

Ten years since Hurricane Katrina: Part two

Destruction of public housing and forced exodus of workers

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This is the second article of a four-part series on the ongoing impact of Hurricane Katrina 10 years after the storm devastated New Orleans and other parts of the US Gulf Coast, exposing pervasive poverty, inequality, and government indifference to the collapse of basic infrastructure in America. Part one was posted October 22.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed more than 200,000 homes and displaced as many as 2 million people from the Gulf Coast. Ten years on, the city has still not recovered from the immense damage incurred.

The storm and its aftermath triggered an exodus of substantial sections of the working class of New Orleans. Many were discouraged from returning by the emotional and economic trauma of displacement, rising living costs, and the decay of public infrastructure. New Orleans had a pre-hurricane population of 484,674. Today, it is 384,320, a 21 percent decline.

Evacuees were spread out across the American South, Nevada and California. Three months after the hurricane, more than 50,000 people were still living in government-paid hotel rooms, unable to find temporary housing. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) applied pressure on these evacuees by threatening to terminate their hotel stays. FEMA eventually placed an outer limit on the stays, ending government hotel fee subsidies on January 7, 2006. This was despite the agency staff's own admission that "available permanent housing is scarce in Louisiana and Mississippi."

Most of those displaced by the hurricane found themselves in cities alien to them. Before finding housing, most had to find employment. Making matters worse, in cities such as Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Houston, Texas, rental prices spiked in response to the influx of Katrina victims. FEMA rental assistance, which was capped to reflect pre-hurricane prices, did not keep pace with the changing housing market.

FEMA had supplied 120,000 trailers to serve as temporary residences for evacuees. By 2007, 81,000 families were still living in FEMA trailers, 13,000 of which were situated in remote trailer parks.

The Sugar Hill FEMA camp, located 70 miles from New Orleans, was typical of the conditions many evacuees faced for years. The park was unsecured and isolated in rural cane fields, and had no medical or emergency services, no laundry facilities, no public transportation, no grocery and only a very limited food bank. There were no childcare facilities, and children did not have access to a public school. Many residents were wholly dependent on charities for immunizations and basic sanitation items such as soap and toilet paper. FEMA announced that it would require occupants to begin paying rent beginning in the spring of 2008.

At least 100,000 of the shoddily constructed FEMA trailers were built with substandard materials that contained toxic levels of

formaldehyde. By June 2008, there were 17,000 confirmed illnesses amongst Katrina survivors caused by exposure to formaldehyde.

By 2007, only 1,000 of the 19,000 Lower Ninth Ward residents had returned. Those who did come home found the area had no functioning gas lines or grocery stores.

In nearby St. Bernard, residents had no phone lines or cable connections, the area had no hospital, and sewage was pumped out of still shattered pipes by trucks.

In Lakeview, a neighborhood located along Lake Pontchartrain, only 47 percent of residents had returned. Residents lived in cramped temporary trailers beside their houses as they rebuilt.

A report published in 2007 by the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps showed that the majority of low-income residents wanted to return to their neighborhoods but could not, citing difficulties securing housing and the expense of their relocation.

Those living in relatively better-off working class neighborhoods in New Orleans who were able to rebuild had to pay out of pocket for repairs. Religious and humanitarian groups subsidized much of the residential reconstruction throughout the region. The federal government had pledged \$116 billion for Gulf Coast reconstruction. Much of this, however, went toward "long-term rebuilding" and was of little immediate assistance.

Road Home, a federally created, privately administered aid disbursement program for Louisiana, awarded money to only a small number of displaced residents. Of the 16,195 applicants from St. Bernard parish, fewer than 3,900 received checks. Applicants typically were awarded a fraction of the amount needed to cover the costs of returning home and rebuilding, and received that only after waiting long periods and undergoing humiliating and onerous verification procedures.

With substantial sections of the working class and urban poor driven out of New Orleans, the corporate elite launched an offensive against the city's remaining social infrastructure. In 2006, a group of affluent business people, appointed by Mayor Ray Nagin to the euphemistically named Bring New Orleans Back Commission, unveiled a highly controversial proposal to raze entire "abandoned" neighborhoods and convert them into public "green spaces."

The neighborhoods—almost invariably poor and majority black—were to be slated for demolition if they did not meet a certain threshold of returning residents. Though that particular proposal eventually fell through due to sufficiently high return rates as well as bitter opposition from local residents, the push for such measures has not ended.

Public housing suffered a disastrous blow following the hurricane. Citing the dilapidated and unsafe conditions in the major housing

complexes—a direct result of underfunding and neglect by the city—officials moved to raze them in order to create “mixed-income housing communities.”

The plan was to create areas split into public and private “market-rate” housing on the grounds of the demolished projects. The move was funded in part by federal grants from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, a nationwide program of which New Orleans was the first recipient.

In 2007, the City Council voted unanimously to demolish the “big four” public complexes—B.W. Cooper, St. Bernard, Lafitte and C.J. Peete—4,534 housing units in all. The situation outside City Hall had become so tense that following the vote, police used pepper spray and Tasers to disperse the crowd of protesters assembled to oppose the demolition.

In 2013, the city began demolition at the Iberville housing development, one of the last remaining public housing complexes in the city. The Housing Authority of New Orleans and the city have now torn down 59 of the 75 buildings in the complex.

The public housing complexes were replaced with “mixed-income” housing communities such as Marrero Commons, Columbia Park, Faubourg Lafitte and Harmony Oaks. Cynically presented as a move to “revitalize” neighborhoods, the operation is designed to drive the remaining working class and poor residents out of the city center. Many of the demolished housing projects were located near the areas of the city that drew large numbers of tourists. The Iberville housing project, long decried as a breeding ground for “criminal” elements, lay just outside the French Quarter.

The results of the demolition of the “big four” complexes reflect the social counterrevolution that has taken place since Katrina. St. Thomas, a complex that had already been demolished in the late 1990s, once had 1,510 public housing units. The new development, River Garden, has only 182. St. Bernard had 1,464; Columbia Park now has 221. C.J. Peete had 1,403; Harmony Oaks has 193. Desire had 1,860; The Estates has 283. The bulk of residences in the new developments are reserved for “moderate” and “market-rate” private homes.

The majority of the working class remaining in the metro New Orleans area now resides outside the city limits—in Metairie, Chalmette, the West Bank and other areas far from the city center. Many of these workers have at least an hour commute to their daily jobs. Those without a car are forced to rely on public transportation that has contracted to only 35 percent of its pre-Katrina level.

The social composition of the city has undergone a profound change. A substantial proportion of the population rebound has come not from returning hurricane victims, but from wealthier strata of the middle class relocating to the city to take advantage of its relatively cheap cost of living and ample investment prospects. Since Hurricane Katrina, the median income in New Orleans has risen by at least 50 percent, to \$45,981 as of 2013. One of the most massive and rapid gentrification processes in history has taken place. Dashing any remaining hopes of return for the rest of displaced hurricane victims, the city put some 1,800 mostly vacant lots up for auction in March of this year.

The rent for a two-bedroom apartment in New Orleans proper has skyrocketed from \$676 in 2005 to \$950 in 2015, a 40 percent increase. Those using Section 8 federal housing assistance vouchers are routinely discriminated against. According to a report published last year in the *Times Picayune*, up to 82 percent of New Orleans landlords refuse to accept Section 8 vouchers.

The Section 8 program offers less stability for its recipients than did public housing. Under public housing, residents were expected to pay 30 percent of their income toward rent. If they lost their jobs, they would not be forced out of their apartments. Under Section 8, however, those unable to pay their share of the rent routinely face eviction and ejection from the program altogether. Those unable to stay with friends or family can quickly find themselves on the streets.

Homelessness skyrocketed in the years directly following the hurricane. In 2007, the city’s homeless population peaked at 11,619 individuals. The homeless population has since declined to its current level of 1,073, roughly on par with its pre-Katrina level.

However, the official rate of homelessness is a very conservative estimate, measuring only street homelessness. The problem of so-called “homeless in their own homes,” or residents who live without electricity, running water or other basic utilities, continues unabated. Many returning residents, unable to afford repairs due to lack of income and an inability to obtain rebuilding grants, are forced to live as squatters in their own homes.

The homelessness estimate likewise does not factor in those living on the edge of destitution. Roughly 12 percent of New Orleans residents under the poverty line face homelessness each year.

The current administration of Mayor Mitch Landrieu recently boasted of “ending” military veteran homelessness in the city of New Orleans. His initiative received enormous press and evoked praise from President Obama during the latter’s visit to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the hurricane.

The mayor’s claims, however, are patently false. A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Michael Terrell, a homeless veteran, shortly after the mayor’s announcement. “No, they ain’t solved it,” he said. “Have you seen over there, by the library? People still sleep over there. I figured they’d get people off the streets. They said they’d get vets off the streets. I’m a vet!”

To be continued

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