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Beyond New Orleans: The Social and Economic Isolation of Urban African Americans

by Rogelio Saenz

(October 2005) Hurricane Katrina's devastation in late August of much of the northern Gulf Coast followed by the slow institutional response to the crisis exposed the impoverishment and disempowerment of many African Americans. The media images of a predominantly African American population left to fend for itself in New Orleans demonstrated to many surprised observers the enduring color line in that city.

But striking disparities between urban blacks and whites in the United States are hardly unique to New Orleans. In large cities across the nation, African Americans are much more likely than whites to be living in communities that are geographically and economically isolated from the economic opportunities, services, and institutions that families need to succeed. These disparities have left African Americans disproportionately vulnerable to the next urban calamity, be it from terrorism or another natural disaster.

No Job, No Car, No Phone: An Entrapping Lack of Basic Resources

Of the 15 U.S. metropolitan areas with the most African Americans in absolute numbers in 2000, New Orleans had the highest black poverty rate, at 33 percent.¹ But racial differences in poverty were stark in each of these metropolitan areas except New York. In Chicago, Newark, Memphis, and St. Louis, African Americans were about five times more likely than whites to be impoverished.

Higher poverty rates for African Americans are also linked to lower levels of education and employment—key elements in attaining economic well-being. In 2000, blacks in these large cities were also far less likely to own a car or a phone, and they were on average younger and more often female than their white counterparts.

Education. Nationwide, about 75 percent of African Americans age 25 or older do not have a college diploma, and 80 percent lacked college degrees in all but two of the 15 largest U.S. metropolitan areas—Washington, D.C. and Atlanta. Whites were more than twice as likely to be college graduates in a dozen of these cities, with the largest disparities (2.5 times) in Memphis, New York City, and Philadelphia.

Employment. One-third to one-half of African American males age 16 or older in the largest 15 U.S. cities were not employed in 2000. Some of these were "discouraged" workers who have left the labor force after numerous unsuccessful attempts to secure a job. In Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles-Long Beach, New Orleans, and St. Louis, only about one-half of African American males were employed (see table).

Blacks in these cities were three-quarters as likely as whites to have a job.

Cars and phones. African Americans are also much more likely than whites to lack basic amenities—such as an automobile or a telephone—that facilitate economic mobility and that many Americans take for granted (see table). In each of the 15 largest U.S. metropolitan areas except New York (where many residents do not have personal transportation), African Americans were about three times as likely as whites to not have an automobile in 2000. In a dozen of these areas, African Americans were at least three times more likely than whites to not have a telephone, with the racial gap in telephone ownership being eight-fold in Newark and Chicago.

Age and sex ratio. African Americans in major U.S. cities are often younger and more likely to be female than their white urban counterparts. Sex ratios (the number of males per 100 females) as of 2000 were approximately 95 or higher among whites in 11 of the 15 largest metropolitan areas, while they were about 85 or lower among African Americans in 10 of the 15 localities. The relative absence of African American males in U.S. cities reflects their high mortality and incarceration rates—factors that weigh heavily in their social and economic entrapment.

Selected Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics Among African Americans and Whites in Selected U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 2000

Metropolitan area	Percent civilian males 16+ employed		Percent no automobile		Percent no phone	
	Afr. Amer.	White	Afr. Amer.	White	Afr. Amer.	White
Baltimore	54.4	73.2	31.4	7.8	4.7	0.9
Chicago	50.2	74.0	29.4	9.4	7.2	0.9
Detroit	51.4	71.7	19.5	5.9	6.3	1.5
Los Angeles-Long Beach	50.9	67.4	20.1	7.8	2.8	0.8
Newark	54.2	72.4	32.3	7.4	5.7	0.7
New Orleans	50.0	68.6	29.6	7.7	5.9	1.8
Philadelphia	50.7	70.6	36.6	10.0	3.5	0.6
St. Louis	52.0	72.3	22.9	5.9	4.8	1.3

Source: Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

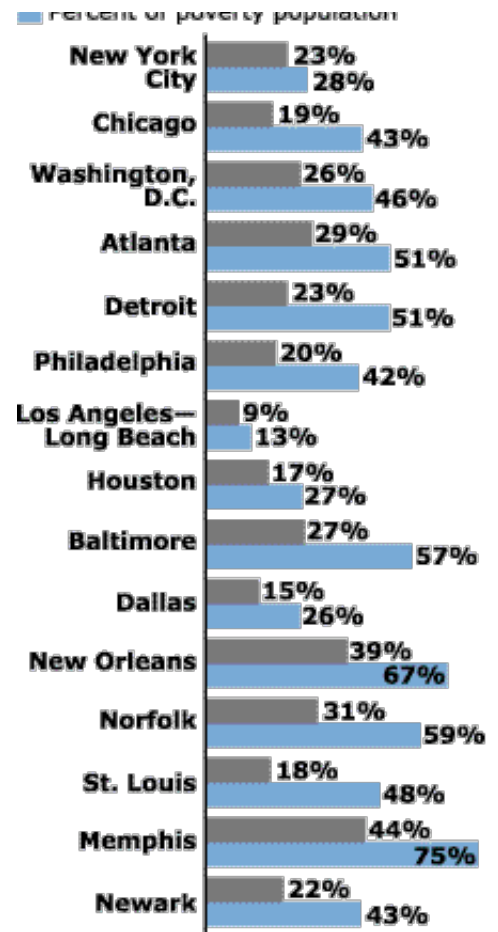
The Extreme Isolation of the African American Poor

Not surprising, poor urban African Americans exhibit even greater levels of social and economic isolation in the United States than the general black population, even when compared with poor urban whites:

African American Percentage of Total Population and Poverty Population in Selected U.S. Cities, 2000

■ Percent of total population
■ Percent of poverty population

- In all but two of the 15 largest U.S. metropolitan areas as of 2000, the presence of African Americans in the poverty population was 1.5 times greater than their representation in the cities' overall populations (see figure). In six of the cities—St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Newark—African Americans were twice as likely to be part of the poverty population relative to their percentage of the total population of these areas.
- Vulnerable populations such as African American children and the elderly were similarly overrepresented among the poor in major U.S. cities in 2000. In all but two of the 15 largest U.S. metro areas, the percentage of African American elderly who were poor was twice their percentage of the city's total elderly population. The faces behind these percentages were made vivid by the stories and numbers of elderly blacks trapped in houses and nursing homes as the floodwaters from Katrina rose in New Orleans.



Source: Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS).

- In all but two of the 15 largest African American metro areas, at least 40 percent of poor blacks did not own a car in 2000, with upwards of 60 percent lacking a vehicle in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Newark. And poor blacks were often twice as likely as poor whites to lack a telephone in these cities.
- White poor people were more than three times as likely as the African American poor to be college graduates in every city studied except Atlanta. Only 25 percent of the cities' poor African American males on average had a job.

Reducing the Risk of Future Disasters for Urban African Americans

African Americans not only have the highest levels of poverty in the country, but they are also the group that is most residentially segregated from and least likely to intermarry with whites. Surveys also continue to reveal that many nonblack Americans express high levels of social distance (the degree to which people desire close or remote social relations with members of other groups) from African Americans.² Given their limited social and economic resources along with their geographic isolation, poor urban African Americans—especially children and the elderly—are disproportionately vulnerable to being left behind during a crisis situation.

What measures need to be taken to improve the social and economic position of African Americans and to avoid future disasters such as the recent one in New Orleans?

- Skills-development, employment, and health-maintenance programs need to be targeted to and strengthened for African Americans.
- Funding and access to education—including Head Start—should be increased for African Americans in order to bolster their social and economic well-being and competitiveness in the labor market.
- Additional policies, resources, and investment are needed to promote the development and relocation of businesses (and thus jobs) to African American urban neighborhoods.
- Government agencies responsible for responding to natural disasters need to factor into their planning the economic and geographic isolation of African Americans—especially the African American urban poor.

Aggressive actions are needed to erase the marginalization of African Americans that Hurricane Katrina exposed. The failure to take such actions will have enormous economic and social costs—not just for African-Americans, but for a society living with a disjuncture between its ideals and the reality of continued stratification along the color line.³

Rogelio Saenz is a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University and author of "Latinos and the Changing Face of America," in *The American People: Census 2000*, ed. Reynolds Farley and John Haaga (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

References

1. Data from the Census 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) are used to examine the standing of African Americans (relative to whites) in the 15 most populous African American Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) and Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). The statistics are based on the populations of the central cities and the suburbs comprising each PMSA and MSA.
 2. Tom Smith, *Intergroup Relations in a Diverse America: Data from the 2000 General Social Survey* (New York: The American Jewish Community, 2001).
 3. I acknowledge the helpful comments of Karen Manges Douglas and David Geronimo Embrick on an earlier draft of this report.
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