Building common ground

How shared attitudes and concerns can create alliances between African-Americans and Latinos in a post-Katrina New Orleans.

Key findings from Dr. Silas Lee & Associates’ survey of African-American and Latino residents in New Orleans, commissioned by Oxfam America, September 2008
Much has been written about the relationship between African-Americans and Latinos and the tensions that arose when they were forced to compete for the same limited resources in a post-Katrina New Orleans. But little is known about what the two groups have in common—and how those shared experiences, attitudes, and goals could bring them together to help rebuild their community.

In late 2008, Oxfam America commissioned Bright Moments,¹ who subcontracted with Dr. Silas Lee & Associates,² to conduct a survey of the racial attitudes of African-Americans and Latinos living in New Orleans. “Building Common Ground” is a summary of those findings. The purpose of the survey was to measure how African-Americans and Latinos rated the quality of their lives, race relations with each other, experiences with discrimination, perceptions of each other, support for an African-American and Latino alliance, and effective strategies for such alliances.

The results reveal that the majority of African-Americans and Latinos agreed that they face similar issues of discrimination³ and agreed that it’s important for their two groups to put aside their differences and work on overcoming those issues.⁴ It is on this common ground that we seek to build.
Before delving into the results of the survey, it’s important to establish some context.

When the levees broke in New Orleans, the waters damaged more than homes and neighborhoods. Katrina, and the government’s shoddy preparation and response, highlighted issues of poverty that existed in the region before the storm but were exacerbated by its wake. These shortcomings in access to affordable housing, decent jobs, and health care were—and continue to be—especially pronounced among the city’s African-American and Latino populations. In fact, they are contributing factors for why the region’s population has seen such demographic changes.

For example, after the storm, local, state, and federal policies encouraged local employers to create disposable jobs and ease immigration documentation requirements. These policies encouraged an influx of Latino immigrants but offered them few legal and financial protections. And since these new jobs offered suppressed wages that were too low to cover the inflated housing costs of rent, insurance, and utilities, fewer African-American workers could afford to return home.5

Federal policies encouraged an influx of Latino immigrant workers and discouraged the return of local African-American workers.

**FIGURE 1. THE CHANGING FACE OF NEW ORLEANS**

According to the US Census Bureau’s 2007 population estimates, the proportion of the Orleans Parish population that is African-American fell from 66.7 to 60.2 percent between 2000 and 2007. Simultaneously, the proportion of Orleans Parish’s population that is Hispanic (of any race) increased from 3.1 to 4.5 percent.

In other words, during this period, the percentage of Hispanics in the Orleans Parish population grew by over 45 percent, while the percentage of African-Americans in the Orleans Parish population dropped by nearly 10 percent.

Latinos and African-Americans who remain in New Orleans face a shared struggle for the same basic needs. Whether they’re putting down roots for the first time or rebuilding their lives, the task remains daunting.
Key findings

What did African-Americans and Latinos in New Orleans say they have in common?

Despite still grappling with the negative consequences of local, state, and federal policies, a large percentage of African-Americans and Latinos surveyed remain optimistic about the future of New Orleans: 69 percent of African-Americans and 49 percent of Latinos said the city is moving in the right direction. At the same time, 90 percent of African-American and more than 80 percent of Latino respondents rated affordable health care, affordable housing, job opportunities, and crime as “very important” issues to their survival and well-being that could stand to be improved.

What hindered access to these basic needs? The results of the survey show that discrimination in several key areas is “more pervasive than isolated” for African-Americans and Latinos.6

In addition to these areas, the majority of African-American and Latino respondents identified experiencing discrimination based on the way they talk,7 their education level,8 and their appearance.8

Taken in combination, these factors led both groups to conclude that they had major problems succeeding in society (with 51 percent of African-Americans citing this as a “major” problem and 60 percent of Latinos saying the same).
Divergent perceptions: How African-Americans and Latinos view each other

While both African-Americans and Latinos see discrimination affecting their own community, each group perceives the other community as experiencing fewer problems in the same areas, revealing what pollster Dr. Silas Lee characterized as a “view from the outside.” For example, both African-Americans and Latinos said their own education levels represented a “major” factor in the discrimination they experienced, but when asked how major a factor discrimination based on education was for the other group, the perceptions were that the discrimination was less pervasive. The same held true when each group was asked about the discrimination the other experienced around succeeding in society and accessing affordable housing. Both African-Americans and Latinos said their own community had a worse experience.

In addition to these different perceptions, African-Americans and Latinos said they weren’t always comfortable interacting with members of the other community, whether on the job or during their free time.

**FIGURE 3. DIFFERENT LEVELS OF COMFORT**

- **At the workplace**
  While a majority of African-Americans said they were “very comfortable” hiring Latinos (65 percent), working for Latinos (51 percent), or working with Latinos (68 percent), Latino respondents were less enthusiastic when asked the same question. Twenty-seven percent of Latino respondents said they were “very comfortable” hiring African-Americans. Nineteen percent said they were “very comfortable” working for African-Americans. And 29 percent said they were “very comfortable” working with African-Americans.

- **In the neighborhood**
  There were similar differences when African-Americans and Latinos were asked about how comfortable they were having each other as neighbors. While 59 percent of African-American respondents said they were “very comfortable” having Latinos as neighbors, only 32 percent of Latinos said they were “very comfortable” having African-Americans as neighbors.

- **As friends**
  The splits in terms of on-the-job and in-the-neighborhood feelings also played out when it came to even more significant interaction. This time, however, only 38 percent of African-American respondents said they have a Latino friend who they “socialize with on a regular basis” while 54 percent of Latinos said they have an African-American friend they see regularly.
Glancing at the numbers, it’s easy to conclude that Latinos feel less comfortable with African-Americans when it comes to sharing space. But that wouldn’t be a fair summation. It would be more accurate to say that African-Americans and Latinos have similar levels of discomfort; those worries just play out differently.

For example, when you drill down on the workplace issue, the survey reveals that 46 percent of African-Americans “strongly/somewhat strongly” agreed that “Latino workers limit job opportunities for African-Americans.”15 At the same time, a majority of the Latinos surveyed, 62 percent, said they “strongly/somewhat strongly” disagreed that they limit job opportunities for their African-American counterparts.16

Why the difference? During the focus group interviews, some African-Americans said they felt threatened by Latino labor because the price of Latino labor was so low. This feeling was supported by the survey findings; when you parse out the information by income, 38 percent of African-American families—who are earning $21,000 to $30,000—“strongly” agreed that “Latino workers limit job opportunities for African-Americans,” while 39 percent of those earning $45,000 and above “strongly” disagreed.17 In other words, those African-Americans who are competing for the same low-wage, post-Katrina jobs as many Latinos are more likely to say they feel threatened by Latino job seekers.

Generally, however, both African-Americans and Latinos agreed that the issue of “job opportunities in New Orleans” is very important18 and something worth setting aside differences in order to overcome.

FIGURE 4. JOB OPPORTUNITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African-Americans</th>
<th>Latinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Securing employment</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very major barrier</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of African-American and Latino respondents identified “securing employment” as a “major” problem. The majority of African-Americans and Latinos said they “strongly/somewhat strongly” agreed that “Latinos and African-Americans can put aside their differences and work together on jobs.”19

From challenges come opportunities

Given the complex realities facing African-Americans and Latinos living in New Orleans, taken in combination with the two communities’ limited interaction and the sudden demographic changes in the city, it’s no wonder that the majority of both communities (57 percent of African-Americans and 64 percent of Latinos) called perceptions of each other a “very major barrier” to alliance building.

A few factors—difficulties with language combined with limited social interaction and trust—may explain some of these divergent perceptions. We must acknowledge these factors when considering ways of establishing alliances.
A majority of both groups (71 percent of African-Americans and 68 percent of Latinos) said language/communication was a “very major barrier” to creating alliances for social change.

Social interaction
A large percentage of both groups (46 percent of African-Americans and 40 percent of Latinos) said opportunities to socialize were a “very major barrier” to creating alliances for social change.

Trust
A majority of both groups (60 percent of African-Americans and 63 percent of Latinos) said trust was a “very major barrier” to creating alliances for social change.

Despite the challenges, the results of the survey suggest that a majority of African-Americans and Latinos believe it’s important to overcome these differences in order to form a coalition that can achieve social and economic equity. At least a third of African-Americans (32 percent) and Latinos (38 percent) said they had given the possibility of such an alliance “a lot” of thought.

The majority of African-Americans (60 percent) and Latinos (55 percent) thought it was “very important” for African-Americans and Latinos to “establish alliances to achieve social and economic equity” in New Orleans. An additional 23 percent of African-Americans and 31 percent of Latinos identified the pursuit of such an alliance as “somewhat important.”

Therefore, 83 percent of African-American respondents and 86 percent of Latino respondents ranked establishing alliances as “somewhat/very important.”
If both African-American and Latino communities are to achieve progress in this changed New Orleans, they must work together. As one focus group participant put it: “We have to be here, and we have to get along. How can we start the dialogue?”

What are some ways forward?

Looking back on history, we see that most social movements have found success when they were affiliated with certain institutions of society, namely the family, schools, or the church. These institutions usually collaborated with local community organizations on a grassroots level. When asked to select between family, a community group, church, or their child’s school to establish an alliance, 43 percent of the African-Americans and 42 percent of the Latinos nominated the church. A community group was the second choice for 15 percent of the African-Americans and 36 percent of the Latinos.

Confirming the influence of the church as one of the trusted institutions to facilitate an interracial alliance, 86 percent of the African-Americans and 83 percent of the Latinos said the church is a “very/somewhat effective” institution to host a dialogue and to improve African-American and Latino relations. A neighborhood festival came in second place for 82 percent of African-Americans and 66 percent of Latinos.

Conclusion: Shared obstacles, common goals

As we think about the future of New Orleans, it’s useful to look back on its past. The city has roots in Spain, France, the Caribbean, and Africa. Long before the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans represented the proverbial American melting pot—or more apt for a town famous for its many ethnic foods, a flavorful gumbo. People of color have lived together, worked together, and enriched each other’s lives for hundreds of years.

Of course, there have been strained relations between African-Americans and Latinos in the past. At the same time, problems have been exacerbated, particularly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, by local, state, and federal policies; limited social interaction; and competition for scarce resources. Both communities said they still have trouble getting decent jobs, affordable housing, health care, and fair treatment in the criminal justice system. But they also said the potential to overcome these barriers is real.

If we are to rebuild New Orleans, we must support these two communities in coming together to form a durable alliance. Local African-American and Latino organizations have already laid the foundation for this work. In commissioning this study, Oxfam America hopes to support these organizations and their continuing efforts to bring these communities together.

As one focus group participant put it, this is just the start of the conversation.
Methodology

An advisory group with representatives from the African-American community (Barbara Major, vice president of Citizens United for Economic Equity), Latino community representatives (Martin Gutierrez, executive director of Neighborhood and Community Services for Catholic Charities and Maria Jose Bermudez, communications and community liaison for Catholic Charities), Oxfam staff members (Ilana Scherl, Jasmine Waddell), a former Oxfam staff member (Colette Pichon-Battle), a representative from the consultant firm coordinating the project (Bill Rouselle, president and CEO of Bright Moments), and the researcher (Dr. Silas Lee) oversaw all aspects of the research.

The advisory group conducted interviews with community leaders from the African-American and Latino communities to identify issues and concerns affecting these communities. Based on these answers, a questionnaire was developed to be used for the focus groups.

The research team from Dr. Silas Lee & Associates conducted four focus group interviews during the week of June 9, 2008, with a random sample of African-Americans and with randomly selected pre- and post-Katrina Latino residents of New Orleans. The focus groups were formed taking into consideration the social and economic demographics and if they were homeowners or renters. Based on the discussions and answers of the focus groups, Dr. Lee worked with the advisory group to produce the questions for the opinion survey.

During July 16–26, 2008, Dr. Silas Lee & Associates interviewed 450 African-American residents of New Orleans selected from a centralized bank using a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system. To ensure the accuracy of the survey, the researchers chose a sample that reflected the social and economic demographics of African-Americans in New Orleans. To capture the opinions of the pre- and post-Katrina Latino community, the Hispanic Apostolate Community Services of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans conducted translated and in-person interviews with 160 Latino immigrants.

The margin of sampling error for the poll is plus or minus 3 percent for the African-American respondents and plus or minus 5 percent for the Latino respondents.
Notes

1. Bright Moments is the New Orleans-based public relations, marketing, and advertising firm that coordinated the survey. More information about this organization can be found at www.brightmomentsnola.com.

2. See Methodology on page 7 for more information.

3. See Figure 2 on page 2.

4. See Figure 6 on page 5.


6. Page 7 of Dr. Silas Lee’s unpublished summary of his survey findings.

7. Fifty-six percent of African-Americans surveyed said their “communication skills” represented a “major” factor in discrimination, and 88 percent of Latinos said their “language skills” represented a “major” factor in discrimination.

8. Sixty-five percent of African-Americans surveyed said their “education level” represented a “major” factor in discrimination, and 66 percent of Latinos said their “education level” represented a “major” factor in discrimination. This is as opposed to African-Americans saying they thought 56 percent of Latinos faced major discrimination and Latinos saying they thought 44 percent of African-Americans experienced major discrimination.

9. Sixty-one percent of African-Americans surveyed said their “appearance” represented a “major” factor in discrimination, and 55 percent of Latinos said their “skin color” represented a “major” factor in discrimination.

10. See Methodology for more information.

11. Page 6 of Dr. Lee’s unpublished summary of his survey findings.

12. Sixty-five percent of African-Americans surveyed said their “education level” represented a “major” factor in discrimination, and 66 percent of Latinos said their “education level” represented a “major” factor in discrimination. This is as opposed to African-Americans saying they thought 56 percent of Latinos faced major discrimination and Latinos saying they thought 44 percent of African-Americans experienced major discrimination.

13. Thirty-three percent of African-Americans said Latinos had a “major” problem “succeeding in society” (as opposed to 60 percent of Latinos who said Latinos had a “major” problem succeeding). Thirty-three percent of Latinos said African-Americans had a “major” problem “succeeding in society” (as opposed to 51 percent of African-Americans who said African-Americans had a “major” problem succeeding).

14. Forty-three percent of African-Americans said Latinos had a “major” problem “accessing decent affordable housing” (as opposed to 59 percent of Latinos who said Latinos had a “major” problem “accessing decent affordable housing”). Thirty percent of Latinos said African-Americans had a “major” problem “accessing decent affordable housing” (as opposed to 66 percent of African-Americans who said African-Americans had a “major” problem “accessing decent affordable housing”).

15. Twenty-five percent of African-Americans said they “strongly agree” that the presence of Latino workers limits job opportunities for African-Americans in New Orleans. Twenty-one percent of African-Americans said they “somewhat agree.”

16. Twenty-five percent of Latinos surveyed said they “somewhat disagree” and 37 percent said they “strongly disagree” that the presence of Latino workers limits job opportunities for African-Americans in New Orleans.

17. The response among African-Americans was fractionalized by income, as 38 percent of the families earning $21,000 to $30,000 said they “strongly agree” that Latinos limit job opportunities for African-Americans, as opposed to 39 percent of those earning $45,000 and above who said they “strongly disagree.”

18. Both African-Americans and Latinos agreed that the issue of “job opportunities in New Orleans” was important. Ninety percent of African-Americans said job opportunities were “very important.” Eighty-six percent of Latinos said job opportunities were “very important.”

19. Sixty-seven percent of African-Americans said they “strongly agree” that Latinos and African-Americans “can put aside their differences and work together on jobs.” Twenty-one percent of African-Americans said they “somewhat agree” that Latinos and African-Americans “can put aside their differences and work together on jobs.” Fifty-three percent of Latinos said they “strongly agree” that Latinos and African-Americans “can put aside their differences and work together on jobs.” Twenty-four percent of Latinos said they “somewhat agree” that Latinos and African-Americans “can put aside their differences and work together on jobs.”

20. See Figure 6.

21. Page 4 of Dr. Lee’s unpublished summary of his survey findings.
Acknowledgments

Oxfam America appreciates the guidance of the “Building Common Ground” Advisory Committee for their tireless efforts throughout the survey, analysis, and review phases of this publication. Thanks go to: Barbara Major, vice president of Citizens United for Economic Equity; Martin Gutierrez, executive director of Neighborhood and Community Services for Catholic Charities; Maria Jose Bermudez, communications and community liaison for Catholic Charities; Bill Rouselle, president and CEO of Bright Moments; and Dr. Silas Lee, president and CEO of Dr. Silas Lee & Associates.

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Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization that creates lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Since the first days after Hurricane Katrina, Oxfam has looked to address not only the immediate challenges of recovery, but the historical legacy of social injustice in the region.

Our US Gulf Coast Hurricane Recovery Program focuses on promoting equity and inclusion for the most vulnerable populations in the hurricane reconstruction effort. Our work seeks to expand the capacity of locally based partner organizations so that they are better positioned to defend the rights of low-wage workers and immigrants, particularly women, and to bring their voices into the reconstruction process.