

Delta blues: Those with the least bear the most

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Ten months ago, the nation was riveted by televised images of people, most of them African Americans, fleeing the floodwaters in New Orleans. It was obvious that poor black neighborhoods were the most vulnerable when Hurricane Katrina hit and the levees broke, and that blacks had the fewest resources with which to cope with the disaster. *Newsweek* branded the situation “a national shame” in a cover story. Many people expected that the economic disparities exposed by Katrina would elicit a national conversation on poverty and race. President Bush spoke of building the city “bigger and better.” Some public figures talked of creating a Marshall Plan for the region or a New Deal-style public works program that would provide work for the displaced poor while rebuilding the city.

The conversation on poverty and race never happened, and so far no bold social vision for the remaking of New Orleans has taken hold. Very little has happened to give low-income residents hope. As thousands of volunteer church workers can attest, the city’s low- and middle-income neighborhoods contain block after block of empty homes, vacant businesses and abandoned cars. There is an eerie silence. No homeowners are in sight. It is as if the waters just receded. About 250,000 residents remain scattered around the country, a great many of them without the resources to return and rebuild.

“The rebuilding of New Orleans is going forward like the evacuation of New Orleans—it is based on self-help,” says William Quigley, director of the Gillis Long Poverty Law Center at Loyola University in New Orleans. “If you need government help, you are out of luck. Public help for rebuilding homes for homeowners (other than flood insurance, which many poor homeowners did not have) has not yet started. Help for renters is not even on the horizon. The poor are again left behind.”

There are, of course, plausible reasons for the standstill. Jobs have disappeared. Much public housing is deemed uninhabitable. The scarcity of rental properties has

caused rent prices to jump, making it that much harder for the working poor and disabled to return. State and federal lawmakers are slow to agree on how much relief money to supply. The city has to decide whether to reinstate utilities. Hovering over the entire rebuilding effort are questions about which areas should be rebuilt; it makes little sense to invest in areas that are likely to be ruined again in the next big storm.

But it is those with the least who most feel the burden of all this uncertainty. They are the ones most likely to be forgotten as public policy is forged. The plight of the Gulf Coast and its people is largely gone from the news reports, and it is easy for outsiders to assume that rebuilding is under way. In fact, the recovery scene replicates the original crisis: there is hope for those with means, a much bleaker future for those without.