newcomers. The picture, like much of the past ten years, is a blend of good and bad, success and failure.

Poverty and Jobs. In brief, the income gap has widened, and New Orleans ranks second in income inequality among 300 U.S. cities.¹ Poverty is entrenched, and the percent of children living in poverty in New Orleans, 38% in 2005, has risen to 39%.² The racial income divide continues growing: white median household income in metro New Orleans, on a par with households nationwide, grew by 22% between 2005 and 2013 to \$60,553. That

was three times the 7% growth rate of black median households (to \$25,102).³ The disparity in 2013 incomes between white and black households was 54%, compared to 40% nationally.⁴ This worsened despite \$71 billion dollars received by the State of Louisiana for rebuilding. Closely tied was the fact that employment rates for white men in metro New Orleans was 77%, compared with 57% for black men.

Housing Affordability. According to an August 11th report from the New Orleans Metropolitan Association of Realtors, average New Orleans home prices climbed an amazing 46% since Katrina. (Increases in Jefferson Parish increased only 1%.)⁵ For renters, the median gross New Orleans rents grew from \$698 to \$925 between 2004 and 2013.⁶ One-bedroom apartment rents rose 33% and two-bedrooms by 41%. A key driver of inflated costs are estimates that Katrina destroyed over half of the region’s rental housing.⁷

In addition, public housing authorities took the opportunity to replace concentrated public housing complexes, even those untouched by Katrina, with mixed income apartments. However, the result is that there are 3,221 fewer low-income public housing apartments in the city.⁸ In Orleans Parish, the percentage of those paying more than 50% of their income on rent and utilities—those termed “severely cost-burdened renters”—rose from 24% to 37% between 2004 and 2013. It should be no surprise, then, that the share of the metro poor living outside New Orleans has expanded from 46% in 1999 to 58% by 2013.⁹ Even those with Housing Choice Vouchers, which tripled in number in Orleans Parish between 2000 and 2010, often found themselves consigned to high-poverty, low-opportunity neighborhoods by “discrimination against voucher users and differential access to rental housing opportunities generally on the basis of race.”¹⁰ In 2010, 90% of voucher users in metro New Orleans were black.¹¹

Criminal Justice. Before Katrina, New Orleans led the nation and the world in incarceration—more than five times the national average in 2005.¹² Since then, two consent decrees are forcing reform in the police department and the jail; an Inspector General’s office is holding criminal justice officials to account; our first independent Police Monitor was created; and constructing a new, smaller, and improved jail—holding two-thirds fewer people already—is the result of ongoing efforts by community members and local officials.¹³ Violent crime is actually down in New Orleans by 17% since 2004, but the decrease has been less than that of the nation at 21%.¹⁴ Innovation across the criminal justice system has started, but comprehensive cultural change needs strong leadership from city and system officials for years to come.¹⁵ Orleans Parish still incarcerates at a rate twice that of the nation.¹⁶

Public Schools. New Orleans public education “can claim the most dramatic before-and-after Katrina picture.”¹⁷ In the 1950s and 60s, whites fled integration to private and parochial schools. Middle-class blacks followed. The pre-Katrina system was 94% African-American with 73% qualifying for free and subsidized lunches. Orleans Parish public schools ranked 67th out of 68 Louisiana districts in math and reading. 62% of students attended schools rated “failing.”¹⁸ Corruption was widespread.

A state takeover beginning pre-Katrina and post-Katrina “reforms” led to: the new Recovery School District oversees 57 charter schools; and the old Orleans Parish School Board oversees 14 charters and operates five traditional schools. (The state board of education directly authorized four additional charters, and there is one independent state school.) The state fired over 7,500 public school teachers and paraprofessionals; most were African-American.¹⁹

Preliminary results of this vast experiment show markedly better test scores and higher graduation rates and enrollment in postsecondary institutions.²⁰ Last year, New Orleans ranked 41st out of 69 districts.²¹ Post-Katrina perceptions vary significantly: only 32% of blacks believe the mostly-charter system is better versus 44% of whites “even though precious few whites attend the public schools.”²²

The state has revoked or not renewed ten charters in ten years; five charter school boards voluntarily closed their schools.²³ The greatest challenge now is how to train, certify, and keep quality teachers in schools relying significantly on young and inexperienced teachers from “alternative pathway programs such as Teach for America and TeachNOLA.”²⁴ Teacher racial composition has changed from 71% black pre-Katrina to 49% in 2014.²⁵

Health Care. Before Katrina, 21% of city residents were uninsured, one of the highest rates in the U.S.

Charity Hospital—part of a state system of free hospitals—was their place for birth, death, and ordinary health care. There LSU and Tulane trained doctors. Flooded on lower levels, “Big Charity” was shuttered after Katrina by state and LSU officials although National Guard, military, and hospital personnel had cleaned and restored the flooded levels within a few weeks after the waters receded.

State and federal officials battled for years over reopening the hospital or building a new one relying heavily on FEMA money. The new one—costing \$1.1 billion from FEMA and bonds—opened August 1st on a 34-acre site carved from local neighborhoods. Those traditionally cared for at Charity—75% African-American—suffered from ten years without its tertiary services and without 100 inpatient psychiatric beds for people often traumatized by storm and halting recovery. Many mental health sufferers ended up in Orleans Parish Prison.

Meanwhile, a loose federation of 70 community health centers opened, offering quality primary care with high patient satisfaction. These centers are funded by private insurance, expanded Affordable Care Act insurance, public and private grants, and post-Katrina appropriations. “Between 2013 and 2014, the percent of uninsured African Americans dropped from 25% to 16%, while the percent of uninsured Whites dropped from 14% to 11%.”²⁶ Governor Jindal and legislators refuse to expand Medicaid, largely with federal ACA funds, to people with incomes below 138% of the poverty line—funding critical to the community primary care network.

Latino newcomers. Latino New Orleans pre-Katrina traced its origins largely to Central American and Caribbean countries—often tied to fruit, coffee, and hardwoods trade.²⁷ Latinos, comprising about one-quarter of the reconstruction labor force, tackled the dirty, dangerous, and disgusting work of Katrina remediation and

recovery. The Latino population grew from 60,000 in 2000 to 103,000 in 2013. Many brought family to make this their “home,” despite being victimized by thieves and unscrupulous employers, harassed by police and ICE, and living in the shadows of undocumented immigration status. Without adequate language and other resources, schools, courts, health care, and the general population are challenged to respond. And, despite resilience as workers and families, long-term Latino viability depends on US comprehensive immigration reform.

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² Bill Quigley, “New Orleans Katrina Pain Index at 10: Who Was Left Behind,” *Huffington Post* blog, July 29, 2015, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-quigley/new-orleans-katrina-pain_b_7831870.html (accessed August 20, 2015).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Allison Plyer, Nihal Shrinath, and Vicki Mack, *The New Orleans Index at Ten*, The Data Center, July 31, 2015, p. 8.

⁵ Katherine Sayre, “New Orleans home prices up 46 percent since Hurricane Katrina; suburbs more modest,” *Times Picayune*, August 11, 2015, at http://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2015/08/new_orleans_home_prices_up_46.html (accessed August 21, 2015).

⁶ Stacy Seichshaydre and Ryan C. Albright, “Expanding Choice and Opportunity in the Housing Choice Voucher Program,” *The Data Center*, July 8, 2015, page 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Quigley, *op. cit.*

⁹ Plyer, Shrinath, and Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Seichshaydre and Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Calvin Johnson, Mathildo Laisne, and Jon Wool, “Criminal Justice: Changing Course on Incarceration,” *The New Orleans Index at Ten*, The Data Center, June 17, 2015, p. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Plyer, Shrinath, and Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Johnson, Laisne, and Wool, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Plyer, Shrinath, and Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Andre Perry, Douglas N. Harris, Christian Buerger, and Vicki Mack, “The Transformation of New Orleans Public Schools: Addressing System-Level Problems without a System,” *The New Orleans Index at Ten*, The Data Center, August 21, 2015 Revised, p. 1.

¹⁸ David Osbourne, “[How New Orleans Made Charter Schools Work](#),” *Washington Monthly*, June-July-August, 2015.

¹⁹ Bill Quigley, “New Orleans Katrina Pain Index at 10: Who Was Left Behind,” *Huffington Post* blog, July 29, 2015.

²⁰ Perry, Harris, Buerger, and Mack, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-7.

²¹ Osbourne, *op. cit.*

²² Quigley, *op. cit.*

²³ Quigley, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Perry, Harris, Buerger, and Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁵ Nathan Barrett and Douglas Harris, “Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce,” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, August 24, 2015, p. 3.

²⁶ Pharissa Robinson, J.D., and Lila Arnaud, M.P.H., “Health Outcomes in Post-Katrina New Orleans: Place and Race Matter,” *State of Black New Orleans: 10 Years Post-Katrina*, Urban League of Greater New Orleans, 2015, pp. 123-38 at 128.

²⁷ Elizabeth Fussell and Lucas Diaz, “Latinos in Metro New Orleans: Progress, Problems, and Potential,” *The New Orleans Index at Ten*, The Data Center, June 2015.