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## **STRUCTURAL RACISM AND HURRICANE KATRINA**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Why are more people of color poor in our country? Why do White people who are poor have different opportunities than Black and Latino poor people? Why should everybody be concerned about structural racism? What must we do to create hope for a new future with more opportunities for all Americans? The broken levees of New Orleans and what happened when they broke directs us to some answers to these important questions.

### **WHAT IS STRUCTURAL RACISM?**

US society is made up of many public and private institutions -- schools, colleges and universities, employers, banks, housing, transportation systems, news media. None of these institutions operate in isolation. They work together and effect each other.

Employers want to be near transportation hubs. We look for housing near good schools. Schools are locally funded so they tend to be better where housing is expensive.

These structures are not neutral. Our history of racism includes racist and race neutral policies and behaviors which produced poverty for people of color and for Whites as well. Race discrimination – denying people of color an education, jobs, and opportunities to create wealth -- adds up over generations. If your grandparents had an eighth grade education, couldn't get a mortgage to buy a home and were not eligible for any government mortgage assistance programs, they had no house to refinance to pay for a child's college tuition. They had no house to leave to next generations. They had no retirement assets. White people, even poor ones, historically have had more educational opportunities, more government help to buy homes and were able to buy them in areas where their homes would appreciate in value. This meant they could help their children and over generations their families had more chances to improve their lives. Racial

disparities – high rates of poverty, unemployment, illnesses etc. -- are effects (or symptoms) of structural racism.

It is also true that poor Whites are often harmed by the same structural arrangements that have oppressed people of color. Under-funded public schools and laws that make unionization and other efforts to create living wages have harmed low-income Whites. But the racial bribe, the privilege of Whiteness, has helped Whites have a slight edge over people of color and has worked to create a wedge between low-income Whites' ability to see their interests and futures as linked the interests and futures of people of color in the United States.

Structural racism helps explain why people of color were more vulnerable and suffered more when the New Orleans' levees broke, and why race is still at the core of the policy positions that weakened the levees and the resilience of Whites and people of color alike.

**Too many people were poor in New Orleans before the levees broke. But White poverty and Black poverty looked different.**

- ◆ Almost one-third (28%) of New Orleanians were poor before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.<sup>1</sup> 67% of the city was Black, but almost a third of Black families lived below the poverty line poor and the vast majority of the City's poor were Black.
- ◆ In the City of New Orleans, communities of color made up nearly 80% of the population in flooded neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup> That is because people of color were more likely to be poor.
  - Over 20% of people hit hard by the flood waters from the broken levees were living at or below the poverty line and another 30% were living just above the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Brookings Institution, Special Analysis by the Brookings Institutions Metropolitan Policy Program, *New Orleans after the Storm: Lessons from the Past, a Plan for the Future*, at 4 (Oct. 2005), at [http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012\\_NewOrleans.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012_NewOrleans.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The Brookings Institution, Special Analysis by the Brookings Institutions Metropolitan Policy Program, *New Orleans after the Storm: Lessons from the Past, a Plan for the Future*, at 16-17 (Oct. 2005), at [http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012\\_NewOrleans.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012_NewOrleans.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, CRS Report for Congress, *Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas* (Nov. 4, 2005).

- Poor Blacks were nearly 4 times more likely than poor Whites to live in extremely poor areas (43% compared to 11%).
- Nearly 70% of poor people impacted by the storm were Black.<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ You had to have a car to get out of New Orleans before the levees broke. Government agencies did not provide buses or any other evacuation support for poor folk.
  - 32.7% of Black New Orleanians had no car to escape the flood waters. Less than 10% of Whites had no car.<sup>5</sup>
  - 52% of poor Black New Orleanians lacked access to a car compared to only 17% of poor Whites.<sup>6</sup>

**New Orleans, like many other cities in the country, has become more segregated and poverty more concentrated over the last 40 years.<sup>7</sup>**

- ◆ As recently as 1976, there were no neighborhoods with a concentration of a majority of Blacks. In 1970, although New Orleans was a poor city, its poor were not highly concentrated in hyper-segregated neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ Between 1970 and 2000, the poverty rates in the city didn't change, but there were 66% more neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (40% or more of the residents live at or below the poverty level). This means that poor people had fewer choices about where to live and were probably living in communities with no jobs, no transportation to jobs and underfunded, poor performing schools.
- ◆ White flight suburbanization changed everything.
  - In 1970, 54% of the region's population lived in the city. By 2000, it had only 36% of the population. In 1970, the City had two-thirds (66%) of the

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<sup>4</sup> Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, CRS Report for Congress, *Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas*, November 4, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Berube and Stephen Raphael, *Access to Cars in New Orleans*, prepared for the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program Katrina Index (using data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample, 2000), at <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/katrina.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Berube and Stephen Raphael, *Access to Cars in New Orleans*, prepared for the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program Katrina Index, at <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/katrina.htm> (using data from the U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 5% Public Use Microdata Sample, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> See Alan Berube and Bruce Katz, The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, *Katrina's Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty Across America* (Oct. 2005), at [http://www.brook.edu/metro/pubs/20051012\\_Concentratedpoverty.pdf](http://www.brook.edu/metro/pubs/20051012_Concentratedpoverty.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The Brookings Institution, *Special Analysis by the Brookings Institutions Metropolitan Policy Program, New Orleans after the Storm: Lessons from the Past, a Plan for the Future*, at 5-6 (Oct. 2005), at [http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012\\_NewOrleans.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/dybdocroot/metro/pubs/20051012_NewOrleans.pdf).

region's jobs. The City's share of jobs sank to less than half (42%) by 2000. This means the city lost jobs and tax revenues to the suburbs.

- In 1970, the City was 42% Black, but by 2000 that number had risen to 67%, while the City only had about one-third (36%) of the region's population.<sup>9</sup>

**Government policies created the White middle class, prevented Blacks and other people of color from joining their ranks and encouraged white flight and sprawl, like New Orleans has seen over the last three decades.**

Since the 1930s, our national government has been growing the White middle class while barring Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and many Asians from it.

- ◆ The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created in 1934, subsidized mortgages and insured private mortgages, but often required new owners to add racially restrictive covenants to their deeds, ensuring all-White neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>
- ◆ By the 1950s, federal money insured half the mortgages in the United States, but only in segregated White neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> People of color were literally classified as nuisances, to be avoided along with “stables” and “pig pens.”<sup>12</sup>
- ◆ The FHA urged developers, bankers, and local governments to use zoning ordinances and physical barriers to protect racial segregation.<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ The Post- World War II GI Bill fueled a massive movement of White men into high-paying professional and managerial jobs. Blacks, many of whom were denied entry to the armed services because of the color of their skin, were less likely to get GI Bill benefits.
- ◆ Black veterans experienced job discrimination. They didn't get the good-paying jobs they should have with their GI Bill-funded education. For example, the United States Employment Service funneled many Black veterans into low-skilled jobs. Black servicemen, who risked their lives to

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<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Thompson Ford, The Boundaries of Race: Political Geography in Legal Analysis, 107 *Harvard Law Review* 449, 451 (1995).

<sup>11</sup> David Rusk, Inside Game/Outside Game: Winning Strategies for Saving Urban America 86-88 (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Thompson Ford, The Boundaries of Race: Political Geography in Legal Analysis, 107 *Harvard Law Review* 449, 451 (1995) (citing Charles Abrams, Forbidden Neighborhood: A Study of Prejudice in Housing 231 (1955)).

<sup>13</sup> David Rusk, Inside Game/Outside Game: Winning Strategies for Saving Urban America 87 (1999) (citing Irving Welfeld, Where We Live: A Social History of American Housing (1988)).

serve their country, came home to the same low-wage, bottom-of-the-barrel jobs they were forced to accept before they went off to war.<sup>14</sup>

- ◆ The federal government took over \$13 billion from cities between 1953 and 1986 for “urban renewal,” which took people of color out of poor but viable neighborhoods and permanently put them in high-density, high-rise public housing in sections of the city far from good jobs and good schools.<sup>15</sup>
- ◆ Urban renewal actually made cities less attractive to Whites, driving even more of them to the suburbs and creating more racial segregation and reducing cities’ middle-class tax base.<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ In the 1980s and 1990s, states used federal mass transit dollars to help those living in distant suburbs commute by train to the financial city centers, but did not take care of the transportation needs of thousands of city center residents (mostly people of color), abandoning them to wait on city streets for overcrowded buses to get to their jobs.<sup>17</sup>
- ◆ The federal interstate highway program, which began in the 1950s, has made and continues to make White flight to the suburbs easier while destroying vibrant Black, Latino and White ethnic communities. Since 1956, the federal government has spent a half-trillion dollars to help pay for highways that lead out to an ever expanding suburban frontier.
- ◆ In its first decade, the program displaced 330,000 families (mostly Black). Bulldozing, which many communities of color and working-class White ethnic communities have been politically powerless to stop, have destroyed homes and thriving commercial corridors. New highways also separate communities from each other, literally walling off Black communities from White communities.<sup>18</sup>

**Why were Black and Latino New Orleanians more vulnerable than White New Orleanians? Blacks and Latinos were on the front lines of our failed infrastructure, because they have been excluded from opportunity.**

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<sup>14</sup> Michael K. Brown et al., *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* 75-76 (Michael K. Brown et al. eds, University of California Press 2003).

<sup>15</sup> David Rusk, *Inside Game/Outside Game: Winning Strategies for Saving Urban America* 90-91 (1999); see also Jonathon Barnett, *The Fractured Metropolis: Improving the New City, Restoring the Old City, Reshaping the Region* 163 (New York: Harper Collins 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Jonathon Barnett, *The Fractured Metropolis: Improving the New City, Restoring the Old City, Reshaping the Region* 162 (New York: Harper Collins 1995).

<sup>17</sup> See Robert D. Bullard, *Addressing Urban Transportation Equity in the United States*, 31 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 1183, 1196 (2004); Robert Puentes, Survey Series of the Brookings Institution Center on Metropolitan Policy, *Flexible Funding for Transit: Who Uses It?*, at 1-2 (May 2000), at <http://www.brook.edu/urban/flexfundingexsum.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Sheryll Cashin, *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream* 113-15 (Public Affairs New York 2004).

**This suburbanization created more racial segregation and more disinvestment in communities of color. Whites, even low income Whites less concentrated in high poverty communities, get more opportunities.**

- ◆ While White families live closer to good jobs and good schools, and have more wealth building opportunities than do families of color.
- ◆ Many White families are also paying a premium to live in segregated White neighborhoods.
  - Houses cost more, families have to spend more of their income on private school tuition because of failing public schools, their children are socially isolated, and parents are forced to spend far too much time commuting and away from their families.<sup>19</sup>

**The fates and well-being of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are linked. Our economic competitiveness rises and falls on our growth in productivity.**

- ◆ When government works to reduce central city poverty in communities of color, whole regions have become wealthier and decreased regional poverty rates.
  - Inequality and poverty create distrust and social tension and lower the human capital crucial to a competitive economy.
  - Regional metro areas with more wealth equality between their cities and suburbs are more likely to have faster economic growth across the region.<sup>20</sup>
- ◆ Our country is now operating in a new global economy where a large educated workforce is essential for nations to compete. Countries with more “self programmable labor” (educated people able to reinvent themselves to adapt to the constantly changing economy) will better be able to compete in the new global economy.<sup>21</sup>
- ◆ Suburbanization and our refusal to invest in communities of color is destroying our regional and national competitiveness.

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<sup>19</sup> Sheryll Cashin, The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream 186-87 (Public Affairs New York 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Manuel Pastor et. al., Growing Together: Linking Regional and Community Development in a Changing Economy, Shelterforce Online (Jan./Feb. 1998), at [www.nhi.org/online/issues/97/pastor.html](http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/97/pastor.html).

<sup>21</sup> See Manuel Castells, The End of the Millennium 372-73 (Blackwell Publishers Inc. 2d ed. 2000).

- Before the levees broke, New Orleans Parish schools were poor and in trouble. Its school system was almost completely segregated. Almost no Whites were in the system.<sup>22</sup>
- During the 2005-2006 school year, the school district faced a \$25 to \$30 million shortfall. In the 2004–2005 school year, only 44% of fourth graders could read well and only 26% could do math well. Eighth graders performance suffered even more. Twenty-six percent could read well, while only 15% could do math well.<sup>23</sup>

**We have to pay for it and Whites have to recognize that programs that help people of color lift all boats. If not, people of color will go first, but we will all eventually, be engulfed in the flood waters.**

- ◆ Tax cuts for the wealthy help put thousands of Americans in harm's way and makes all of us more vulnerable to hard times (natural disasters, illnesses in the family, sudden lay-offs, crashes in the market).
  - Over the last four years, the aggressive pursuit and signing into law of massive tax cuts (over a trillion dollars) for the wealthiest 5% (those with incomes of 300,000 or more) has meant billions less for disaster relief and a safety net.<sup>24</sup>
    - Bush proposed a \$708 million cut to the Army Corps of Engineers, including a huge cut to federal funds (\$71.2 million) for hurricane and flood prevention in New Orleans.
  - August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit. New Orleans' flood and hurricane protection infrastructure collapsed. The city flooded, killing over a thousand people.

**Government investment created the White middle class. It can create a stronger middle class that admits Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans and poor Whites. It can create more social stability and economic competitiveness for the entire nation. But it must address racial inequity to do it.**

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<sup>22</sup> John R. Logan, Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, *Choosing Segregation: Racial Imbalance in American Public Schools, 1990-2000*, at 6 (Mar. 29, 2002), at <http://mumford.albany.edu/census/SchoolPop/SPReport/SPDownload.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> See Paul T. Hill and Jane Hannaway, Urban Institute Series, *After Katrina: Rebuilding Opportunity and Equity in the New New Orleans*, *The Future of Public Education in New Orleans*, at 2 (Jan. 30, 2006), at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=900913>.

<sup>24</sup> David Sirota, *How the Katrina Catastrophe Proves That Conservatives' Tax Cut Zealotry Has Left America Vulnerable to Disaster*, *In These Times*, Oct. 24, 2005, at 16-21.