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A Fuller Picture

Beginning to understand what we are seeing in New Orleans.

There has been something askew in the reporting from New Orleans. It has bothered me for a week now. Finally, when I took a look at the [2000 census data on New Orleans](#), a lot became clearer.

According to the Census, [the population of New Orleans](#) in 2000 was 485,000 of whom 326,000 were black, 136,000 white, and the remaining ten thousand or so each, Asian or Hispanic.

If 75-80 percent of the population evacuated the city safely before the storm hit, as everybody is reporting, that means that far more than half the black population escaped safely before the storm slammed into the city. Even if *all* those who did not evacuate were black — and that is manifestly not true — 25 percent of the total population is only 121,000. Twenty percent is 96,000. By far the majority of blacks in New Orleans, who numbered as the storm began some 326,000, evacuated in advance.

Even they lost much, maybe everything, but at least they were not caught in the roiling water.

Secondly, I have heard ever since reading about Huey Long of the 1930s that Louisiana is one of the most corrupt and dependency-prone states in the Union. Of all the cities in the south, New Orleans seems the one most welfare-oriented, least entrepreneurial, most state-dependent, and least economically dynamic. More than any other southern city, it is "Old South" rather than "New South." That, of course, is part of its charm. It refuses the modern bustle, says "Slow down, Be easy." It lulls. Its charm seduces. And it is also the prototypical, old-time welfare-state city.

The Census report shows what that means in vivid detail. In 2000, there were only 25,000 two-parent families in New Orleans with children under 18. By contrast, there were more than 26,000 female householders with children under 18, and no husband present. In other words, slightly more mothers all alone with children than married-couple mothers.

In addition, there were more than 18,000 householders who were more than 65 years old and living alone. Of these, most would normally be female.

If you add together the 26,000 female householders with children under 18, no husband present, and the 18,000 householders more than 65 years old and living alone, that is an estimated 40,000 female-headed households. That explains the pictures we are seeing on television, which are overwhelming female, most often with young children. The chances of persons in this demographic being employed full-time, year round, and with a good income, are not high. The chances of them living in poverty, and without an automobile, are exceedingly high.

In the future, city planners should carefully count in advance the numbers of persons who fall in this demographic when they formulate evacuation plans. Female householders all by themselves with children or over 65 are statistically likely to be severely disadvantaged in thinking about options for the future, disadvantaged in not having the means to determine their own destiny, and disadvantaged with respect to the habits of mind that accustom them to taking charge of their own future. Special provision will need to be made for helping them. They are likely to be accustomed to being taken care of by the state.

The younger mothers among them have been abandoned by those they should have been able to count on, the males in their lives. The over-65s (in urban areas) are likely to be totally dependent on Social Security and other government benefits, without private pensions or homeownership of their own. In emergencies, such persons need someone else to take care of them. It is wrong to throw them, at this point, solely on their own resources. Some will be able to manage that, but by no means all.

Is this not what our eyes are showing us among those who failed to evacuate in time? To be sure, thousands of those taking refuge are men, and some are married couples, and some are white, Hispanic, or Asian. More research could show that my own hypotheses — and even visual observations — are wrong. But the Census data helps explain to me what my eyes are seeing.

Another question that bothers me: I would also really like to know what happened to the better-off blacks and whites of New

Orleans, who escaped before the storm hit. How many have lost their homes? How many have loved ones still unaccounted for?

What are things now like in those lovely suburbs around New Orleans?

It is not only those who did not evacuate in time that seem to have suffered horribly. I would love to see more reporting about the middle class — and sympathy for them, too. They are Katrina's victims, too.

Is it possible that many of them will not receive the insurance payments they are counting on, in order to get their lives started up again at a level not too far below where they were before the storm hit? Have they taken a permanent hit? How will many cope with that?

The poor may suffer worst of all, but they are not the only ones to taste bitter ashes in times of calamity, and to find their souls tested. Those of the middle class who worked hard (maybe even worked their way out of poverty), played by the rules, and set aside some resources for times of trouble, also deserve our help. Especially just at that exact moment when everything they made so many sacrifices to attain has been taken from them.

It was just then that Job was tried. So might we all be.

— *Michael Novak is the winner of the 1994 Templeton Prize for progress in religion and the George Frederick Jewett Scholar in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute. Novak's own website is www.michaelnovak.net.*

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