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DEADLY WAITING GAME: AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING NATURAL AND MAN-MADE DISASTERS BEYOND HURRICANE KATRINA

Robert D. Bullard, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This report used an equity framework to compare and contrast government response to emergencies affecting African Americans and whites dating back some eight decades. It uses the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster to examine the socio-historical context of past emergency responses to selected natural and man-made disasters, including weather-related disasters, epidemics, environmental contamination, industrial accidents, and bioterrorism threats.

Conclusion

Emergency response often reflects the pre-existing social and political stratification structure with black communities receiving less priority than white communities. There is a clear racial divide in the way the U.S. government responds to various types of emergencies in African American and white communities. Generally, government response is biased in favor of whites and affluent Americans. Differential disaster response places the health and safety of African Americans and other vulnerable populations at special risk.

Many African Americans have learned the hard way that waiting for government to respond can be hazardous to their health and the health of their communities. Generally, African Americans do not trust government officials, including the medical and public health community, to treat them fairly. This mistrust dates back to the antebellum period in our nation's history when slaves and freed blacks were used in nonconsensual experimentation.

Over the past eight decades, government response to weather-related disasters, epidemics, industrial accidents, toxic contamination, and bioterrorism threats points to clear preferences given to whites over African Americans. Having a car can make the difference between being employed and unemployed. As jobs and opportunity flee to the distant suburbs, where public transit is inadequate or nonexistent, persons without cars are literally left by the side of the road. Having a car can also mean the difference between being trapped and escaping natural and man-made disasters. Clearly, private car ownership increases mobility in normal times as well as in times of disaster. Boosting African American car ownership would enhance their ability to access jobs as well as evacuate during natural and man-made disasters.

Natural and man-made disasters heighten the problem our nation's non-drivers and transit-dependents residents face everyday. Disaster planners often fail the weakest and "most vulnerable" of our society—individuals without cars, non-drivers, children, the disabled, the homeless, sick persons, and the elderly. Natural and man-made disasters expose a major weakness in our mass evacuation plans and the vulnerability of people without cars—a population that faces major transportation challenges in everyday life.

Hurricane Katrina exposed the systematic weakness of the nation's emergency preparedness and homeland security. Race and class dynamics are intricately linked to the failures in post-Katrina New Orleans reconstruction, repopulation, and recovery. There can be no homeland security if people do not have homes to go to and if they lose trust in government to respond to an emergency in an effective, fair, and just way.