

Oxfam Fact Sheet | US Gulf Coast Recovery Program

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Background on the US Gulf Coast

Even before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast, Louisiana and Mississippi were the two poorest states in the nation. Nearly one in five residents lived below the national poverty line of about \$20,000 in annual income for a family of four. Good schools, job opportunities, and decent housing were scarce. Now the region is in crisis. The 2005 storms, coupled with levee failures, severely damaged or destroyed more than 300,000 homes across the Gulf Coast. Seventy-one percent of the housing Katrina damaged or ruined was affordable to low-income households. Today communities are struggling to rebuild schools, health facilities, and businesses—all while residents remain displaced or still live in trailers.

In the midst of this recovery, the inequities that preceded the storm remain. While the opportunity exists to build back better, that will only happen if the rights of the most vulnerable citizens are recognized and respected. In fact, though, working families and people of color are being left behind in the long-term recovery.

The facts

- > As of late April 2007—nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina—more than 100,000 households were still living in trailers and temporary housing provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
- > Before Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 45 percent of households in the areas hit by the storm were renters. Severe damage to or loss of rental units—at least 82,000 in Louisiana and 21,000 in Mississippi—falls particularly hard on low-income families. Yet neither state has prioritized repair of rental units to put these families back in their homes.
- > Soon after Katrina hit, the Bush Administration temporarily suspended the enforcement of basic worker health and safety regulations, as well as the requirement that federal contractors pay prevailing wages. The result has been widespread worker abuse. As one indication, the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance announced in May, that it had secured \$1 million in unpaid wages and workers' compensation claims for 585 immigrant laborers.
- > Immigrants helping to rebuild the Gulf Coast face extensive discrimination, as one case of 300 guest workers from the Decatur Hotel in New Orleans reveals. They won a landmark decision stating that guest workers with H-2B visas are entitled to the same protection as all other workers in the US.
- > Despite poverty rates that topped 30 percent in some storm-devastated communities, state officials sought and the federal government approved waivers reducing—and in several cases eliminating—the share of recovery grants required to benefit low- and moderate-income communities.
- > Though Louisiana and Mississippi have \$16 billion in housing and community development grants to distribute, the states are not consistently sharing information about how much of that money is reaching low-income residents. Very little data is available publicly for evaluating the effectiveness and equity of the grant program.
- > The distribution of homeowner grants has been harmfully slow. In Louisiana, officials have recorded 140,243 applications for funds, but as of the end of May 2007, less than 20 percent of applicants had received their promised checks. In Mississippi, 21 months after Katrina and six months after \$700 million was set aside for low-income homeowners, they had yet to receive any grants. Meanwhile the number of foreclosures increases, with a spike expected in October 2007 when a temporary foreclosure freeze ends in Mississippi.



Many hands make the work lighter, but on the Gulf Coast a great deal remains to be done, especially to ensure that the recovery is fair to low-income and vulnerable communities.

LILIANA RODRIGUEZ/OXFAM AMERICA

Working together to end poverty and injustice

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Oxfam America

Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization that creates lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Working together with local partners in more than 120 countries, including here in the US, Oxfam provides practical assistance to help people overcome poverty, respond to disasters, and secure their rights.

For more information about our work or to take action, please visit www.oxfamamerica.org.

“The continuing crisis in the Gulf Coast is not yesterday’s news, but a test of our commitment to keep America’s promise to our most vulnerable citizens.”

Raymond C. Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America

In high spirits, Tyree Enclade and Blake Reddick spent the afternoon spinning through the sea of clover that has sprouted across Phoenix, LA. With the determination of residents and the help of scores of volunteers, their hurricane-battered town is slowly recovering.



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What Oxfam is doing

Oxfam America is working to ensure fairness in the recovery for low-income and vulnerable communities devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We bring a long and successful track record of humanitarian response around the world, and we have also worked in the US for the past 15 years. Our two priorities in the Gulf Coast are ensuring access to safe and affordable housing, and protecting basic rights—fair pay, safe site conditions, decent housing, just treatment—for tens of thousands of workers now rebuilding the region. Oxfam does the following:

- > Provides support, technical assistance, and training to local groups in Mississippi and Louisiana; since the storms we have made more than \$1.6 million in grants to close to 40 organizations across the coast.
- > Assists in alliance- and coalition-building within and between the two Gulf Coast states.
- > Works with local researchers to update and publicize key information.
- > Works side by side with community organizations to strengthen their local, state, and federal advocacy efforts.

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