

Hurricane Katrina and U.S. Citizens in Poverty

When we see many of the faces of the people stranded in New Orleans, we are seeing the faces of poverty in the richest country in the world. The latest U.S. Census Report indicates that for the fourth year in a row, our nation's poverty rate has increased, while the wealth of the richest people in our country is increasing. These statistics, which demonstrate a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, now have a human face: can we ignore them any longer?

August 2005 Census Report Show Poverty* Increasing in the United States

- The nation's poverty rate rose to 12.7 % of the U.S. population last year, the fourth consecutive annual increase.
- There were 37 million people living in extreme poverty, up 1.1 million people from 2003.
- The number of people without health insurance grew from 45 million to 45.8 million.
- The South was the poorest region.
- Nearly one in four African Americans and one in five Hispanics remain in dire poverty.
- The 13,000 richest families in the U.S. now have the total income of the 20 million poorest peoples' incomes combined.
- The U.S. now has the largest gap of any Western industrialized nation between the rich and poor.

NOTE *It is important to note that the poverty threshold differs by the size and makeup of a household. For example, a family of four with two children was considered living in poverty if their income was \$19,157 or less. For a family of two with no children, it was \$12,649. For a person 65 and over living alone, it was \$9,060. Therefore, it must be taken into consideration that this is only one classification of "poverty." Families of four with two children who make \$20,000 a year would not have been considered poor by this report.)

Poverty in the Region Hit by Hurricane Katrina

- The percent of persons living below the poverty level in Gulfport and Biloxi (the hardest hit cities) in Mississippi is 17.7% and 14.6 % respectively, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1999.
- The poverty rate for the city of New Orleans is an astounding 27.9%, as reported by the 2000 U.S Census Bureau.
- The median household income for New Orleans residents in 2000 was \$27,133, compared to a median of \$41,994 for the U.S. population as a whole.
- 32% of children under 18 in New Orleans are below the poverty level.

"A 2-year-old girl, clutching a bottle and ignoring her knock-off Barbie doll, running in circles around her mother. Homeless men trying to doze on the sidewalk, using backpacks as pillows. People without cars. People with old cars but nowhere to go. [Tens of thousands of them.] These were the people without enough money or luck to leave town as Hurricane Katrina was poised to have its way with New Orleans."

The Times-Picayune, August 30, 2005



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It's Not Fair: Disasters Hit The Poor the Hardest

“As a former student of Tulane University in New Orleans, I understand what it feels like to have to flee the city for hurricanes...but it's much different for a wealthy college student to seek shelter than it is for an impoverished local in the Big Easy . . . Because no matter what, when you have money, you can leave the scene before things get bad and afford to rebuild successfully when it's all over. Life isn't the same for the rest of Louisiana. Surrounded by toxic factories and struggling to survive daily in poverty-stricken areas, many residents of New Orleans have now suffered the final blow to their already difficult lives. I was a reading and writing tutor for below-average 2nd graders in the city's schools, and I know all too well from my students' stories that life before Katrina was anything but easy.”

Margaret, *Inside Higher Education News*, Aug. 31, 2005

- Poor people live in homes which are not as sturdy, stable and safe as others. Many homes of the poor in New Orleans were old, one story wooden structures.
- The places where those in poverty live are often the most vulnerable, overcrowded and the first to flood.
- It is much more difficult for the poor to evacuate. Many don't have cars. They cannot afford to get train or plane tickets for their families and they have no place to go.
- Low income people are least likely to have insurance to rebuild. They often have no savings for emergencies. When jobs are lost in disasters, their jobs are often the first to go.
- Poor people can become emotionally dysfunctional because of constant crises, no hope and little resources to deal with living on the edge and post-traumatic stress.

A Prayer for the Victims of Hurricane Katrina

O God, we remember when the disciples of Jesus were terrified after a long night on a turbulent sea. When they cried to you for help, you stilled the sea and brought them to safety.

We ask now that you comfort and still the hearts of those suffering from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. We pray for those who have been displaced and who cannot return to homes destroyed or damaged by the storm. We pray for those whose lives were lost and for those who now must grieve the loss of a loved one. We pray for those who need food, water, and basic shelter. We also pray for those who are attempting to offer help and relief to victims. Help us all to be Christ-like in our compassion and outreach.

While we wonder why such devastation can occur, we know that our names are written in the palm of your hand. Let your loving grace wash over those who must now face bleak futures, especially those in poverty. Calm their hearts and let them experience the solidarity of the human community. Hold them close and help us witness to your love through our aid and support. Amen.

The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is taking up a National Collection for Hurricane Relief. Diocesan collections and individual gifts should be sent to:

2005 Hurricane Relief Fund
Catholic Charities USA
PO Box 25168
Alexandria, VA 22313-9788

www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/news/katrina.cfm

