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# Economic Survival Strategies and Food Insecurity: The Case of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans

Loretta Pyles
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**ABSTRACT.** This article reports on a study of 67 Hurricane Katrina survivors who were evacuated to one Texas community. The authors examine the economic survival strategies employed by Katrina evacuees to feed their families during the approximately one week time frame beginning the day before the storm and ending when they were ultimately evacuated from New Orleans. An analysis of their strategies and actions provides insight both into the nature of households and sharing networks under the pressure of this disaster and the shortages that ensue when federal and state systems cannot meet basic needs beyond the resources of the local community. doi:10.1080/01488370802086047
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**KEYWORDS.** Disaster, poverty, food security, informal economy, economic survival

Families experiencing disaster conditions in the United States encounter some of the weaknesses in our food and nutrition programs, weaknesses which, in turn, leave many with food insecurities. In times of economic downturn and job loss, among other conditions, many families report times when the next day's food is uncertain and they experience days with skipped meals. These exposures to food scarcity are heightened when families are displaced and dislocated in times of disaster. During such emergencies, even families' typically reliable strategies for sharing food informally and seeking help from local agencies may fail them.

Research on families in poverty in the United States (Zekeri, 2006; Edin & Lein, 1997) consistently refers to household strategies for getting enough food. Low-wage jobs and the welfare safety net have both declined eroding families' purchasing power. Additionally, over the past several decades rent, utilities, and other expenses are taking a bigger bite out of household wages (Hancock, 2002; Biggerstaff, Morris & Casebolt, 2002). Low income families draw on their social supports, local agencies, and access to extra wages from informal work to get food, as well as other necessities. They of-

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ten engage the assistance of multiple programs (e.g., Food Stamps, the school breakfast and lunch program, WIC, and others) in order to keep food in their households.

Food security, or the availability of adequate food, is a human right clearly recognized by international conventions. The United States has attempted to address this issue through various hunger and nutrition programs for the poor including the Food Stamp program, school breakfast and lunch programs, the agricultural surplus commodities program and others. However, recent welfare policy retrenchments and Food Stamp allowances and restrictions have left many impoverished families seeking food from a range of other sources, often leaving them with lingering food insecurity (Biggerstaff, Morris & Casebolt, 2002). When other sources are unavailable, and even extended networks lacked food, families often adopt new informal strategies for survival and experience changes in diet including missed meals.

In these circumstances, many low income families end up violating some of the myriad work and welfare regulations in order to protect minimal resources. They may not report income either to the welfare office or the tax office. More specifically, they may not inform a food pantry that they are simultaneously receiving Food Stamps, or let the school breakfast and lunch program know about informal income. They need multiple resources to fill the gap in their household food resources, even though regulations often prohibit such duplications of services.

These struggles become starker during periods of more extreme necessity such as disasters; families' typical food strategies may not work, leading families to adopt, at least for a time, more explicitly criminal activities such as stealing. Engaging in such activities, in turn, makes families vulnerable to further criminal and civil sanctions, which can leave their families even more deeply at risk. Access to food and other provisions during disasters and complex emergencies is markedly a problem for low income people who are the most vulnerable to food insecurity under the best of conditions.

This research examines the survival strategies employed by Katrina evacuees to feed their families during the approximately one week time frame beginning the day before the storm and ending when they were ultimately evacuated from New Orleans. Among many other topics, the research participants provided considerable detail on the ways in which they obtained food and other provisions during the days following the levee failures in New Orleans–a time when all commercial activity had ceased, the city was without electricity, gas or potable water, and disaster assistance was not generally forthcoming. An analysis of their strategies and actions provides insight both into the nature of households and sharing networks under the pressure of this disaster and the shortages that ensue when federal and state systems cannot meet basic needs beyond the resources of the local community.

## *LITERATURE REVIEW*

While food insecurity is prevalent in many communities in the United States, it becomes a primary focus in times of emergency. Under the stress of a disaster, the informal strategies families use are highlighted and augmented, along with the impacts of a loss of more formal resources through either work or federal and state programs. Zekeri (2006) defines food insecurity as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (p. 2). Recently, the USDA reported that 12.6 million households were food insecure at some point during the year of 2005 (Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2006).

Food insecurity affects populations differentially; indeed, low income women, African American and Hispanic families are more likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity. According to the USDA, while 11.0 percent of all households are food insecure, 30.8 percent of single female-headed households with children, 22.4 percent of Black households and 17.9 percent of Hispanic households are food insecure (Nord, Andrews & Carlson, 2006).

Research indicates that survival strategies of poor and low income families facing hunger and food insecurity include: drawing on government and private sector support; getting

help from partners, family, and friends; doubling up in households; and cutting the size of, or skipping, meals (Zekeri, 2006). Biggerstaff, Morris and Nichols-Casebolt (2002) conducted a study of people receiving food assistance services from food pantries and soup kitchens in Virginia. In this sample of 1,500 individuals utilizing emergency food services, only 37 percent reported participating in the Food Stamp Program as a way to increase their access to food. The study authors identify various reasons for the low Food Stamp Program participation rate–lack of information about the program; could not meet work requirements for the program; the benefits are too small to bother. Those who do enroll in state administered Food Stamp programs find the receipt of their benefits contingent upon the proper functioning of an often unwieldy bureaucracy with changing qualifications. For example, when the state of Texas implemented a privatized Food Stamp eligibility and enrollment system to improve efficiency and reduce costs, thousands of eligible households were left without access to Food Stamps, including those recently displaced and relocated by Katrina.

Besides accessing government programs and community-based food programs, individuals trying to survive on low or no income often resort to bartering, sharing and exchanging resources with family, friends and strangers (Miranne, 1998; McInnis-Dittrich, 1995; Stack, 1974). Stack's (1974) ethnographic study of African American extended kinship networks reveals the resourceful ways in which individuals depend on family and friends to share resources such as food and clothing and services such as child-care. According to Stack (1974), networks "trade food stamps, rent money, a TV, hats, dice, a car, a nickel here, a cigarette there, food, milk, grits, and children" (p. 32). She identified a rhythm of exchange where an object or service is swapped with the intent of obligating the receiver over a period of time. One of the respondents describes the process: "It's just like at stores where people give you credit. They have to trust you to pay them back, and if you pay them you can get more things" (p. 41).

Other researchers have identified strategies low income people engage in to make ends meet. They sell personal possessions at pawn shops, items they have made or acquired such as crafts, food or drugs, and services such as daycare, housecleaning or sex (Pyles, 2007; Edin & Lein, 1997; McInnis-Dittrich, 1995). While some people may choose these forms of resource-generating strategies as a preference over formal work, many perceive a lack of alternatives and some, whether or not they can find work, prefer these strategies to depending on government and charity programs for support. Furthermore, many in low income jobs need to combine such strategies with their paid work in order to meet household demands. Neither the job, nor the helping agencies can provide all of the necessities. Many households combine resources from both.

International literature has explored food security issues in disasters and complex emergencies. Flores, Khwaja and White (2005), who focused on "sudden-onset food crises" associated with natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods, highlight the capacity of local and national infrastructures to meet the basic needs of affected citizens during such crises. "G iven the episodic nature of the shock, national governments and civil society often have significant capacity to mobilize resources and to respond to basic demands for food, water and shelter" (p. 37). However, to date researchers have not carefully explored these issues in a domestic context. Thus, by analyzing the food insecurity issues in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina we learn about the specific coping strategies of affected individuals, as well the broader capacities of the government and civil society to respond in such crises.

## *METHODS*

In the months after hurricane Katrina, an interdisciplinary team of researchers interviewed a panel of households whose members had been evacuated from New Orleans into one Texas community. Both previous research and theories of human response to traumas, including natural disasters (Kopelman, 2000; Moulds & Bryant, 2005; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995; Williams, 1994), indicate that memories of the complex and multiple interactions with various agencies and organizations may become distorted with time or even forgotten. The panel of evacuee household members was formed and

interviewed as quickly as possible to collect as detailed and undistorted an account as possible. However, families had a number of demands on their time and energy, and the process of recruitment and first interviews took some months. In most cases, however, the interviewers were able to elicit detailed accounts of the days both before and after the evacuation.

The research was conducted in a Texas community that received thousands of evacuees. While many evacuees were housed almost immediately with friends and relatives living in the city, thousands of others were housed for several weeks in emergency shelters. Drawing on this diverse population, the research team developed a purposive sample, designed to include a wide variation in household composition and evacuation experience. Research on traumatic events and loss suggests that poverty, race and ethnicity, among other variables, affect both the experience and severity of trauma (Horwitz et al., 2001; Kasturirangan et al., 2004; Kessler et al., 1997; Phifer et al., 1988; Turner & Lloyd, 1995; Yarvis et al., 2004; Tucker, 2004). In addition, among other variables, life course stage has also emerged as an important determinant in the experience of trauma (Banyard et al., 2001; Kraus, 2004; Kulkarni, 2006; Norris, 1992; Phifer et al., 1988; Turner & Lloyd, 1995; Yarvis et al., 2004). While primarily African-American, the panel also includes whites and Hispanics. Households often included more than two generations, and the research team interviewed multiple people in some households to elicit accounts from different perspectives. The research is still ongoing, since the intention is to interview in as many households as possible at intervals over an 18-month period. This analysis draws on the initial interviews with the first 67 of those interviewed. Of the 67 individuals interviewed, 62 percent were women and 38 percent were men. Seventy-two (72) percent of respondents were Black/African American, 23 percent were white and 5 percent were Latino/Hispanic.

Evacuees responded to open-ended questions that scaffolded a narrative of their experiences starting in the days before the storm through the time of the interview with particular attention to the sources of help and support they knew about and used, and the barriers and assistance they experienced in accessing those sources. Interviewers elicited material about a range of issues including: family preservation, material necessities, medical care/stabilization, grief and loss, and housing. Interviews attempted to establish household economic status before, during, and after the storm; chronicle pivotal experiences during the period of the storm and evacuation out of New Orleans; and determine the timing and history of their evacuation, and future plans. Finally, family demography and contact information to help locate interviewees for follow-up was collected. Such applied ethnographic approaches have been successfully used to collect data and undertake analysis in a resource and time-efficient manner (Beebe, 1995; Harris et al., 1997; Low et al., 2005).

In accordance with the human subjects board, respondents were informed of their rights as research participants. They also received a small honorarium for their participation, and an audio copy of their interview. All interviews were recorded on digital equipment, and logged in with a data manager who assessed the interviews for completeness. Transcriptions were analyzed for themes using general thematic coding in an electronic database by one of the authors. The other authors reviewed the codes for accuracy.

## *FINDINGS*

A variety of themes related to obtaining and securing food emerged from the study. First, evacuees discussed their pre-storm measures to secure provisions. They also elaborated on their attempts to prevent food spoilage and cope with anticipated gas and electrical outages by "cooking up" the food that they had. Second, participants described pooling their limited resources with family, friends and strangers in the days following the levee failure. Third, some participants reflected on how they and others broke into private property to obtain provisions. Fourth, participants identified their experiences receiving food assistance from formal systems in New Orleans during the crisis. These successive strategies illustrate the experiences of respondents as food became scarcer and scarcer in the aftermath of the storm. When

outside "help" finally came, interviewees' feelings are described as being closer to outrage than relief in large part because of how food aid was delivered and because of how long it took to arrive.

### *Stocking Up and Cooking Up: Salvaging Provisions*

New Orleans residents have long contended with hurricanes and the threat of hurricanes during the late summer months of the Gulf hurricane season. For the people in this sample, preparing for an impending storm included engaging in routine activities, such as making sure there was plenty of food and water, as well as batteries and other necessary provisions. Because of electrical failures, it was common to salvage food from freezers and "cook it up" ahead of time or after the electricity went out to cook it on an outdoor grill. The research participants anticipated that the food that they had would spoil or that gas and/or electric stoves and ovens would at some point be non-functional; thus, they wanted to cook it and share it with others. One research participant discussed her pre-storm preparation, anticipating that utility outages would be imminent: "I went to the supermarket to look for things we needed . . . canned good supplies, canned tuna, canned milk . . . after that we helped prepare all the foods . . . we helped my Mom to prepare everything in the kitchen." Another participant discussed a similar scenario, including going over to her mother's house, which was a three-story structure: "it became cluttered because all of my sisters and children and everybody . . . but, we felt safe . . . we was cooking, and . . . just getting batteries and everything that you get prepared for a hurricane." The ritual of cooking itself seemed to provide some structure and comfort as families and friends awaited the storm's arrival.

A few days into the storm, one research participant discussed her actions regarding salvaging food:

> I figured we can't keep eating this stuff out the cans . . . We went to Family Dollar, got [took] the barbeque grills, the charcoal, the lighter fluid so you know we was actually cooking, you know, on the grills with the pots. I had the pots on the grill. I'm a certified chef, by the way, so you know, yeah; I knew what to do to survive. I knew what we could eat. What we can't eat. What was going to make us thirsty, dehydrated, and stuff.

Many people who went to the public shelters also brought food provisions with them. According to one woman: "we packed the little bit of food and supplies we had in the house and we took those with us." One research participant who always kept lots of canned food on hand, says, "in case something happened I could feed the whole complex. I had cans and cans." When she decided to leave her home and go to a shelter, she packed a bag on rollers that she had used before to go to the small grocery a few blocks away.

Even people with more resources including cars and cash were concerned about getting food. Cars and money were of little help when few grocery stores and restaurants had food or remained open. After a 12-hour drive to Baton Rouge from New Orleans (normally a 90 minute drive) and searching for a restaurant or grocery store with food, one research participant said, " . . . we finally found a restaurant that had some food; I think it was Sonic in fact. We just got as much as could, we filled up our tank again." As with this participant, the unpredictability of local food supplies caused people to stock up when food was available. Ironically, this strategy likely resulted in food becoming even scarcer.

### *Pooling Resources, but Reaching a Limit*

Many people discussed how they shared resources with people they met during the hurricane, sometimes bartering as well for what they needed. One woman described the generosity of total strangers that she met during the storm: " . . . [They] were very generous, always thinking of us and trying to offer us something. If they had something, they offered us something." Another participant told us: " . . . every time I would see somebody with something for sale, I would try to bargain with them and buy it." One person said: "As long as we had money, whether it [the food] was stolen or not, we were bartering. We were bargaining for the food.

And a lot of people were generous and just giving it to us." Because of the daytime heat and lack of food, the participant commented: " . . . we got weaker and weaker." One woman recalled:

> So me and some older people we had us a spot . . . Some of them I knew, and some of them I just met. They was really nice people, so we formed a little group . . . We did everything together . . . We helped each other, that's how we managed . . . We made us a warm spot with blankets, our own spot, about twelve of us.

One person discussed how her neighbor helped her family out with food and water: "We were just thinking about what we were going to do . . . that we weren't going to have food. At least, for the first few days after the hurricane, we had a neighbor who lived two houses away . . . He helped us out a lot, he brought us food, and he'd bring us water. Those first days after the hurricane." Another person explained: "So, what happened, we cooked on the grills and stuff like that and then, you know, everybody in the complex that was there, they was cooking on grills and people was helping each other out." Similarly: "the wonderful people in the city that ice boxes had went off, came over with barbeque pits and was cooking whatever they had in their freezers and in their ice boxes and was cooking for whoever wanted to eat."

One person talked about giving a neighbor woman "three bags of groceries" while another gave a man whom she had befriended for several days "four dollars in case we get separated." Another person recalled: "We stayed there four days, no food no water. We had, well I had a gallon of water, and I took, we just took sips out at a time. We had the baby's milk and little snacks that we had. We was just making it last, you know, and throughout the, some people would share a little bread or something, but I would give it to my kids." And another: "I think I might have taken a bottle of water with me and maybe some breakfast bars and maybe some oranges. I forgot, because we got so weak."

As the days wore on, a few people identified problems with the sharing, including a decline in open-handed generosity. One man remembered:

> Actually, I think it was two days we were in the shelter and after that I separated from my family and the people I was in the shelter with, you know the group, I just felt like I wasn't getting the gratification I deserved for doing things I mean, I was like one of the main ones out there gathering food for these other people . . . and people wasn't grateful because of that and, that's what I got in a disagreement about with one of the members of the group and I decided to do my own thing so to speak.

Another person stated: "at that point, people wasn't sharing, people start feeling that greed and being more 'me, me, me' instead of trying to share."

### *"You call it looting, whatever, but they were trying to survive"*

Many participants discussed experiences entering stores and other private property to obtain provisions, reflecting on the morality of this survival strategy, knowing that others might judge their choices negatively. "People were panicking, breaking into buildings just to find food and water, and pretty much, up in the convention center you have like a banquet room which they had, they raided." One woman remarked: "So people was hungry, thirsty, so they went to looting, you know, you call it looting whatever but they were trying to survive." One woman went to seek shelter at a local school with the help of some young men in the neighborhood. She observed many young women with babies at the school with no formula or diapers. She recounted, "I knew those babies needed formula and I know they needed diapers. And some of the guys went out and got diapers and formula . . . I had never experienced that before, but I think it is called survival at the time . . . God knows what is right and what is wrong." One man who helped a woman who had a big family with small children obtain provisions stated: "You can't blame the people in a way, because they had children and babies." One woman discussed how her neighbor, with the assistance of others in her neighborhood, took someone's boat and started saving people. ". . . he went and got the boat. People if you are

listening to this, he went and got your boat and hope they repaid or whatever for the boat, whatever I don't know. Because we had to wind up leaving the boat, you know."

At the Superdome and Convention Center in New Orleans, the shelters of last resort in the city, research participants reported that people broke into the food and drink machines and offices for necessities that were not provided by the shelter itself. Before formal help arrived, young people in particular broke into the suites and other offices where food was stored, as well as into concession stands and food and soft drink machines. One woman said: "The kids went wild and into robbing all the machines and all the offices."

One man recounted his story:

> We didn't have any water, no food, and we had a little food that we bought . . . We was running low . . . It was about maybe close to eighteen of us . . . Once we ran out of food . . . we see people walking back and forth with baskets and the food. I'm like, no, that's not me. I wasn't raised that way. And they're like "well, what are we going to do for food?" I said, "Thing's going to be over in a minute. The roads clear up. I had my older brother's truck. He has a 2005 Titan. So, I said "get in the truck, gonna roll out." I said, "that truck will go through anything" you know. So, later on that Monday night, the food ran out and like Tuesday morning I kind of, I didn't sleep the whole time, you know. So, I'm kind of sitting up there and I'm like "man, I got to do something." See, everybody else was getting food but us. So, I ran into a couple of boat police officers and, and I was telling them the situation. They said "Baby, all the stores are open." I said, "Is, is the power still, is up in some of these stores?" 'Cause I said "I have a credit card" you know. Said, "No, baby, the stores are 'open.' " They said "Just get in there, get the necessity what you need and come out." So, after that, you know we had a couple of cops that was on the back of the truck that was helping us get . . . I was actually being transportation for them because I was the only decent vehicle on the road that was able to go through waters, you know.

Transportation to get food was often critical after Hurricane Katrina. Often, transportation required a boat that could get through the flooded streets:

> My little granddaughter and my little niece and the two gentlemen next door and my other daughter took a boat. And he said he was going to the convention center, to the Superdome. And he left the boat there with us, so then we get in the boat and go around there by my daughter's house and got some more food and stuff for us to have. And then they went and got water and stuff too. . . . Some of the stores were open, sitting wide open, so they went in to see if they could find water and stuff.

Several of the evacuees described the role of the police officers while they took provisions from stores. One man said that a police officer said to him as he entered the store, "Okay, you have to feed your family . . . But don't take the cash registers." Another explained: "The police told us, 'When we get what we need, you'll get what you'll need.' You know because they was doing their thing too." This appeared to be a reference to a New Orleans police department that had a history of corruption pre-Katrina.

Some research participants believed that some people went beyond mere survival and clearly crossed a moral line: "And then I saw maybe people doing other things that you didn't need – liquor, certain other things. You didn't need cigarettes, you know, but that was part of the thing too." And another said:

> I mean it got to a point where Wednesday evening people was kicking in people's doors, killing them over food you know. Right where we was at, I mean, in the complex the, the lady downstairs she had a bunch of food. They kicked in her door, took her food, and some other people in the other side of the apartment complex, it was like a half a mile down, the little group took over the complex . . .

At a certain point, participants described conditions that had begun to deteriorate to extreme desperation and lawlessness, particularly at the Superdome and convention center. Several people articulated their perception that they had been abandoned to die.

### *"Dogs are Treated Better than Us": Food Assistance from Public and Private Systems*

Though, in the absence of other assistance and facing immediate shortages, participants' initial food strategies were independent or focused on mutual self-help, help from more formal sources came days later. Several respondents explained that they did not receive provisions from governmental or non-governmental entities for many days, and when food supplies did arrive they were administered in a chaotic and demeaning manner. When the National Guard threw food and water into crowds of people, one participant remarked that it made her feel like a "dog."

One person summed up the scenario for many people: "I slept on a bridge, it was like a freeway, for like maybe two days, you know because it took a couple of days for like people to come rescue . . . it was pretty, pretty bad, you know, sleeping on the bridge it's like . . . it was just, people scavenging for food." Similarly:

> When I got on top of that roof, it was over eight hundred, nine hundred people on top of this roof and it wasn't a big old roof. And what happened was we had no food, no water. The sun was so hot. It was so hot out there and we stood out there like two and a half days and finally the Marines and the Red Cross came to get us.

One woman discussed her arrival at the convention center after she and her daughter made a 12-hour journey pulling her grandson on a blow-up mattress through the water: "It was no light, no air, it was hot, no food, no water . . . we had no help, the mayor, I don't know where Bush was or the mayor, I don't know what station they was watching, but we stood there four days with no food and water."

An elderly woman describes the arrival of the military in terms that evoked an invasion rather than a rescue:

> It seemed like it was 500 trucks and it was scary . . . And I kept thinking, it looked like Hitler and Mussolini because they all had big guns and everything . . . And you are sitting there thinking, well, what are they going to do with us? Do we have to get in the back of the truck? And we had to walk like a block and a half, which was very hard for me, to go get food commodities.

One woman describes the scenario and her thoughts at the time that the military finally arrived:

> . . . so then the military came and that's when they were, they killed a few people that was trying to jump on the helicopters when it wasn't organized and reacting in a rational, rash way, or irrational whatever. Where, they were out of control and they had to do what they had to do to get order, so they got some kind of order and after that they served us food, they were giving out food at different stations, the little military packets that they have that they put, yeah, and that was good, people had those, and the kids start moving around, and having fun. And all the kids didn't know what we were really going through, they was playing and having fun, and but, after the third day I was kind of panicking then because it was like "oh, God, not another day." Because at that time people was making bowel movements everywhere, you couldn't wash, you know, it was just getting hectic it was like, you know "they're going to leave us here to die or something," you know, so I'm just thinking, how can they not see this happening, see us on camera, I see helicopters passing but no one's coming to rescue us. So I was just basically wondering why it's taking so long to rescue us, you know it was just unbelievable they took four days to rescue us out of there, and I could have thought of so many ways they could have gotten,

> buses, helicopters, planes they could have gotten to land there and get us all up out of there, so that was one thing that really puzzled me . . .

All through the week, families used a succession of strategies to eke out their food until they could reengage with their networks and with formal helping systems. Their strategies vividly illustrated the necessity families faced to first conserve their own resources (stocking up and cooking up), then engage effectively in the kind of sharing and mutual support that might bring in additional resources, and finally, when these could not make up for the lack of more formal assistance, to engage in foraging in stores and other settings for the required necessities.

## *DISCUSSION*

The strategies that impoverished families use to provide basic necessities for themselves are complex combinations of informal and formal helping systems. Often under pressure from changes in familial circumstances, community context, and special needs, families face insecurity even in the context of cohesive neighborhoods and available federal and state programs. A major disaster, disrupting community and informal networks, illuminates the dependence of many households on larger state systems for support, and the degree of hardship experienced when it fails.

Sharing and exchanging of resources are economic coping strategies commonly utilized by low-income families, and many families appear to have coped in these familiar ways during the storm. This strategy incorporated sharing with strangers in some situations. However, under the pressures of a disaster, not only individual households, but the sharing networks in which they were embedded became bereft of food. Swapping works only when someone in the network has something to swap, and when conditions of scarcity become so great that no-one has enough, then the limits of individual generosity are also exposed. While such sharing can carry people through the two or three days of dislocation and trouble following many storms, it is not a sufficient strategy to carry the weight of large unsupported networks experiencing weeks or longer without access to ordinary outside resources.

In addition, in this time of crisis and food insecurity, local agencies and other supports may be insufficient. Under this stress in New Orleans, individuals, households, and larger groups took over private property, particularly food and water, and stores became a "public domain," sometimes sanctioned by the remaining representatives of the government in the form of the police. While this was a short-term response to a dire crisis, evacuees and others believed that this was not a real resolution to the problems they faced in New Orleans. Respondents expressed their sense of abandonment at the hands of a larger entity that failed to provide basic assistance.

In contrast, when food supplies were delivered by agencies charged with helping participants, rather than relief many participants experienced terror and feelings of degradation. The slow and ineffective response to their needs confirmed a history of poor and sometimes racist treatment by helping systems. It marked for many low income, Black New Orleanians a succession of gaps in the safety net, leaving them uncared for at the most basic level in a time of emergency: Their households could not be self-supporting; they could not reliably turn to the informal networks that served so well under less extreme circumstances. Their city, state, and national governments dehumanized them before recognizing their need for help and then providing it in an ineffectual and disorganized fashion.

Government programs, barely adequate in ordinary times, left families without access to any other resources, when stranded. Evacuees' desperation increased over the ensuing days, and when "help" finally arrived participants' basic needs and dignities were not considered in the initial allocation of food supplies. Despite the resourceful coping strategies of this group of evacuees, it appears that their human rights were violated based on the premise of food security alone.

Though the U.S. has tackled food availability issues generally, addressing these issues via disaster and complex emergency policies at local, state and national levels would be helpful to vulnerable populations like those in this study.

Thus, there are some clear issues for national discussion:

- The federal government has a role in orchestrating the response to a major disaster and in ensuring the direct provision of survival basics to individuals and families affected. Informal networks, local agencies, and even states may be bankrupt of necessary resources.
- Our major food provision programs are neither designed nor well-equipped to provide quickly for the needs of disaster victims.
- We have no national dialogue acknowledging the need in some circumstances to take over private property. Not only individuals in need, but the police and other professionals on the scene have little guidance.

While the magnitude of the disaster when the levees broke in New Orleans was unprecedented, it also served to highlight the weaknesses in a welfare and government response program that has devolved from the federal to the state to the local level, and placed increasing pressure on the self-sufficiency of individual households. When emergency robs households of any semblance of self-sufficiency, a localized support system, itself disrupted by the emergency, may well be incapable of making the large, strong response required to minimize hardship. In such cases life-threatening hardships and shortages emerge.

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