

Katrina's Blueprint for Ending Poverty

by Lance Hill

There is an old saying, “When you stumble, dig for gold.” When we encounter adversity, we seldom have the presence of mind to learn from it, although we generally learn more in life from our mistakes than from our successes. Hurricane Katrina was a monumental stumble that nearly landed us into an abyss. It scattered the poor of New Orleans throughout the nation and left those behind consumed with the task of shoring up the city’s levees before the next storm arrived. Yet concealed within the dispersal of hundreds of thousands of poor people was a rich vein of new knowledge that may unlock the secret to ending poverty.

The unexpected windfall was not that the flood waters had washed away

the poor to better lives elsewhere. This is the fashionable “silver lining” argument trumpeted by pundits who believe that every success that displaced people enjoy is more evidence that they should never return home to New Orleans. A “culture of poverty” created by the poor themselves was responsible for their plight, so they say, and no amount of government services or employment opportunities could mend a broken spirit.

Most of the displaced are not faring as well as some would have us believe, but there are success stories and they deserve our attention—but not for the reasons normally offered. Success can also be a sign of failure—in this case, the failure of New Orleans to provide adequate services and opportunities for poor people to help them succeed. Why do the same people flourish in one environment and founder in another? The answer lies with viewing the displacement as an enormous social experiment.

Before Katrina, we were told that it was a waste to spend money on New Orleans schools because poor black students did not want to learn. Yet there is clear evidence that many host communities succeeded where New Orleans failed. In Houston, Austin and Columbia, South Carolina, many displaced children are excelling in school. Rather than treat these successes as arguments against returning to New Orleans, we need to find out why these communities succeeded and use their strategies as a blueprint to rebuild New Orleans schools and neighborhoods. The answers are not that hard to find.

To improve achievement scores in some Houston schools it took little more than reducing the teacher-student ratio and using new computer-based learning technologies. In Columbia, South Carolina, each displaced family person was provided a “shepherd,” a personal advocate whose job was to make sure that evacuees found decent

housing, necessary social services, and good healthcare and schools.

These simple experiments with urban poverty have produced a formula for success. Now we know that these children can learn, if only they are provided the necessary resources. Given this knowledge, to return these children to the same underfunded and overcrowded schools will be nothing short of a moral crime. Now we know that families are far more likely to prosper and become independent if they have a helping hand from someone who will advocate for them against unresponsive government bureaucracies and heartless corporations. Why cannot we provide the same helping hand for people returning to New Orleans? If we change nothing, nothing will change.

The great exodus from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast created an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with new strategies for ending poverty and ignorance. The key that unlocked the door to a better life in Houston or Austin is the same key that will unlock the door to a better life in New Orleans. While researchers are descending on the Gulf Coast by the hundreds to find solutions to our problems, it may be that the answers are to be found using this Diaspora as Blueprint Research approach to research in the displaced communities. Social scientists need to rethink their research strategies and objectives in the displaced communities so that they can ultimately translate their findings into a blueprint for ending poverty, ignorance and crime in New Orleans as well as rest of the nation.

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Katrina Summer Research Project

To complement the extensive humanitarian relief work by the hundreds of people coming to the Gulf Area, Lance Hill, Executive Director of Tulane University's Southern Inst. for Education & Research, is organizing teams to undertake basic research tasks necessary to counter the racial injustices of the recovery. The aim is to create Katrina Research Workgroups to go to New Orleans this summer, for brief or extended periods, to develop brief, accessible reports on social justice issues surrounding education, housing, homelessness, employment, social services, resettlement patterns, community organizing, the environment, public health, etc. Such groups will be comprised of experienced researchers and students working with and guided by local community people. For further information, contact Hill at so-inst@tulane.edu.