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Natural Disasters and Homelessness

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Natural disasters can hit at anytime and anywhere. It is not uncommon that such disasters leave thousands homeless. People left homeless by natural disasters have fewer resources than any other type of homeless person. There is no park to camp out in, no alley to sleep in, and no bridge to sleep under. Furthermore, organizations and coalitions put in place to help the homeless also suffer from natural disasters, leaving the homeless with even less assistance. One of the most telling examples of relationships between natural disasters and homelessness is the case of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans

Housing

- Natural disasters affect a large segment of the population. In the Katrina disaster, flood waters submerged about 80% of the city.¹
- Of the 200,000 homes lost to Katrina 41,000 were rental units for low income individuals. When these rental units were restored the average price of rent raised from \$461 to \$836.²
- A number of Katrina victims completely paid off their home mortgages but did not purchase insurance. When Katrina hit New Orleans many of their homes were damaged beyond repair. These people prefer to be known as *homeless homeowners*.
- As of now there are 80,000 vacant dwellings in New Orleans. Many poor, mentally ill, and chemically dependent individuals have constructed unfit-living quarters reminiscent of third world countries.³

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. "Hurricane Katrina: What Government is Doing." Retrieved 2008. Available from http://www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/programs/gc_1157649340100.shtm.

² Gonzales, John Moreno. (August 19, 2007). "Homeless on the Rise in New Orleans." *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved August 2009. http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/08/19/homeless_on_the_rise_in_new_orleans/.

³ National Institute of Mental Health. (January 24, 2008). "Mental Disorders Persist Among Hurricane Katrina Survivors." Retrieved May 29, 2008 from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/science-news/2008/mental-disorders-persist-among-hurricane-katrina-survivors.shtml>.

- Information from Federal Statistics of Louisiana (2008) shows a 1.9% decline in housing units from 2000-2006, while the nation as a whole saw a 9% increase in the same.⁴
- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that Katrina was responsible for the loss 230,000 jobs, making it difficult for these victims to find housing and healthcare and leaving them exposed.⁵

Economic

- Due to Katrina and the economic shifts caused by the hurricane, housing and rent prices have increased dramatically all over the city. A large percentage of people are homeless not from damage to their homes but because they can not afford the rising prices of rent.
- The price of low income housing has skyrocketed in comparison to pre-Katrina prices. 40% of homeless shelter inhabitants in New Orleans are employed in full time positions.⁶

Authority

- Trespassing has become the fourth most common crime in New Orleans due to people breaking into and living in abandoned houses.
- Police have noticed a theme of homeless individuals calling authorities on themselves, as an attempt to find a safe place for the night.⁷

Education and Youth

- Children and youth who have become homeless due to natural disasters often have trouble attending school.
- Although it is against the McKinney-Vento Act*, youth can experience difficulty in transitioning because required documents such as immunization records and school records have been destroyed.
- In June of 2008 40% of schools in New Orleans remained closed, yet in mid-2007 more than 90% of the hotels in New Orleans were up and running. Even now, the educational quality and resources are below the level they were pre-Katrina.⁸

⁴ Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Agricultural Statistics Service, National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau. (2008). Federal Statistics on Louisiana. Retrieved May 30, 2008 from <http://www.fedstats.gov/qf/states/22000.html>.

⁵ Roncs, Philip L. Deputy Commissioner Bureau of Labor Statistics Bureau of Labor Statistic. "Statement of Philip L. Roncs Deputy Commissioner Bureau of Labor Statistics before the Joint Economic Committee UNITED STATES CONGRESS." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (October 7, 2005). Retrieved August 2009 from http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/jec_10072005.pdf.

⁶ Jervis, Rick. (March 16, 2008). New Orleans' homeless rate swells to 1 in 25. *USA Today*. Retrieved May 29, 2008, from http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-03-16-neworleans-homeless-rate_N.htm.

⁷ Gonzales, John Moreno. (August 19, 2007). "Homeless on the Rise in New Orleans." *The Boston Globe*.. Retrieved August 2009.

⁸ National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. (2005). "School Year Uncertain for Children in Hurricane Aftermath: Advocates urge help to restore access and normalcy to school kids". Retrieved May 30, 2008 from http://www.nlchp.org/view_release.cfm?PRID=47.

Statistics

- According to the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security (2008), “More than 1.5 million people were directly affected and more than 800,000 citizens were forced to live outside their homes – the largest displacement of people since the great Dust Bowl migrations of the 1930s.”⁹
- According to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), nearly 275,000 Gulf Coast residents were forced into congregate (group) shelters.¹⁰
- 12,000 people were left homeless in New Orleans after Katrina. In most cities homeless people account for about 1% of the population. In New Orleans, 4% of the population is homeless.¹¹
- The homeless issue in New Orleans is problematic. After natural disasters there is generally an increase in homelessness which ends in about 6 months. In New Orleans, the rate of homelessness in and around the city has continued to increase, even three years after Katrina.¹²
- Many victims of natural disasters suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, while those who previously had control over mental illness often struggle to find the treatment necessary to maintain that control. Reports from NIMH (2008) state, “the prevalence of serious mental illness increased from 11 percent to 14 percent after Hurricane Katrina.”¹³
- Out of the entire homeless population in New Orleans, 60% percent said that Katrina left them homeless and of that 60% percent only 30% percent said that they had gotten some form of assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).¹³

* The federal law requires access to the same transportation services provided to other students in the district, and in some instances, special arrangements to meet the needs of homeless students, who tend to move frequently. Districts may also use funds for school supplies and tutoring services to help make up classes due to homelessness. The full McKinney-Vento act please can be found on through U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s website, <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/lawsandregs/laws/index.cfm?title=t4>.

⁹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Hurricane Katrina: What Government is Doing.” Retrieved 2008. Available from http://www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/programs/gc_1157649340100.shtm.

¹⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2006). Hurricane Katrina, One-Year Later. Retrieved May 30, 2008 from <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=29108>.

¹¹ Jervis, Rick. (March 17, 2008). Homeless Still Feel Katrina’s Wrath. *USA Today*. Retrieved 2009. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-03-16-homeless_N.htm

¹² Federal Emergency Management Agency. (May 2008). Current Gulf Statistics. Retrieved May 29, 2008 from <http://www.fema.gov/hazard/hurricane/2005katrina/statistics.shtm>.

¹³ National Institute of Mental Health. (January 24, 2008). “Mental Disorders Persist Among Hurricane Katrina Survivors”. Retrieved May 29, 2008 from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/science-news/2008/mental-disorders-persist-among-hurricane-katrina-survivors.shtml>.

¹⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2006). Hurricane Katrina, One-Year Later. Retrieved May 30, 2008 from <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=29108>.