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Gloria Simo Ph.D.  
gsimo2@uis.edu

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## Poverty in New Orleans: Before and After Katrina

BY

GLORIA SIMO, PH.D.

*Assistant Director, Chaddick Institute of Metropolitan Development,  
DePaul University*

On 29 August 2005, Hurricane Katrina inflicted massive damage on the states of Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. While the physical damage in all these areas was indescribable, the effects were exacerbated in the city of New Orleans as the levee system was breached at multiple locations, causing massive flooding in many neighborhoods, from the poorer black neighborhoods in Mid-City and the Lower Ninth Ward to the middle-class white neighborhood of Lakeview, forcing many residents of these communities from their homes. On 30 August, the United States of America awoke to media coverage of the increasing damage in New Orleans on national television, with floodwaters covering the city and American citizens stranded on the rooftops of their homes and inside the Superdome.

These dire circumstances continued to deteriorate as local, state, and federal agencies left many residents to fend for themselves. The faces depicted in national media coverage looked increasingly desperate each day while news coverage continued into the following weekend. As that weekend wore on, viewers from around the world could not believe what they were seeing: that these horrendous conditions could exist in the United States. It also became increasingly clear that a disproportionate number of people victimized by Katrina had been extremely disadvantaged even before the storm, and had lost what little they possessed to the raging floodwaters. Questions then arose as to why government response to the storm was so slow and insufficient. Critics began to speculate that government officials were hoping to change the demographic characteristics of pre-Katrina New Orleans by giving the poor and disenfranchised no other alternative but to leave the only homes they had ever known and move to another region of the state or country, thus dispersing the poverty and misery to someplace — anywhere — else. In fact, that is what occurred in many neighborhoods.

According to a June 2006 Brookings report, the largest population losses in hurricane-impacted areas of the Gulf Coast were in the New Orleans metro area and in Orleans parish, which incorporates most of the city. According to this report, the current population of this area is more white, less poor,

and more transitory than the pre-hurricane population. This is in contrast to counties along the Mississippi coast, which lost more of their white residents and homeowners after the hurricane. Other Gulf Coast metropolitan communities in Louisiana, such as Baton Rouge, took in these fleeing residents but experienced only minor shifts in their demographic characteristics, which suggests that the impact from New Orleans evacuees was minimal, and also that the poor and minority populations that fled from the city really did move to other regions of the country.



The Rebuild Center, built on the grounds of St. Joseph Church.

*Photo courtesy of the author*

But many residents were simply unable to leave. While some reporters claimed that those stranded in New Orleans had not even attempted to leave, others acknowledged that many residents had no choice as they could not afford to escape or were not provided the necessary assistance to do so. Although it was the worst crisis of its kind in the U.S., Katrina was not the first weather emergency in which poverty had a severe impact on the residents' ability to prepare for the situation, cope with it, and recover from it in the long term.

In 2005 the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* conducted an investigation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and found that repeated cuts in federal funding for the National Hurricane Center had greatly hampered its capacity to predict the path and severity of hurricanes. The *Sun-Sentinel* also found that when hurricanes are predicted, or do hit, it is the tone of the government which helps or hinders an adequate response, and most of this response — or lack thereof — is shown to have the worst effects on the poor.

For example, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida encouraged citizens to “take personal responsibility” in preparing for the hurricane season of 2005, just prior to Katrina. Preparedness was defined as stocking up on all the equipment, food, water, and medicine necessary to ride out the storms, or making sure they had enough gas in their cars to evacuate if need be. But, the question

became: What does this mean to the poor, disabled, and elderly whose food stamps or Social Security were spent earlier in the month, who also need medication that their Medicare and Medicaid will not allow them to stock up on, and who do not have cars to fill up with gas — even if they had the money for gas — but would instead need to take public transportation, which might not even be available? These are the people, the poor and near-poor, who live clustered in areas most vulnerable to severe weather conditions.

These same factors also played a role in evacuation when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Jane Daugherty, a four-time winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for her coverage of the disadvantaged, discusses the faces of poverty in New Orleans after Katrina.<sup>1</sup> She confirms that the poor had no choice but to stay put as they could not afford to leave, mainly because they could not afford the necessary supplies. She also points out that poverty is not the only issue, and that other demographics contributed to the problem. Daugherty characterizes two specific groups most gravely affected in the aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans: the “elderly person, who lives alone and spends almost every dollar of their Social Security check on housing, prescriptions and food,” and the “single mother with a couple of preschool children who takes the bus to work, gets food stamps to help feed her kids, and whose medical care is paid by Medicaid (if she qualifies) because her job at Wal-Mart or McDonald’s doesn’t include health care benefits.”<sup>2</sup> Another author also points out that the majority of poor residents who were trapped in the Superdome for days without food and water were African-American, and claims that this was why it took so long for the news media to report on the deplorable conditions and the extreme need for help.<sup>3</sup>

So it was not just poverty itself (as defined only by income levels) but also many of the factors often associated with poverty that either kept the citizens of New Orleans from evacuating or made them more anxious to return to their homes and what was left of their belongings. Some of these factors — such as race, gender, and age — are commonly understood as leading to poverty in the U.S., while others — such as health, housing, education, jobs, and income — are the outcomes of poverty. This article focuses on how all of these problems need to be addressed in the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul, not only to make progress in New Orleans, but also to show how these issues

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Daugherty, “Remembering Those Who Are Usually Forgotten,” in *What Katrina Revealed*, Nieman Reports (Spring 2006), at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-1NR-spring/p06-0601-daugherty.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Daugherty, “Remembering.”

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Meléndez Salinas, “When the Role Race Plays in Societal Gaps is Unspoken,” in *What Katrina Revealed*, Nieman Reports (Spring 2006), at [http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-1NRspring/NR06-01\\_Katrina\\_eMprint.pdf](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-1NRspring/NR06-01_Katrina_eMprint.pdf).

can be addressed in other impoverished communities and have a long-term impact on poverty conditions.

This article applies these principles to a particular neighborhood in New Orleans known as Tulane/Canal in the larger Mid-City community and reflects on the work of faculty, staff, and students from the School of Public Service (SPS) and the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University, and its effects on poverty conditions that existed in that neighborhood after Katrina. The article also examines the demographic landscape of New Orleans in relation to relevant literature on the politics of poverty, race, and gender, discusses how we define poverty in the U.S., and examines the other factors of poverty which apply in this context. Finally it examines the role that faculty and students of SPS and Chaddick played in serving these poor residents of New Orleans, fulfilling their Vincentian mission.

### **The Case: Tulane/Canal and Mid-City**

The conditions outlined above were especially evident in the Tulane/Canal neighborhood located less than half a mile away from the Superdome, and just outside the historic French Quarter and the central business district, where post-Katrina flood waters ranged from three to more than seven feet deep. This neighborhood also houses the regional medical center, including several major hospitals, but it was also marked by widely recognized characteristics of poverty pre-Katrina. These indicators included the Iberville public housing project and a population that was 50.8 percent African-American, with a median annual household income of \$6,875 and an individual poverty rate of 54 percent at the time of the 2000 U.S. census, five years prior to Katrina. Forces were at work even then to improve the plight of these poverty-stricken residents, but when they were finally allowed to return to their homes after Katrina they found that they needed even more assistance: many of their homes were badly damaged or totally destroyed, medical facilities were closed down, and government agencies and private developers were seeking to change the demographics of their neighborhood so that they could no longer afford to live there.

A focal point of hope for this neighborhood's poor residents, both before and after the storm, has been Saint Joseph Roman Catholic Church located in the heart of Mid-City. Reverend Perry Henry, C.M., pastor of St. Joseph, and Sister Vera Butler, P.B.V.M., Executive Director of the Tulane/Canal Neighborhood Development Corporation (T/CNDC), provide leadership and hope to the community on a daily basis. Less than a month after Katrina struck, Father Henry, a former trustee of DePaul University, contacted Reverend Dennis Holtschneider, C.M., president of DePaul, to request technical assistance from the university in the areas of urban and strategic planning, and community development for the Tulane/Canal neighborhood.

St. Joseph is a central partner of many New Orleans nonprofits including Lantern Light — a ministry of the Presentation Sisters, led by Sister Vera, that serves the homeless in the neighborhood — and is also a founding member of the Tulane/Canal Neighborhood Development Corporation (T/CNDC), which has historically spearheaded affordable housing, economic development, and social service initiatives throughout the surrounding community. But Hurricane Katrina had exacerbated existing challenges for St. Joseph and the T/CNDC, requiring a more comprehensive planning and development initiative.

The DePaul SPS/Chaddick team was particularly well-suited to complete this work, based on their knowledge and experience with nonprofit and public organizations and their ability to create collaborative partnerships. After meeting with the university's executive leadership, SPS faculty proposed to assemble and dispatch a team of students to the New Orleans area to provide the requested assistance. As a part of Vincentian-led DePaul, SPS is firmly rooted in a service-learning ethic, and this project served to further instill these values in participating students in accordance with SPS's stated mission:

We educate women and men to become effective public service leaders in the global community guided by the values of St. Vincent de Paul....<sup>4</sup>

And these Vincentian values are the foundation for carrying out the broader university mission:

In meeting its public service responsibility, the university encourages faculty, staff, and students to apply specialized expertise in ways that contribute to the societal, economic, cultural, and ethical quality of life in the metropolitan area and beyond. When appropriate, DePaul develops service partnerships with other institutions and agencies.<sup>5</sup>

The SPS/Chaddick faculty, staff, and students who have traveled to New Orleans on this mission followed Saint Vincent's example to serve urgent human needs and recognize the God-given dignity of each person.

Following the initial trip in December of 2005, the SPS/Chaddick team prepared a strategic plan that identified a number of other services that parishioners of St. Joseph and residents of the neighborhood needed — especially

<sup>4</sup> School of Public Service at DePaul University, Strategic Plan 2004-05, at [http://www.publicservice.depaul.edu/mps/about/MPS\\_Strategic\\_Plan0405.pdf](http://www.publicservice.depaul.edu/mps/about/MPS_Strategic_Plan0405.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> DePaul University Mission Statement (November 1991), at <http://www.depaul.edu/about/mission/index.asp>.

those which would help to serve and advocate for the poor. Father Henry and SPS faculty and students presented this plan to other neighborhood groups and used it as the basis for establishing the Mid-City Collaborative, expanding the geographic area it would serve. Since the plan's adoption in March of 2006, the Mid-City Collaborative provided the impetus for the Rebuild Center, a community center built on the grounds of St. Joseph Church, dedicated in August of 2007 on the second anniversary of Katrina. Numerous trips have been made by SPS students and faculty since December of 2005 to evaluate and make recommendations to improve the services provided at the Rebuild Center and to write a new strategic plan for the Rebuild Center itself.

### Definitions and Correlates of Poverty

Knowing the degree to which poverty existed in the Tulane/Canal neighborhood even before Katrina allows a greater understanding of the forces that residents were up against and the kind of assistance they needed. The formal definition of poverty in the U.S. is based on income and the degree to which individuals and families fall at or below the poverty income threshold. For 2007, the poverty guidelines as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are as follows:

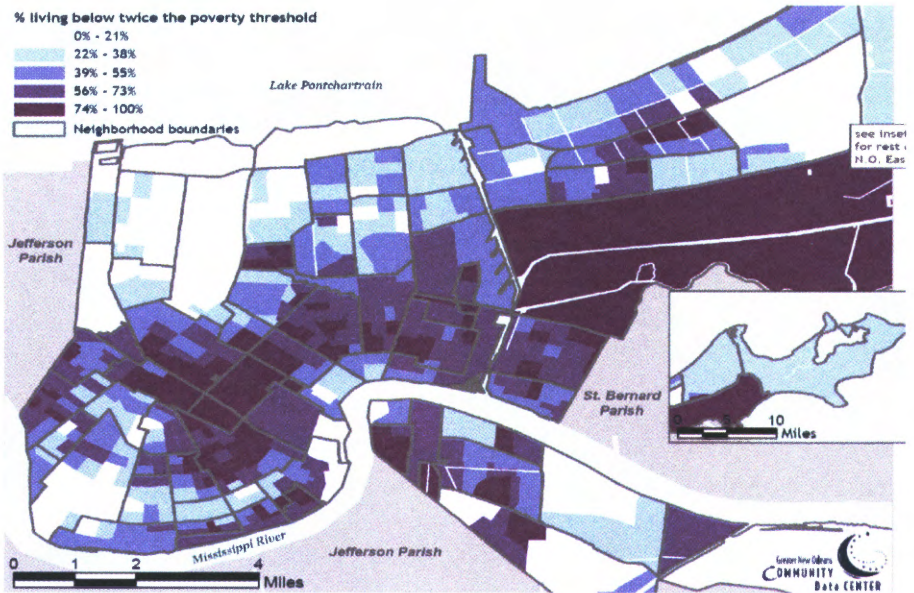
Table 1. 2007 HHS Poverty Guidelines.<sup>6</sup>

Persons in family or household	48 contiguous states and D.C.	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$10,210	\$12,770	\$11,750
2	13,690	17,120	15,750
3	17,170	21,470	19,750
4	20,650	25,820	23,750
5	24,130	30,170	27,750
6	27,610	34,520	31,750
7	31,090	38,870	35,750
8	34,570	43,220	39,750
For each additional person, add:	3,480	4,350	4,000

<sup>6</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 15 (24 January 2007), 3147-3148.

As this table shows, the poverty threshold for one person in forty-eight states (including Louisiana) is \$10,218 annually — but as already indicated, the household income in Tulane/Canal prior to Katrina was only \$6,875. This figure is well below the threshold for one person and less than 50 percent of the guideline amount (\$13,690) for a two-person household. In fact, many neighborhoods in New Orleans were staggeringly impoverished before the storm, as shown in Figure A, prepared by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) in 2004, prior to Katrina.

*Figure A. Percentage of people living on income below twice the poverty threshold, by census block in Orleans Parish.*



### Other Poverty Factors

While many accept these income levels as the primary criteria for defining poverty in the U.S., others claim that U.S. poverty does not really exist in comparison to other (poorer) nations, while still others argue that the threshold of poverty is actually set too low and should be based on other factors besides income levels. They also believe that the gap between higher and lower incomes in the U.S. is increasing, and that families of all backgrounds and income levels are falling farther and farther behind financially.

### Seeing the Poor as Individuals

Jason Johnson suggests that the ability to identify poverty conditions and



provide the full range of services needed by the poor comes from telling and listening to individual stories from people of all racial, ethnic, religious, and demographic backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> Johnson suggests that policymakers and donors must realize that the poor are not just out-of-work welfare mothers but also parents who work hard, commute long distances to their jobs, and need day care — or who work split shifts to avoid having to pay for day care. Still they do not make enough money to obtain decent housing, adequate health care, or a good education for themselves and their children. Thus, although they work and may earn income above poverty guidelines, they are still poor.

These authors also provide evidence that race, gender, age, and education all play a role in determining how much income an individual or family earns, and thus further determine whether that individual or family can be identified as poor. But studies also show the extent to which those most likely to be poor actually receive goods and services that help them to improve their quality of life, such as improved housing, health care, and physical safety, and including survival in emergency circumstances. Daugherty, like Johnson, sees the value of providing personalized stories of individuals living in poverty as such stories make these people more real, and more likely to elicit a measure of response from private citizens and nonprofit and public organizations. Responses to the depth and breadth of these poverty conditions, especially in New Orleans after Katrina, needed to provide coordinated assistance from many sectors. This is where and how the response from SPS began.

## Data

The first SPS/Chaddick Team spent eight days in New Orleans in December of 2005. Subsequent trips were made by SPS faculty and students in February, March, June, and December of 2006, September, October and November of 2007 and April, September and October of 2008. The initial field trip centered on broad input and inclusion of stakeholders, a comprehensive needs assessment, and exploration of collaborative relationships. Researchers spent time surveying the affected areas in the Tulane/Canal neighborhood and documenting areas of particular concern. The rest of their time was spent meeting with stakeholder groups and collecting data from their members.

Secondary quantitative data provided a demographic context for understanding the needs of Tulane/Canal residents and a comparison between the Tulane/Canal neighborhood and the city of New Orleans as a whole at the time of the 2000 U.S. Census.

Table 2 shows the central census tract of the Tulane / Canal neighborhood

<sup>7</sup> Jason Johnson, "Numbers Don't Tell a Story That Connects With Readers," in *What Katrina Revealed*, Nieman Reports (Spring 2006), at [http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-1NR-spring/NR06-01\\_Katrina\\_eMprint.pdf](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/06-1NR-spring/NR06-01_Katrina_eMprint.pdf).

(Census Tract 60, U.S. Census Bureau 2000) as a subsection of Orleans parish. Census Tract 60 compares to Orleans parish in terms of higher poverty rates (54 percent of individuals and 45.8 percent of families with median income at \$5,904 per capita and \$6,875 per household), lower median age (25.8), and a higher proportion of females (60.8 percent). Although the neighborhood has a larger proportion of white residents (32.5 percent) than the parish as a whole (28.1 percent), it is still predominantly non-white (67.5% percent). Homeownership rates (11.8 percent) and median housing values (\$44,500, 51 percent of the average home value for Orleans parish) are well below that of other parish residents. Clearly the neighborhood already had significant initial challenges and poverty indicators prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Table 2.

<b>Geographic Designation</b>	<b>New Orleans</b>	
	<b>Tulane/Canal (Census Tract 60)</b>	<b>Orleans Parish</b>
Population size	1,326	484,674
Median age	25.8	33.1
% Male	39.20%	46.90%
% Female	60.80%	53.10%
<b>Race</b>		
% Caucasian	32.50%	28.10%
% African-American	50.80%	67.30%
% Hispanic or Latino	1.20%	3.10%

<b>Income and Poverty</b>		
Median household	\$6,875	\$27,133
Median family	\$17,014	\$32,338
Median per capita	\$5,904	\$17,258
% Families in poverty	45.80%	23.70%
% Individuals in poverty	54.00%	27.90%
<b>Housing</b>		
% Owner occupied	11.80%	46.50%
% Renter occupied	88.30%	42.70%
Median housing value	\$44,500	\$87,300

Primary qualitative data was collected by the SPS/Chaddick team after consultation with Father Perry and Sister Vera, who worked with the research team before their arrival in New Orleans to identify the primary issues that they believed needed to be addressed in the recovery of Tulane/Canal. These issues were initially identified as housing, health care, and economic development — further evidence that problems associated with this degree of poverty are multidimensional. The research team then compiled a list of organizations present in New Orleans prior to Katrina that provided services to address these problems. The original team identified 205 government and nonprofit organizations. Of these 205, they targeted sixty-eight that they believed were related to the mission of the T/CNDC — thirty that dealt with housing, twenty-three involved with health and human services, and fifteen related to economic development. Team members were able to meet with representatives and attend meetings in thirty-nine of these sixty-eight targeted organizations during their time on the ground in New Orleans. Data came from participant observations of the Bring Back New Orleans Commission (BBNOC), as well as various nonprofit organizations, public and nonprofit collaboratives, focus groups, individual interviews with government officials, and representatives of nonprofit agencies.

## The Strategic Plan: Evidence of a Variety of Needs

As a result of this data collection the SPS/Chaddick team identified eight major areas of need in the Tulane/Canal or Mid-City neighborhood. This basically corroborated the categories identified by Father Perry and Sister Vera, except that the researchers focused more on housing, health, and human services and less on economic development because they determined these were greater needs. They specified these needs in the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan, initially prepared for St. Joseph Church but ultimately adopted for the newly formed Mid-City Collaborative. The first three goals are organizational, the next three call for the provision of services to the community's poor, and the last two are administrative. Broadly these goals are:

- Organization: clarify organizational identity and affiliations.
- Staffing and volunteers: recruit, retain, and build number and capacity of paid staff and volunteers.
- Networking/partnerships: maximize potential networking and partnership opportunities with public (government), nonprofit, and private-sector organizations.
- Housing: support for community members in all degrees of housing need, including homelessness, affordable rental housing and homeownership.
- Community health services and referrals for physical and mental health needs.
- Community social services referrals and the establishment of a one-stop advocacy center to provide residents and/or homeless with appropriate services or referrals.
- Professional reports, documents and services: identify and clarify needs for consultant and other professional services, and appropriate experts to provide them.
- Physical and social inventory: determine the need for a detailed land-use and social-data framework for the neighborhood to advance the position of the Mid-City Collaborative in the broader community.

The goals of the strategic plan confirm that the correlates of poverty found in the literature and discussed in this paper indeed existed in Tulane/Canal and Mid-City both before and after Katrina. The data also indicate that these needs must all be addressed simultaneously if poverty is to be alleviated so that the neighborhood can move forward in the long term.

The Rebuild Center has been established to meet many of the goals of the Mid-City Collaborative's Strategic Plan, especially in regard to providing services to the poor. Although at this writing the center has only been in

operation for one year, its principals share a strong sense that it will help alleviate the negative effects of Katrina and poverty in New Orleans, not only in the short term but in the long term as well. Although many organizational partners have taken on the responsibility of actually delivering needed services, the role of the SPS/Chaddick teams in identifying these needs and proposing remedies was a major building block to serving the poor of Tulane/Canal and Mid-City New Orleans. While much is yet to be done, the SPS/Chaddick teams will remain involved with the evaluation of these services, revisions to their strategic plan, and their effects on the poor of Tulane/Canal and Mid-City.



Rebuild Center mural overlooking New Orleans.  
*Photo courtesy of the author*

Most importantly, the Vincentian values on which the Rebuild Center was founded are sure to play a major role in its success. For as the plan was formulated with attention to “the societal, economic, cultural and ethical quality of life” of the Mid-City neighborhood in New Orleans, the plan also specifies that each individual served through the center be recognized for his or her inherent value, and treated with dignity and respect.