

**After the Storm:
Race and Victims' Reactions to the Hurricane Katrina Aftermath**

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When disaster strikes, Americans like to believe that no matter who gets hit, no matter what race, color, creed, or socioeconomic level they hail from, we are all in it together. Unfortunately, however, we are not one united race and one united class. Hurricane Katrina did not affect all people of the Gulf Coast equally. By failing to acknowledge that the aftermath of the storm had racial and class dimensions, we miss the opportunity to understand the underlying power structures and patterns of inequality that will make recovery from the storms more difficult for some.

Questions of race and class came into focus as news video and photographs showed primarily black citizens stranded in New Orleans. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the New Orleans population to be 20% white and 68% black. According to a Population Reference Bureau Report, of the 15 U.S. metropolitan areas with the most African Americans, New Orleans had the highest black poverty rate, at 33 percent (Saenz, 2005). Within the city itself, the poorest tended to live in the lowest parts that are most vulnerable to flooding. Moreover, only half of African American males were employed (Saenz, 2005). African Americans were also much more likely than whites to lack basic amenities such as an automobile or a telephone (Saenz, 2005). Given their limited social and economic resources along with their geographic isolation, poor urban African Americans are disproportionately vulnerable to being left behind during a crisis situation. Clearly, there were racial and class dimensions to the aftermath of the storm.

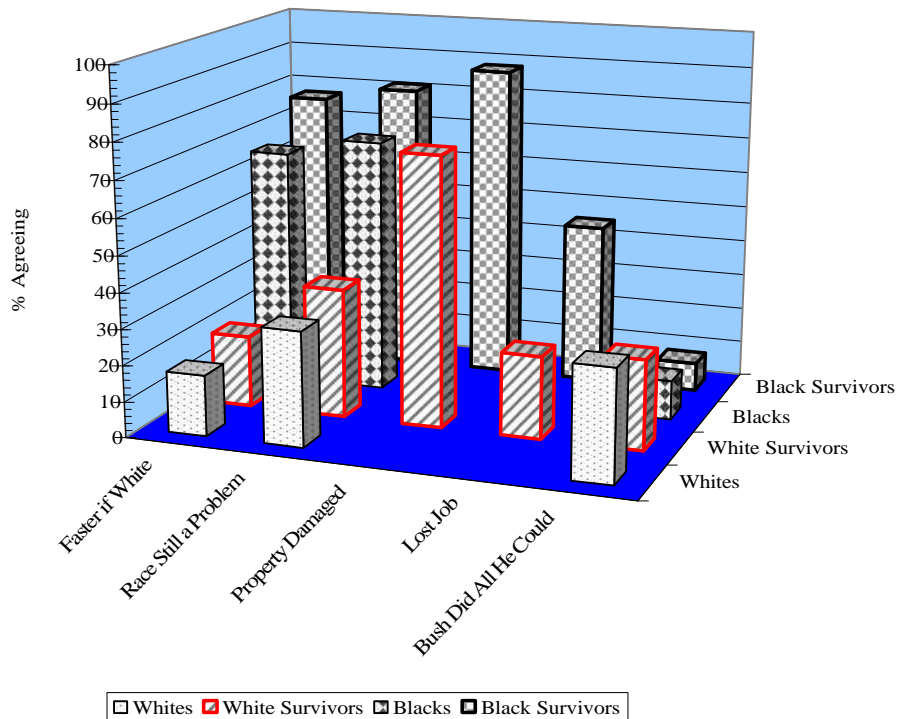
The Black United Fund of Illinois commissioned me to conduct a study of the long-term experiences and needs of victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita throughout the Gulf Coast Diaspora. As part of that effort, I collected data from victims who have been relocated to various

sites around the nation. This evening, I would like to share some of the results of analysis of that survey of victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and make some comparisons to data from a national survey of the general population that was collected by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. In the context of this evening’s forum, I will focus on differences in how blacks and whites (victims and members of the general public) reacted to the response to the Hurricanes, and what linkages, if any, they make between responses to the hurricanes and America’s current international and domestic priorities.

Black and White Perspectives on the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Blacks and whites draw very different lessons from the tragedy. More striking, there is widespread agreement among blacks that the government’s response to the crisis would have been faster if most of the storm’s victims had been white; two-thirds of African Americans

Fig. 1: Racial Differences in Reactions to the Response to Hurricanes



(66%) express that view. Overwhelmingly, whites feel this would not have made a difference in the government's response, as only 17% think that the race of the victims mattered. The gap between white survivors and African American survivors is even greater, as 20% of white survivors versus 77% of black survivors say that the race of the victims mattered.

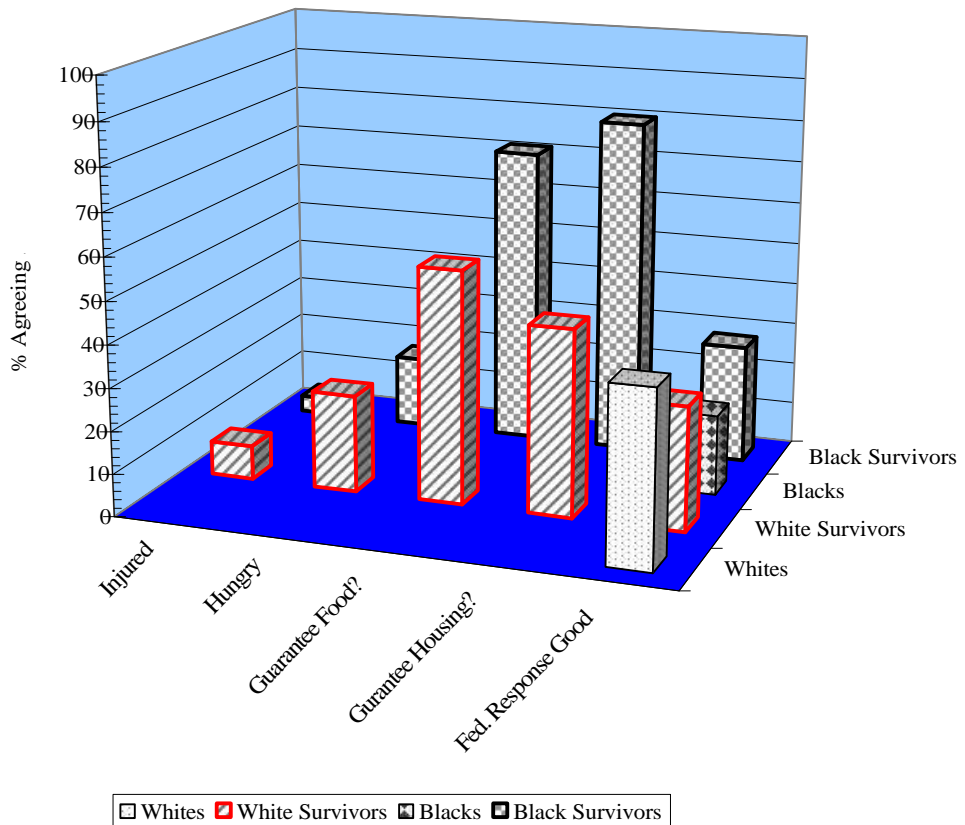
More than 7 in 10 blacks (71%) and 8 in 10 black survivors (81%) say the disaster shows that racial inequality remains a major problem in the country. But most whites disagree. Less than a third (32%) of whites and 36% of white hurricane survivors believed that the government's response to the tragedy shed light on persisting racial problems in the U.S.

African Americans across the country have had stronger reactions to the disaster in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast than have whites. Blacks make harsher judgments of the federal government's response to the crisis, perceive the plight of disaster victims in a different light, and feel more emotionally connected to what's happened. The disaster has had a far more significant personal impact on blacks than whites. African Americans are also much more likely than whites to report feeling depressed (73% vs. 55%) and angry (70% vs. 46%) because of what's happened in areas affected by the hurricane. In terms of the victims, this also seems to be true. The results show that high proportions of whites and blacks sustained losses as a result of the hurricanes. Three quarters of white victims (75%) say that they sustained property damage. An even higher percentage of blacks, 88%, report such losses. In terms of job loss, nearly a quarter of whites say that they lost a job because of the hurricanes. For blacks, the proportion is almost double, as 45% report job loss resulting from the hurricanes. African Americans appear to be less sympathetic to the response of President Bush than do whites. Less than 1 in 10 blacks (11%) say President Bush did all he could do to get relief efforts going quickly, compared with

more than 3 in 10 whites (31%). While 25% of white survivors say that President Bush did all he could do to get relief efforts going quickly, only 8% of black survivors hold that view.

African Americans were not necessarily on the “short end of the stick” on all dimensions related to the hurricane, however. For example, a higher proportion of white survivors (8%) than black survivors (4%) say that they sustained injuries. And a higher percentage of whites (23%) than blacks (17%) say that they went without food after the hurricanes. Still, black survivors (71%) were more likely than their white counterparts (55%) to say that the federal government should guarantee food to those who were displaced by the hurricanes. Black survivors (80%)

Fig. 2: Racial Differences in Reactions to the Response to Hurricanes

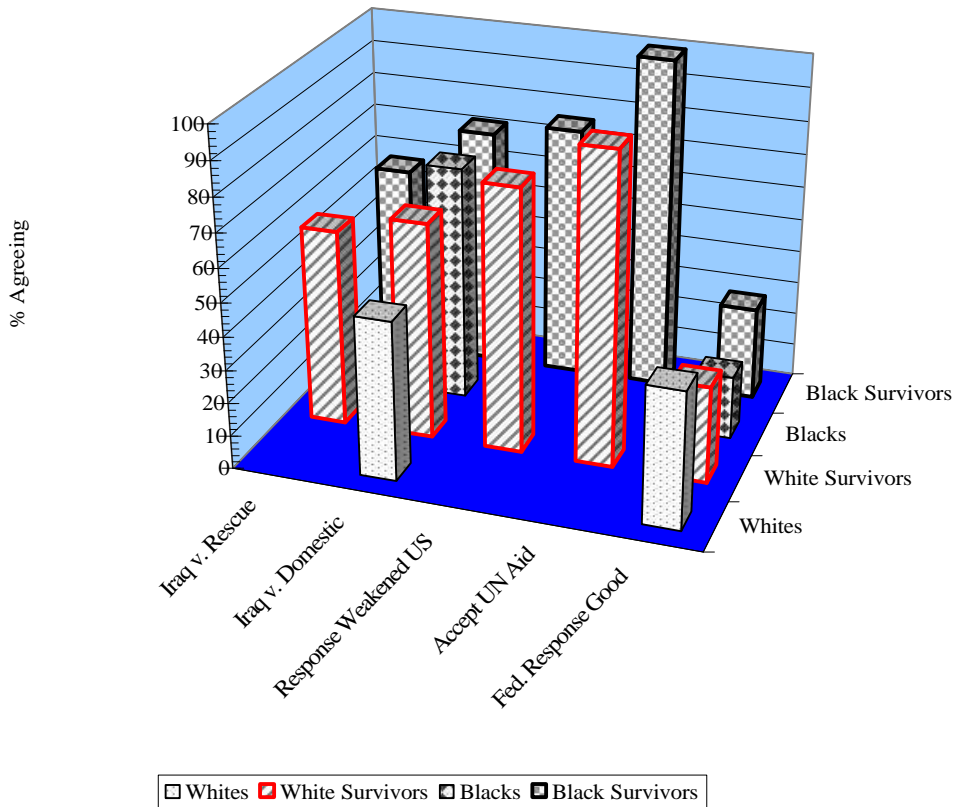


were nearly twice as likely as were white survivors (44%) to say that the federal government should guarantee housing to the displaced. Blacks were also considerably more critical of the federal government’s performance in general—19% say the federal government’s response was

good, compared with 41% of whites. Black and white survivors, however, view the federal government’s response in fairly similar ways, as 28% of black survivors and 29% of white survivors say that the federal government’s response was good.

When asked whether attention to the war in Iraq made it more difficult to attend to the rescue of victims of Hurricane Katrina (presumably because of National Guard personnel and machinery and equipment that might have been used), 57% of black survivors and 59% of white

Fig. 3: Racial Differences in Reactions to the Response to Hurricanes

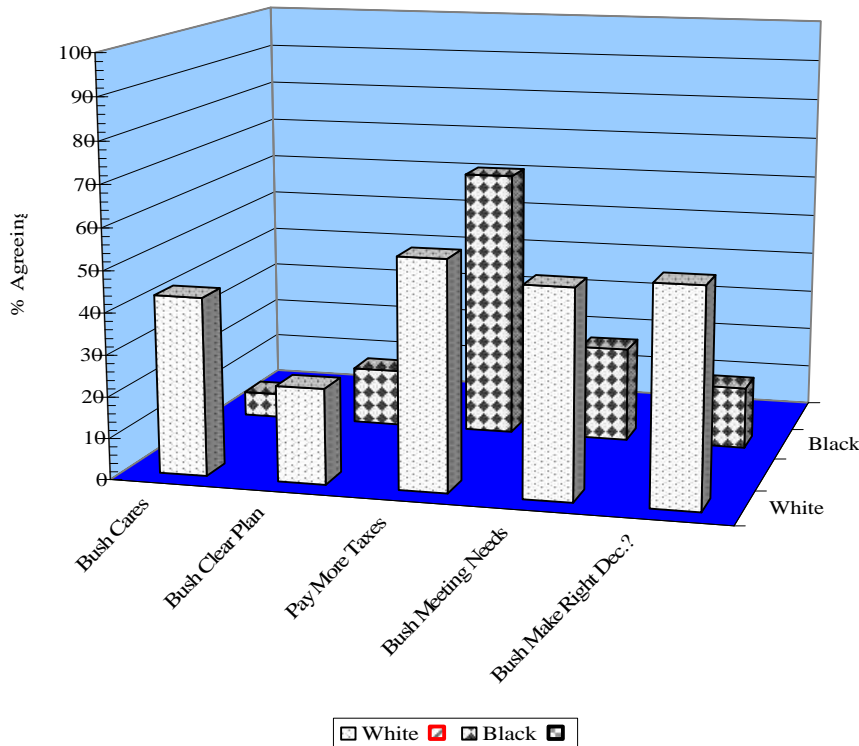


survivors agreed with this premise. When asked whether “America’s continued involvement in the war in Iraq makes it more difficult for America to attend to problems at home,” 7 in 10 (71% of) blacks agreed compared with less than half (48%) of whites. Nearly two thirds (65%) of white hurricane survivors, however, agreed with this, and 72% of black survivors agreed. More than three quarters of white survivors (79%) and black survivors (76%) believed that the

government's response to the hurricanes weakened it in the eyes of other countries. And there was near consensus among survivors that the United States should accept aid from the United Nations and other sources to help evacuees secure food, clothing, housing, and other essentials, as 93% of white survivors agreed with this, and 99% of black survivors agreed.

Only 6% of African Americans believe that President Bush cares a lot about the needs and problems of people left homeless by the hurricanes. This compares with more than 4 in 10 whites (43%). Only 14% of blacks believe the Bush Administration has a clear plan for finding housing and jobs for the victims, compared with 23% of whites. A higher percentage of blacks (65%) than whites (55%) say that they are willing to pay higher taxes to help with the recovery from

Fig. 4: Racial Differences in Reactions to the Response to Hurricanes



Hurricane Katrina. Finally, while a majority of whites (51%) approves of the way President Bush is responding to meeting the needs of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, less than 1 in 4 blacks (23%) agree with this view. More generally, only 15% of blacks say that they have confidence in

George W. Bush's ability to make the right decisions about dealing with the problems people affected by Hurricane Katrina are facing. This compares with more than half of whites (52%).

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita put issues of poverty, class and race in America back on the front burner when the world saw the plight of poor, mostly black storm victims all but abandoned in New Orleans. But the results of this survey also tell another story: There were substantial differences in how blacks and whites viewed the aftermath of the storms. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed the wide gulf between the nation's haves and have-nots. As a society, we need to address the gross disparities that Hurricane Katrina exposed. This requires aggressive social policy that calls for a restructuring of current national priorities away from the War in Iraq so that the necessary resources can be used on other pressing domestic and international issues. Failure to take such actions will have enormous economic and social costs—not just for African Americans, but for a society living with a disconnect between its ideals and the reality of continued inequality along the color line. Unfortunately, many whites in the United States are so unwilling to see or even discuss issues of race and class that it is possible that these issues will soon be casualties of the storms, too.

Reference

Saenz, Rogelio. 2005. *Beyond New Orleans: The Social and Economic Isolation of Urban African Americans*. Population Reference Bureau Report. Washington, DC.