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Opinion: The Real Scandal Unveiled By Katrina

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Opinion: Guest Opinion

The Real Scandal Unveiled By Katrina

By [Jorge R. Mancillas](#)

The body of a human being lying lifeless on the street is always an unsettling sight. I had seen them more than once while on human rights missions abroad. But there was something particularly disturbing about seeing a corpse stretched on the sidewalk of a downtown street in a major American city, while passers by barely paid attention.

A scant group of men and a few women, all indigent, African American, mostly, sat or stood scattered in the surrounding area as dusk turned into darkness. Without access to heat, electricity or running water, a couple of them started a small fire next to a brick wall. As a slight wind rustled the garbage strewn on the pavement, I caught a whiff of the stench of unbathed bodies that floated on the air.

The images emanating from New Orleans over the last few days, reminded me of that scene. I had not witnessed it in the midst of a major natural disaster, though, but on a routine day in skid row in downtown Los Angeles. I have read and heard commentaries all week, expressing the shock that such horrors as we have witnessed taking place in New Orleans could happen "here." Scenes we "normally" associate with places like Haiti, Rwanda or Baghdad. Yet they can be found in most major American cities, hidden from view, ignored by the media that scoured New Orleans and the surrounding area in the aftermath of Katrina looking for dramatic images.

Initially, most of us did not grasp who were those that had found themselves trapped by the rising waters that flooded the "Big Easy." Why it was that so many had remained behind while the majority of their neighbors evacuated the city. Many even attributed their plight to their reluctance to obey the evacuation orders. Only gradually did we become aware that 27.9% of New Orleans residents, roughly the proportion that remained behind, lived in poverty.

It took the winds of a strength 5 hurricane to lift the veil that covers the commonplace reality of poverty that held 37 million Americans in its grip in 2004, according to US Census Bureau figures. That was an increase of 1.1 million more than the previous year, adding to the cumulative gain of 17 percent under the Bush administration.

Seeing the generous response across the country as many rush to aid the thousands who were left homeless by Katrina, the cries of condemnation at the slow response by the Federal government, makes

me wonder why we are so oblivious to the fate of much larger numbers who struggle chronically with similar circumstances.

The best estimate on the scope of homelessness in America, compiled by the Urban Institute, indicates that about 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, experience homelessness in a given year. That is, almost 10% of those living in poverty are homeless, roaming our streets in much the same way we have been shocked to see thousands in New Orleans, prey to a few criminals in their midst, desperate for food and the basics, without access to the means to escape their condition. Shattering common stereotypes, only 10% of the urban homeless population in 2003 were veterans, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors' survey, and only a small minority suffers from severe and persistent mental illness.

Forty percent are families with children. In fact, the survey found that 17% of the urban homeless are employed but their income is insufficient to afford housing. With no national policy to address it, the problem is only worsening. A recent report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development revealed that close to 11 million Americans have "worst case" housing needs, and are at high risk of homelessness. These are people spending over half of their income on housing while living in crowded conditions, or who live in dwellings that are falling apart.

It is noteworthy that, as was the case of those abandoned in the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center, a large proportion of the homeless, 49 percent, are African Americans. The aftermath of Katrina has exposed that poverty is a secret national scandal, one that goes completely unaddressed by those who claim themselves champions of moral values. The self-proclaimed defenders of the right to life, who will go to battle for an amorphous clump of embryonic stem cells, are indifferent to the millions of children who live in poverty. They do nothing to change the fact that the U.S. ranks 43rd in the world in infant mortality, with 7 children per thousand dying before reaching one year of age in 2003.

That is a total of 29,834 children, a number that probably exceeds the number of victims of Katrina. Over 34,000 children die annually before age 5. Poverty continues to rise while the administration insists on transfers of wealth in the form of tax cuts and other policies favoring the privileged, arguing that the rising tide will make all boats rise. What we have witnessed in the last few years -as we have more dramatically in the last few days-, literally and metaphorically, is that, as waters rise, those without boats are left to drown in despair.

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