

## What if a Hurricane Hit Connecticut?: Reflections on Katrina and the “Chronic Storms” Faced by Connecticut’s Poor

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*Hurricane Katrina destroyed more than homes, lives and livelihoods; it swept away the curtain hiding the poor, confronting the richest nation on the globe with its inner Third World. (Frida Berrigan, September 21, 2005).<sup>1</sup>*

On August 29, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, killing hundreds, and seriously disrupting the lives of over a million others. The plight of these people captured the hearts and minds of Americans throughout the country. Indeed, with assistance rushing in from all over the world, one can say the plight of Katrina’s victims captured the world’s attention.

The faces we watched virtually around the clock were the faces of American poverty. Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama are three of the poorest states in the nation, ranking 1<sup>st</sup> (21.6%), 2<sup>nd</sup> (19.4%), and 9<sup>th</sup> (16.1%) respectively, in the percentage of people living below the federal poverty level in the United States Census Bureau’s 2004 American Community Survey.<sup>2</sup> Connecticut’s relatively low poverty rate of 7.6% (lowest among the states, tied with New Hampshire), suggests that Connecticut’s concerns and those of the states ravaged by Katrina do not overlap. Those living in poverty in Connecticut know that such suggestions would be false.

### Connecticut’s Chronic Poverty Storm

Several Connecticut journalists have drawn attention to parallels between Connecticut and Louisiana:

Michelle Jacklin wrote: “If a monster hurricane bore down on Hartford and a mass evacuation was ordered, who would be left behind?...[T]hose most likely to be left behind in Hartford would be the sick, the elderly and the young. And because most of them are African American and Latino, the pictures of isolation and abandonment in Connecticut’s capital would look

<sup>1</sup> Frida Berrigan, “America’s Third World”, *Tompaine.com*, September 21, 2005.  
[http://www.tompaine.com/articles/20050921/americas\\_third\\_world.php](http://www.tompaine.com/articles/20050921/americas_third_world.php)

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2004. Table R1701. Percent of People Below Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months (For Whom Poverty Status is Determined).

strikingly similar to the ones we saw of New Orleans after the hurricane hit and the levees broke.”<sup>3</sup>

Susan Campbell wrote: “Congress approved a \$10.5 billion relief package, but you know what? It’s not enough. We abandoned the poor in our cities years ago, and the post-hurricane plight on the Gulf Coast is that hands-off policy, writ large....New Orleans fares as poorly as Hartford on bad-city lists....If a similar catastrophe struck here, guess who’d be left clinging to the trees and the rooftops? The official response has been shameful. If this could be a wake-up call, so be it.”<sup>4</sup>

Helen Ubinas wrote that it is “easier to avert our eyes when the calamity is just the daily drip, drip, drip of poverty all around us....There are good, hard-working people just trying to keep their heads above water [in Connecticut]. And maybe we should help them before they’re floating past us.”<sup>5</sup>

Parallels between New Orleans and Hartford abound. While Hartford’s child poverty rate of 41.3% placed the city second highest in the nation behind Brownsville, Texas, New Orleans’ rate of 40.5% placed third highest (tied with Providence, RI). Both cities are predominantly populated by minorities, sharing 28% White populations (though New Orleans’ population is 67% Black/African American, and just 3.1% Hispanic or Latino, while Hartford’s minority population is more evenly split – 38.1% Black/African American and 40.5% Hispanic/Latino).

Hartford is not the only Connecticut city, of course, that struggles with a poverty problem. Indeed, every Connecticut town contains families struggling to make ends meet. For many of these families, the cost of meeting daily needs is not an episodic, but rather a *chronic, storm*.

### **What if a REAL Hurricane Hit Connecticut?**

Although the likelihood of Connecticut coping with a hurricane of the magnitude of Katrina is comparatively low, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) considers it to be enough of a possibility to have modeled the impact of various categories of hurricane on the Connecticut coast. NHC’s SLOSH model (Sea, Lake and Overland Surges from Hurricanes) estimates storm surge heights and winds resulting from hurricanes by taking into account pressure, size, forward speed, track, and winds.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 below shows the extent to which the Connecticut shore could be inundated by storm surges resulting from various categories of hurricanes.

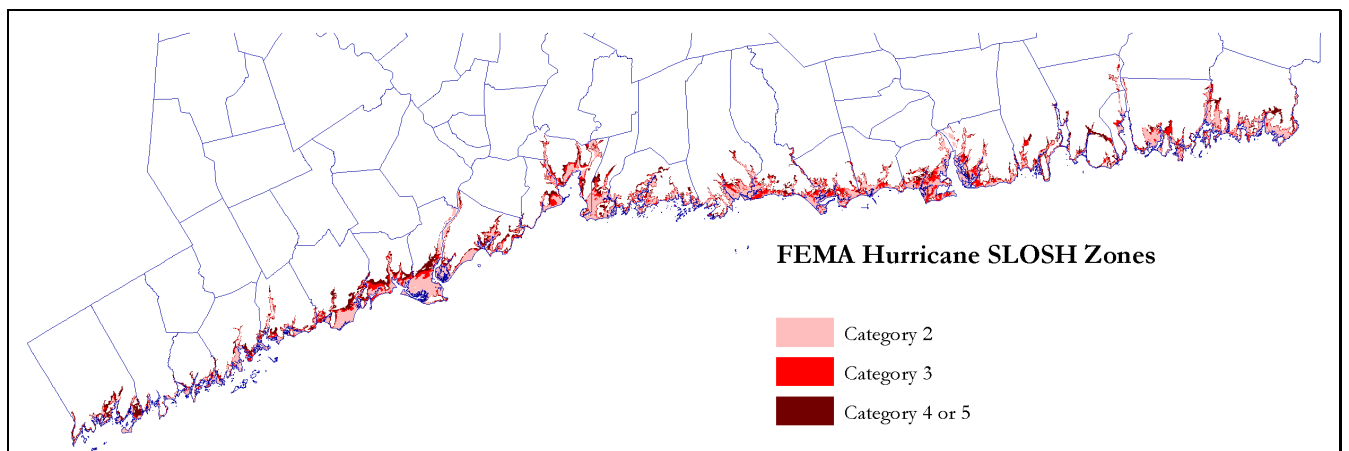
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<sup>3</sup> Michele Jacklin, “Water’s Rising for Hartford’s Underclass,” *The Hartford Courant*, September 14, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Campbell, “In New Orleans, Pump out the Poverty, Too,” *The Hartford Courant*, September 3, 2005.

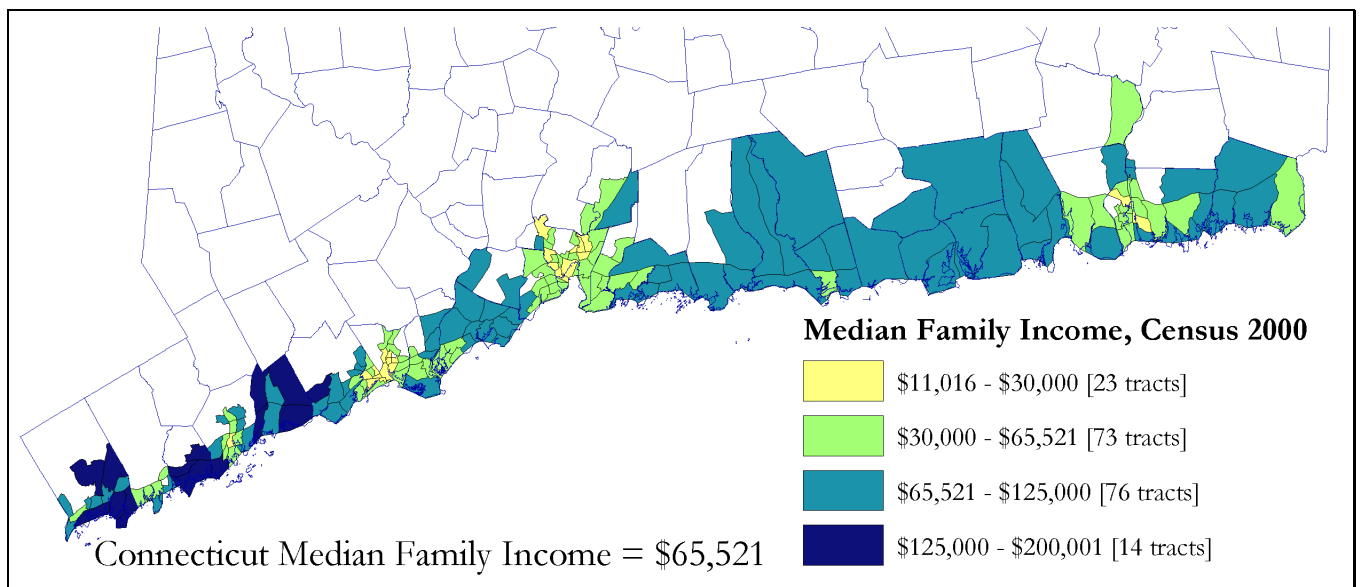
<sup>5</sup> Helen Ubinas, “Drowning in Poverty Closer to Home,” *The Hartford Courant*, September 8, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> National Hurricane Center, “SLOSH Model,” <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/HAW2/english/surge/slosh.shtml>.



**Figure 1**

What do we know about *who* would be impacted by a real hurricane hitting Connecticut's shoreline? Figures 2 and 3 below show the Census tracts that could be inundated by surges from category 4 or 5 hurricanes hitting the Connecticut shoreline. In Figure 2, we see the median family income for the census tracts that could be affected by a hurricane strike on Connecticut's shoreline.



**Figure 2**

Tracts with median family incomes exceeding \$125,000 are concentrated in Fairfield County, including five tracts where the median family income exceeds \$200,000, which is the top category the Census Bureau uses for such values. By comparison, the twenty-three tracts with median family incomes less than \$30,000 are concentrated almost exclusively in the cities of Bridgeport (11 tracts) and New Haven (9 tracts).

In Figure 3, we see the poverty rates in the Census tracts vulnerable to a hurricane strike in Connecticut. Twenty-six percent of Connecticut's poor (67,512 people) live in the 186 Census tracts potentially impacted by hurricane strikes on Connecticut's coasts. This compares to 22% of the overall population (751,629 people) living in potential danger of a hurricane strike.

The insets in Figure 3 provide a closer look at the Census tracts affected in the cities of Bridgeport and New Haven. High poverty areas in these two cities bear the brunt of the impact on Connecticut’s poor areas. In fact, among the 23 “high poverty”<sup>7</sup> Census tracts within the areas potentially impacted by a category 4 or 5 hurricane striking the Connecticut coast, nine (9) fall in Bridgeport, while twelve (12) fall in New Haven. The cities of Stamford and New London each have one high poverty Census tract in the “SLOSH zone.”

Katrina highlighted many ongoing disparities that separate Americans by race and class. A joint study by Alan Berube of the Brookings Institution and Steven Raphael of the Goldman School of Public Policy highlights the fact that many of those left behind in New Orleans lacked access to an automobile.<sup>8</sup> “Those households, largely dependent on the limited emergency public transportation available to evacuate the city in advance of the storm, were most likely to be left behind.”<sup>9</sup>

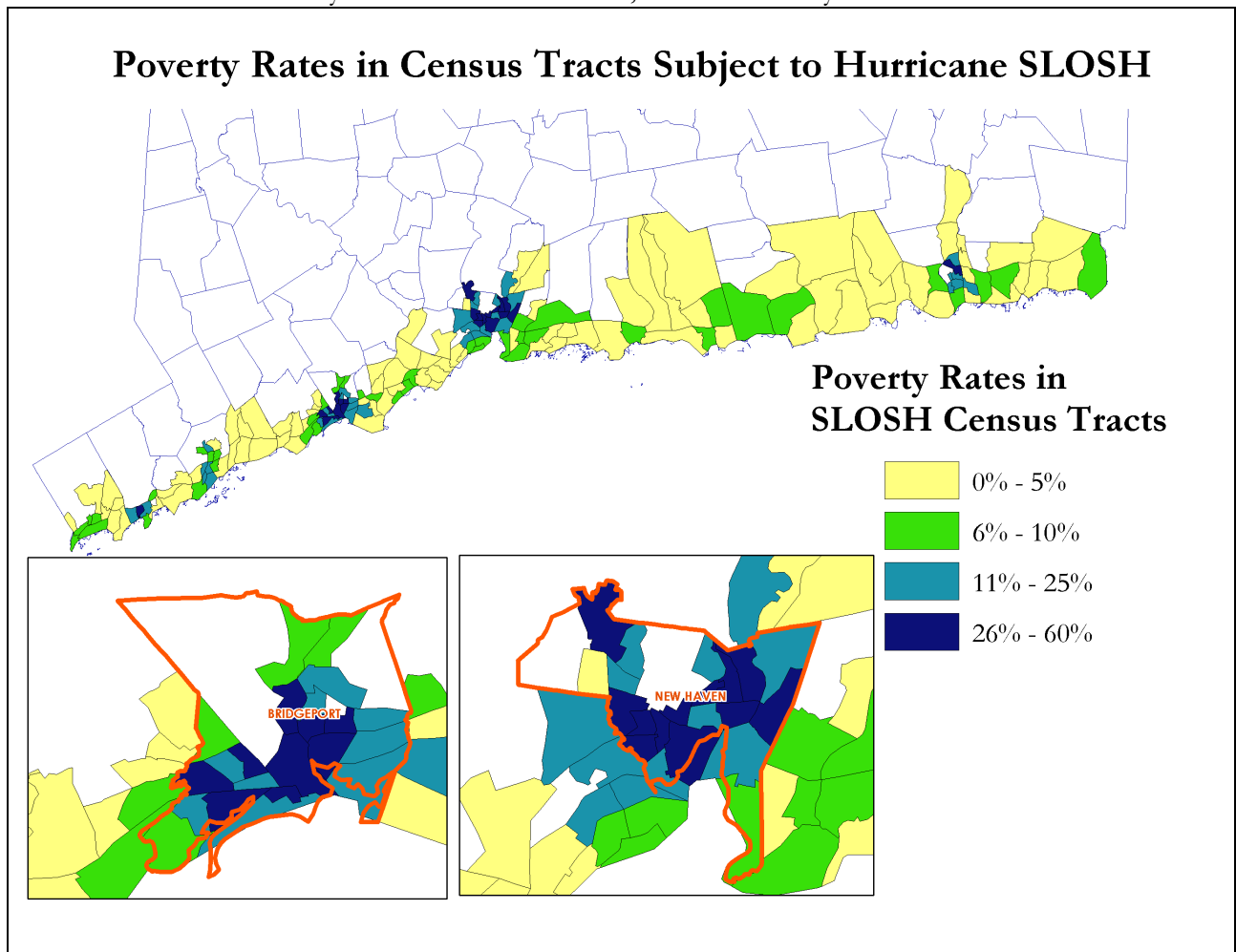


Figure 3

In fact, their data show that in New Orleans, about one in four residents lacked access to a car in 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Defined here as tracts where the poverty rate exceeds 25%.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Berube and Steven Raphael, *Access to Cars in New Orleans* (Brookings Institution and Goldman School of Public Policy, 2005), available at: [http://www.brookings.edu/metro/20050915\\_katrinacarstables.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/20050915_katrinacarstables.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Berube and Raphael, *Ibid.*

Representatives of The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the Washington Post, and Harvard School of Public Health conducted interviews of those evacuated from New Orleans to Houston in the aftermath of Katrina. Their interviewees confirmed the significance of a lack of access to an automobile. When asked why they did not leave the city on their own before Katrina struck, 35% reported they “Did not have a car or way to leave.”<sup>10</sup>

Access to transportation would also be a significant factor in the event of a disaster striking Connecticut’s cities. Berube and Raphael’s research finds that 26% of New Orleans’ residents lacked access to an automobile in 2000. By comparison, 32% of Hartford residents, 23% of New Haven residents, 19% of Bridgeport residents, 16% of Waterbury residents and 8% of Stamford residents lack cars. Sitting vulnerable on the Connecticut shoreline, both Bridgeport and New Haven need to heed the challenges inherent in evacuating a city sitting in Hurricane SLOSH zones, with high poverty rates and low levels of access to transportation.

### **Coping with “Chronic Storms” in Connecticut**

There is little doubt that a Category 4 hurricane striking the City of New Haven or the City of Bridgeport would have potentially devastating impacts on the poor within those cities. What is equally clear, however, is that the poor in those cities and throughout Connecticut face chronic daily storms that threaten their well-being.

We know, for instance, that nearly one in five Connecticut families is *asset-poor*, lacking sufficient net worth to weather a three-month income interruption even after reducing their expenditures to the federal poverty level.<sup>11</sup> While such an interruption *could* come from the disruptive impact of a hurricane, it is far more likely that the income interruption would result from an unexpected family illness, a period of unemployment, or a disruptive event such as a divorce. These events threaten the economic well-being of Connecticut families throughout the year and while there is a specified beginning and end to hurricane season (June 1 and November 30, according to the Hurricane Research Division of the National Hurricane Center),<sup>12</sup> the chronic storms that Connecticut’s poor endure can and do happen year round.

Katrina opened the eyes of our nation to the plight of those struggling in poverty. The whole world has witnessed how the poor have been neglected in the wealthiest nation of the world. Here in Connecticut, even if real hurricanes may not regularly threaten our security as they do in states such as Florida and Louisiana, there are other forces over which we can exercise a degree of control that *do* threaten our most vulnerable citizens. Senator John Edwards stated in recent remarks, “The Superdome made [poor people] impossible to ignore, but we could look down the streets of every city in America and seen enough poor and forgotten families to fill all the football stadiums in America.”<sup>13</sup> Here in Connecticut, Connecticut’s 87,000 children who are living each day in poverty would fill UConn’s state of the art Rentschler Field in East Hartford more than twice (and still leave thousands waiting in line for a third show).

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<sup>10</sup> The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, *Survey of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees*, (September 2005), p. 6. Other factors cited included: thought the storm and aftermath wouldn’t be as bad as it was (28%); I just didn’t want to leave (10%); physically unable to leave (5%); had to care for someone physically unable to leave (7%), waited too long” (7%); worried possessions would be stolen/damaged (4%); and I didn’t want to leave my pet (1%).

<sup>11</sup> D. Hall, *Connecticut Asset Scorecard, 2005* (Connecticut Voices for Children, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> National Hurricane Center, “Frequently Asked Questions”, <http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/tcfaq/G1.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Senator John Edwards, remarks as prepared for delivery, “Restoring the American Dream – Combating Poverty and Building One America,” Center for American Progress, September 19, 2005.

While Connecticut's citizenry responded with open arms, open homes, and open wallets to the plight of those coping with Katrina, it is less clear that we are responding as well to the needs of those among us who face the chronic storm of persistent poverty. During recent months in Connecticut, there have been approximately 3,000 clients served monthly at Connecticut's homeless shelters, including approximately 500 children.<sup>14</sup> More troubling is the fact that just as many clients have been turned away from Connecticut's shelters, the vast majority because no beds were available. During the month of June, homeless shelters in Bridgeport served 132 clients, and turned away 81, while shelters in New Haven served 298 clients, and turned away 677.<sup>15</sup>

Many facing the chronic storms of poverty in Connecticut turn to community and government programs to stave off hunger. Foodshare and the Connecticut Food Bank estimate there are approximately 350,000 people in Connecticut relying monthly on food pantries and soup kitchens.<sup>16</sup> The Food Research and Action Center counts 133,158 children participating in free and reduced price meals in Connecticut, and 195,980 participating in the Food Stamps program.<sup>17</sup> Connecticut's State Department of Education reports 66.5% of public school children in New Haven are eligible for free and reduced price meals, while in Bridgeport, 97.5% of students are eligible.<sup>18</sup> The need in Connecticut is significant, widespread, and persistent.

Helen Ubinas poses a question that Connecticut's elected officials -- indeed each of Connecticut's residents -- should ponder: "I couldn't help but wonder: What if we put forth this kind of effort to feed and house the homeless and less fortunate right here? Would 32,000 people in the state -- 40 percent of them children -- face homelessness every year? Would 600 households in the Capitol Region find themselves facing life without a roof over their head? Would we need to commission a group to come up with a plan to end homelessness by 2015?"<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, Katrina has highlighted the important role that we collectively need to play through our elected governments in responding to the needs of our lower income Americans, regardless of their place of residence or the cause of their distress. An effective and capable government is essential to a healthy nation. Through our governments, we must plan ahead, anticipate and solve problems, and respond to threats to our communities, our states, and our country.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This report has focused both on the potential impact of a real hurricane strike on Connecticut's coast and the symbolic "chronic storms" faced by those struggling to make ends meet in Connecticut.

In a real hurricane strike, Connecticut would be most endangered by a strike on a concentrated population center. The two centers with the greatest concentrations of individuals who would be threatened by a hurricane strike are Bridgeport and New Haven, both cities with relatively high poverty concentrations.

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<sup>14</sup> Department of Social Services, Community Services Unit, "Homeless Shelter Report," April 2005, May 2005, June 2005. In June 2005, the most recent month for which data are currently available, there were 2,755 clients served statewide including 539 children, and 3,215 clients turned away (91% because of lack of beds).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Personal Communications with Nancy Carrington, Executive Director of The Connecticut Foodbank and Gloria McAdam, President of Foodshare.

<sup>17</sup> Food Research and Action Center, *State of the States, 2005*, (FRAC, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education, *Strategic School Profiles* database, SY2003-2004, at <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/DER/datacentral/MultipleSearch.asp>.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Ubinas, "Drowning in Poverty Closer to Home," *The Hartford Courant*, September 8, 2005.

In the event of an actual hurricane strike on Connecticut's coast, federal, state and local officials would need to work together to ensure that everyone, particularly the most vulnerable, were moved out of harm's way. Both the stranding of thousands unable to escape from Katrina because of a lack of transportation and the congested freeways plaguing those fleeing from Rita highlight the importance of a viable evacuation plan that leaves no person behind. This seems particularly important for both Bridgeport and New Haven, located along Connecticut's Interstate-95, which is routinely reduced to a virtual parking lot during 'normal' commuting days. A well-designed plan, that could be competently and quickly executed, to assure timely evacuation from areas at risk, and provision of adequate food, water, housing and other necessities for as long as necessary, is as essential in Connecticut as it was in Louisiana and Texas.

For those facing "chronic storms," whether through prolonged poverty, an unexpected family illness, a loss of employment, or disruptive events such as a divorce or a death in the family, the imperative for federal, state, and local officials to work together to craft policy responses to alleviate poverty is no less. Policies that enhance the capacity of families to weather such storms – including a range of family asset building policies – are particularly essential. Policies aimed at expanding homeownership opportunities for lower income families, expanded use of the earned income tax credit (including adoption of a state level credit as each of our neighboring states has done), and expanded access for all (regardless of race or socio-economic class) to appropriate post-secondary educational opportunities, would help families build an asset base that buffers them from poverty storms.

Connecticut *can* shelter its citizenry from the chronic storms of poverty. We have seen in vivid, painful detail the price that is paid when we fail to build strong, adequate levees to shelter and protect our communities. If we have given a lot *to* those who have been harmed by Katrina, we must also be certain to take *from* Katrina the important lessons she has taught us for those among us who also need protection from economic storms.