

A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina: An Intersectional Analysis

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Housing devastation in the Ninth Ward, New Orleans (photo by Paula Burch-Celentano, Tulane University Office of Publications)

“Staying” in New Orleans before the Storm

Even non-locals know New Orleans by its neighborhoods — the French Quarter, the Treme, the Garden District, and now the Ninth Ward. But for residents of New Orleans, identification with neighborhood likely exceeds that of any other city in the United States. Here, when inhabitants meet, the question “Where do you stay?” comes long before “What do you do?” New Orleanians exhibit a cultural allegiance to and historical knowledge of place that is exceptional in North America. It is both cause and effect of notoriously low levels of out-migration — New Orleanian families have been in the city for generations, and a striking number have never been out of the region. The blow Hurricane Katrina struck to the material landscape and housing, and to the residents’ psychological sense of belonging and identity, should be viewed in the light of this unique attachment to place.

Housing is a gendered phenomenon because women’s access to a safe home is mediated by men, children, a gendered labor market, and gendered housing and welfare policy. As women are overwhelmingly responsible for domestic caring for children, the disabled, and the elderly, women’s relationship to home is an indicator of the quality of life of other vulnerable groups as well. Women in New Orleans have long organized themselves politically around issues linked to housing, in groups like public housing development Resident Councils, the New Orleans Welfare Rights Organization, and the New Orleans Tenants Organization. Most of the data collected thus far on housing in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina is not disaggregated by gender, and thus we must interpret race and poverty statistics through a gendered lens in order to understand the intersectional impact of housing on the lives of women and girls since the storm.

Pre-storm housing patterns were clearly determined by gender, race, and class. In some ways, New Orleans reflects correlations apparent in the rest of the country, only more so. Before the storm, Orleans parish was 65 percent Black¹, and

had a 28 percent poverty rate, compared to a 12 percent poverty rate nationwide. Renters constituted 54 percent of the city population, compared to 34 percent nationwide. The city also had twice the national rate of female-headed households, a figure impacted by the job discrimination and underemployment experienced by local Black/African American men. Relatedly, 55 percent of grandparents were responsible for dependent grandchildren, presumably in home-based care.

But there are other ways in which New Orleans’ historical exceptionalism as the continuous urban center of free people of color (*gens de couleur libre*) created exceptional housing patterns as well. Several middle class neighborhoods with a higher percentage of Black/African American residents than the rest of the city, such as Gentilly Terrace and Pontchartrain Park, also had a significantly higher owner occupancy rate. This correlation applied to the poor and working class Lower Ninth Ward as well, for despite the latter’s high poverty (34 percent) and female-headed household rates (25 percent), it too had a higher percentage of home ownership, at 59 percent. For many poor, working class,

and middle class Black/African Americans in New Orleans, home ownership was a hard-earned and life-sustaining asset.

Housing Demographic Changes since the Storm

The population of Orleans Parish was 452,170 in July 2005. The Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which includes Orleans and six surrounding parishes, was 1,316,510. After a near total displacement of residents in September 2005, by November 2007, the U.S. Postal Service claimed that 139,744 out of 198,232 pre-storm households were receiving mail in New Orleans, which some local analysts have argued is the most accurate population indicator in a time of ongoing flux. By all estimates, this post-Katrina population is whiter and wealthier than its pre-Katrina inhabitants. The MSA has seen greater increases in population as some New Orleanians have moved to outlying parishes, and the MSH is now at 81 percent of its pre-Katrina household rate, or 452,733 out of 524,317. We still do not know what percentage of these households are returning residents, and what percentage are new inhabitants.

According to FEMA damage records, 134,564 (72 percent)² housing units in Orleans Parish were damaged by Katrina and Rita and the subsequent flooding, of which 78,918 (42 percent)³ were severely damaged or destroyed. In a city in which the majority of inhabitants were renters, it is estimated that 51,700 of the seriously damaged or destroyed units were rentals.⁴ In January 2008, in the middle of FEMA's campaign to vacate occupied trailers by June 2008, there were approximately 34,000 inhabited trailers in Louisiana, with more in Orleans Parish than other parishes.⁵ Meanwhile, the homeless population of New Orleans continues to grow, hovering now at 12,000,⁶ which is double the pre-storm number. In the Fall 2007, a homeless encampment swelled in the quad across from City Hall until it was driven out and a fence put around the area. Hundreds

then relocated to tents under the Claiborne Avenue overpass. The choice of this location was not lost on locals, some of whom remember this corridor—in the years before a federal highway was sited there—as being the heart of the Black/African American owned business and cultural arts district. City officials continue to threaten the imminent removal of the homeless, and have returned to controversial mission-model temporary sheltering.

The Impact of Federal Housing Policy: A Second Storm

While the floodwaters and failed levees significantly impacted the housing stock of the parish, affordable housing advocates point to local and federal housing policy response as the source of an ongoing secondary disaster. Due to occupational gender discrimination and other sources of gender inequity, women are disproportionately in need of low-income housing. Black/African American women's need for affordable housing is the result of the intersection of gender and race inequality as the wages of both Black/African American women and men are considerably lower than those of White women and men.

PolicyLink, a progressive think tank, recently released a report in which it calculates that “[f]ederal recovery programs are projected to restore only 43 percent of the city's total rental losses.”⁷ The rental housing shortage means rents have increased by 46 percent since the storm. James Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center has challenged federal neglect of renters in its multi-billion dollar allocation for homeowners through the Road Home program. While just half of the almost 200,000 home-owning applicants have received their awards, the fraction designated for rental units goes to landlords for renovation, and not to renters themselves.⁸ Into this shrunken housing landscape created by “passive policy”—the lack of federal disaster funds allocated for rental housing recovery—HUD (the Department

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of Housing and Urban Development) and HANO (Housing Authority of New Orleans) have additionally taken a more aggressive approach when it comes to housing for the lowest income, disabled, and elderly renters by actively defunding subsidized housing. HUD has designated funds to rebuild just over a third (4,538 units)⁹ of the subsidized housing stock. Further, after a two year campaign to demolish four public housing developments (C.J. Peete, B.W. Cooper, Lafitte, and St. Bernard), HUD/HANO began the demolition process in December 2007. Overwhelmingly, public housing leaseholders are women, in this case Black/African American, who are largely heads of households with children.

The decision to demolish four of New Orleans' ten public housing developments during a time of housing crisis in the city was contested locally, nationally, and internationally. Despite the fact that generations of New Orleanians had sought shelter in the projects during hurricane warnings because of their low-rise, sturdy brick workmanship, residents were evacuated along with the rest of the city days after surviving the storm. When they returned to New Orleans they were not allowed back into the developments, and within a few months steel plates were placed over doors and windows. After ten months of limbo for over 4,500 public housing families, on June 2006, HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson announced federal plans to demolish the four developments. This decision precipitated local, national, and international resistance. Civil Rights lawyers filed lawsuits on behalf of residents; Congresswoman Maxine Waters (D-CA) successfully passed House legislation (HR 1227) requiring further investigation and a freeze on demolitions, and Senators Christopher Dodd (D-Conn) and Mary Landrieu (D-LA) sponsored its sister initiative, SB 1668, which has been held up in committee ever since by Louisiana's Republican Senator Vitter; critical statements were issued by all three Democratic

Presidential candidates at the time; UN Rapporteurs on Internally Displaced People visited the city repeatedly and two UN advisers condemned the demolitions¹⁰; and a grassroots social movement has arisen in New Orleans that organizes residents and plans public demonstrations.

Despite the variety of concerns voiced by critics of HUD's decision, demolitions have begun on three of the four developments (final permits for Lafitte are pending). The number of units to be rebuilt is highly disputed. HUD/HANO intend to replace the housing developments with mixed-income units in line with broader federal housing policy under HOPE VI, and claim they will replace the pre-storm total number of 6,606 public housing units with 3,343 public housing units, and 5,518 subsidized units with 1,765 subsidized units.¹¹ Affordable housing advocates claim that while these figures indicate a dramatic reduction in net housing, they also under represent the more significant drop in rental units at what policy makers call deep affordability. Despite using the vague language of low-income housing, HUD has inflated the Area Median Income (AMI) levels, so that its "low-income" threshold is out of reach of the poorest sector. PolicyLink notes that the total number of units available to extremely low-income renters will be a mere 37 percent of the pre-storm pool, while local housing advocates claim it will be even smaller. In this way, they argue, HUD and HANO are engineering policy as to who can and cannot return to New Orleans.

Framing the Struggle for Affordable Housing: Finding Alternatives

The bleak affordable housing situation for returning New Orleanians has generated a variety of responses beyond the defense of public housing. These include the turn by locals to an international human right-to-housing framework, and a multifaceted grassroots exploration of affordable housing alternatives.

Local and national racial justice groups are increasingly using a human rights paradigm to attempt to hold the United States accountable to international standards of racial justice. Interestingly, similar measures have not been taken in the name of gender justice. Since Hurricane Katrina, local grassroots groups like The People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, and national groups like The U.S. Human Rights Network, have invoked U.N. rights discourse to substantiate charges that Black/African Americans have been disparately impacted by Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. These efforts have focused on housing and displacement. On March 8, 2008, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) issued its concluding observations on the recent U.S. status report to the committee, advising

that the U.S. “increase its efforts in order to facilitate the return of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina to their homes, if feasible, or to guarantee access to adequate and affordable housing.”¹² U.N. experts on Internally Displaced People also have made numerous trips to New Orleans to gather evidence and encourage application of the IDP framework to Katrina evacuees. Federal initiatives to reduce affordable housing in New Orleans have also been met with grassroots efforts to explore alternative means to the development of low-income housing. Former public housing residents, together with local advocates, are exploring land trusts and other approaches to collective land ownership. As two local women organizers of color and an ally explain, “Community organizing and community-based accountability are the things we have left when the systems have collapsed.”¹³

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all statistics included in this report come from the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. Accessed February-March 2008. <<http://www.gnocdc.org/index.html>>
- 2 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Office of Policy Development and Research. February 12, 2006. “Current Housing Unit Damage Estimates: Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma.” <http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/GulfCoast_HsngDmgEst.pdf>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 PolicyLink. December 2007. “Fewer Homes for Katrina’s Poorest Victims: An Analysis of Subsidized Homes in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” <http://www.policylink.org/documents/nola_fewerhomes.pdf>
- 5 Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. January 15, 2008. “The New Orleans Index: Tracking Recovery of New Orleans & the Metro Area.” :32.
- 6 Quigley, William P., Director, Loyola Law Clinic. Personal correspondence, March 2008.
- 7 PolicyLink, 2.
- 8 Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and Greater New Orleans Community Data Center. January 15, 2008. “The New Orleans Index: Tracking Recovery of New Orleans & the Metro Area.” :7
- 9 PolicyLink 1.
- 10 *Times-Picayune*. Thursday, March 6, 2008. “Housing Critics Never Visited N.O.” :1.
- 11 Housing and Urban Development. “Fact Sheet: New Housing to Benefit New Orleans.” December 2007. <<http://www.hud.gov/news/neworleansfact.cfm>>; PolicyLink 2.
- 12 United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. March 7, 2008. “Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.” Seventy-second Session. <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/ENACARegion/Pages/USIndex.aspx>>
- 13 Bierria, Alisa, Mayaba Liebenthal, and INCITE! 2007. “To Render Ourselves Visible: Women of Color Organizing and Hurricane Katrina” in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*. Boston: South End Press.