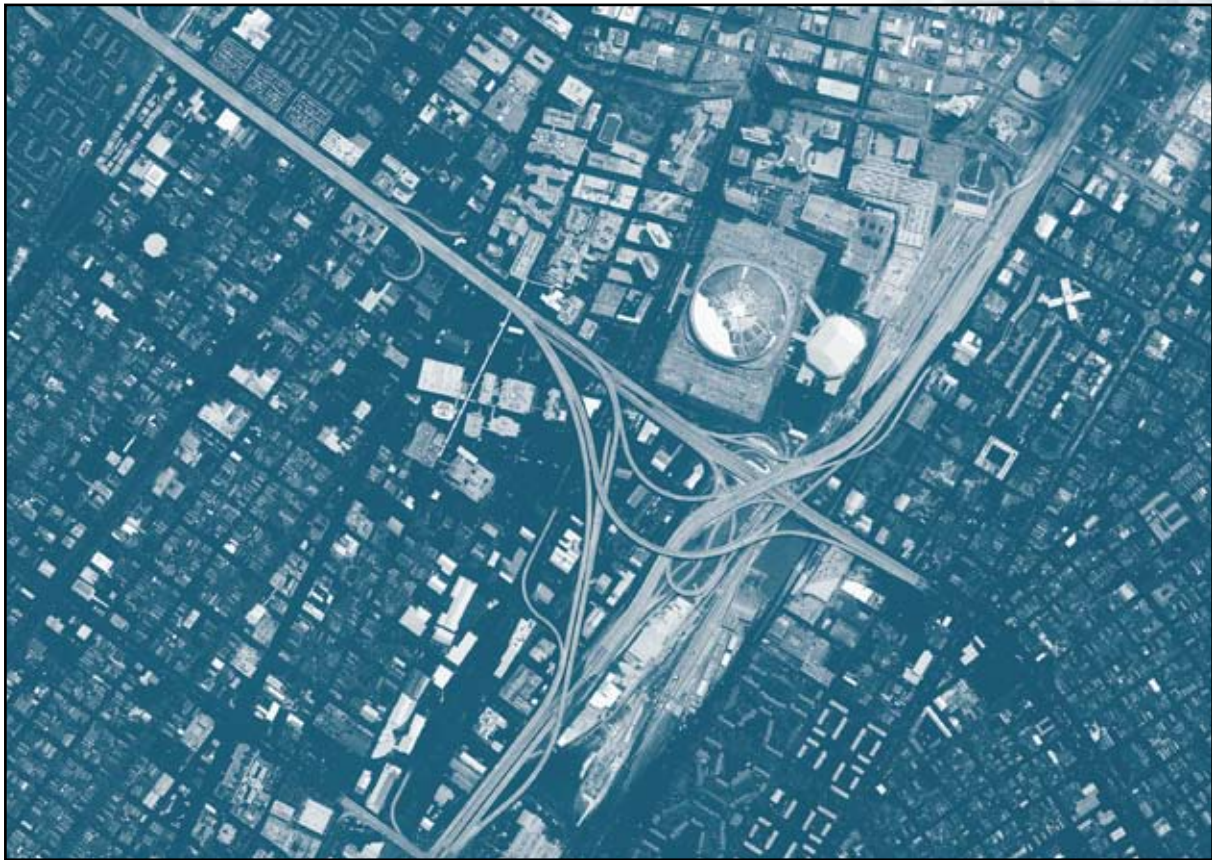


UN-HABITAT

STATE OF THE WORLD'S CITIES 2006/7

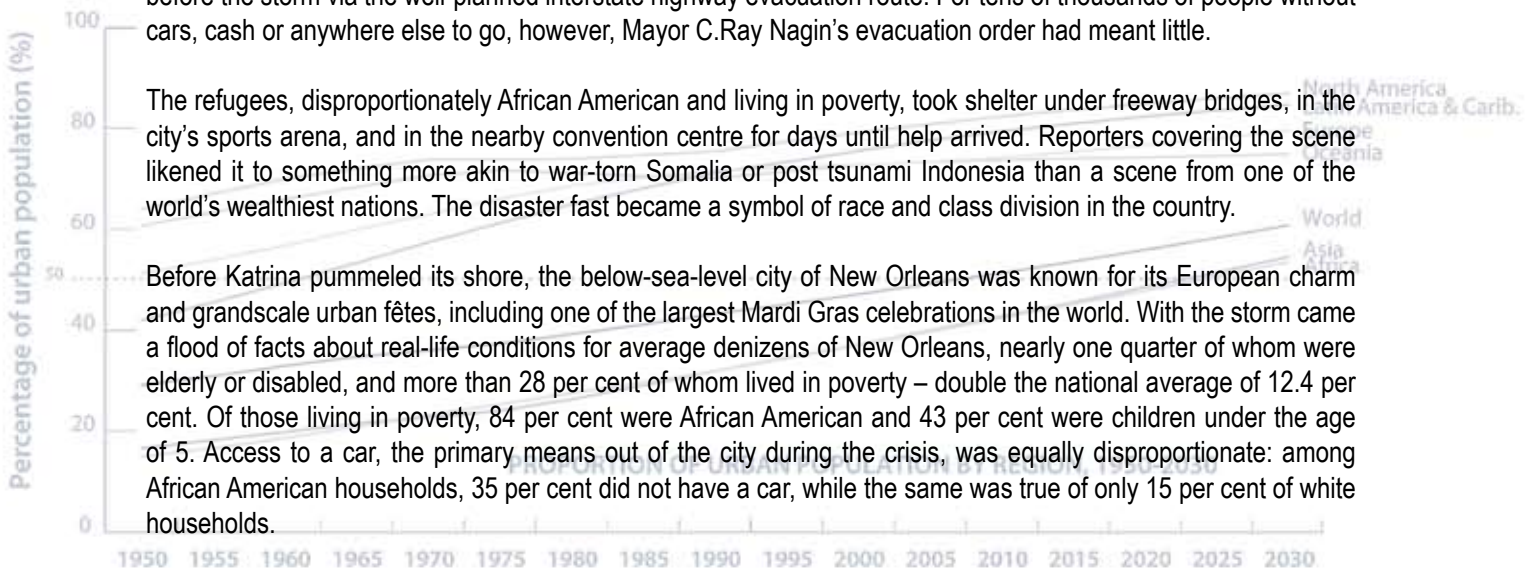


New Orleans: Poor residents suffer deepest impact of Hurricane Katrina

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States on 29 August 2005, the storm left more than one million people homeless and killed hundreds across three states. The city of New Orleans, in the southern state of Louisiana, suffered Katrina's greatest lasting impact. Lashed by winds of more than 140 miles per hour and flooded by water overflowing the levees that kept the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Ponchartrain at bay, New Orleans lay almost entirely submerged and in ruins after the storm. Many of the city's 485,000 inhabitants fled before the storm via the well-planned interstate highway evacuation route. For tens of thousands of people without cars, cash or anywhere else to go, however, Mayor C.Ray Nagin's evacuation order had meant little.

The refugees, disproportionately African American and living in poverty, took shelter under freeway bridges, in the city's sports arena, and in the nearby convention centre for days until help arrived. Reporters covering the scene likened it to something more akin to war-torn Somalia or post tsunami Indonesia than a scene from one of the world's wealthiest nations. The disaster fast became a symbol of race and class division in the country.

Before Katrina pummeled its shore, the below-sea-level city of New Orleans was known for its European charm and grand-scale urban fêtes, including one of the largest Mardi Gras celebrations in the world. With the storm came a flood of facts about real-life conditions for average denizens of New Orleans, nearly one quarter of whom were elderly or disabled, and more than 28 per cent of whom lived in poverty – double the national average of 12.4 per cent. Of those living in poverty, 84 per cent were African American and 43 per cent were children under the age of 5. Access to a car, the primary means out of the city during the crisis, was equally disproportionate: among African American households, 35 per cent did not have a car, while the same was true of only 15 per cent of white households.



As in many parts of the developing world, the poorest residents of New Orleans lived in the most hazardous areas of the city. Many of the city's lowest-income residents lived in the floodplains of the Lower Ninth Ward, a neighbourhood that sat below sea level and was inundated when the canals and levees failed. Although the Federal Emergency Management Agency had predicted that a hurricane would strike New Orleans since at least 2001, federal funds to reinforce the levees had been decreasing in recent years. Speaking to a New York Times reporter, geographer Craig E. Colten of Louisiana State University said, "Out West, there is a saying that water flows to money. But in New Orleans, water flows away from money. Those with resources who control where the drainage goes have always chosen to live on the high ground. So the people in the low areas were hardest hit."

The Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhood – where more than 98 per cent of the residents were African American and more than a third lived in poverty – was built on a reclaimed cypress swamp, gradually drained and developed over the first half of the 20th century. The city's higher ground had been settled since the early 1700s, when French colonists fortified the swampland surrounded by large bodies of water and called it "l'efflantant" – the floating island. By 2005, the New Orleans metropolitan area was home to more than one million people. With population expansion came more reclamation; levees were built and water pumped away as settlements spread down from the high southern shore of Lake Ponchartrain to the low banks of the Mississippi. The lowest land was the only place European immigrants and African American families could afford to build homes in the early 1900s; the dirty, flood-prone parcels of land were adjacent to the city's commercial and industrial areas.

Poverty kept residents of the Lower Ninth in place over the years, unable either to move up and out or to renovate their increasingly run-down houses. In 2000, more than half of the neighbourhood's residents owned their homes and had occupied them for 10 years or longer; the opposite was true nationwide, with more than 60 per cent of American households having moved in the past 10 years. The houses in the neighbourhood held the history of New Orleans itself – 62 per cent were built before 1960, and only one-tenth were less than 20 years old. The age of the housing, along with its location, put residents of the Lower Ninth at risk. Having endured flooding before, the residents suffered another deep impact on their stability and their access to affordable housing with Hurricane Katrina. They may also be the last to benefit as the city is gradually rebuilt over the next several years.

Katrina was the first such storm to devastate a major urban centre in the United States. In other places similarly affected, the rebuilding of affordable housing has historically taken last place among the items on long-term plans, or has been left out altogether. Kobe, Japan, provides a case in point. When that city was destroyed by an earthquake in 1995, many residents lived in temporary housing for eight years, and areas of the city that had been affordable for families were rebuilt with housing beyond their financial reach.

But while the city of New Orleans will no doubt be eventually rebuilt, many fear its soul has been lost forever. As neighbouring cities and states struggled to cope with the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the flooded city, authorities warned that draining the water from the city could take months, which would make it less likely that the refugees would return soon. According to one report, many of the more than 200,000 people who crossed into the neighbouring State of Texas in buses, planes and trains vowed never to return to New Orleans and its surrounding areas.

Sources: Applebome, et al. 2005; Greater New Orleans Community Data Center 2005; DeParle 2005; Leavitt 2000; Teather 2005; Gonzalez 2005; Walsh, et al. 2005; Luthra 2005.

This is a UN-HABITAT Feature/Backgrounder, please feel free to publish or quote from this article provided UN-HABITAT is given credit. Suitable photographs are available on our website. For further information, please contact: Mr. Sharad Shankardass, Spokesperson, or Ms. Zahra Hassan, Press & Media Liaison, Press & Media Relations Unit, Tel: (254 2) 7623153/7623151, Fax: (254 2) 7624060, E-mail: habitat.press@unhabitat.org, Website: www.unhabitat.org. SOWC/06/07/B/Stories3