

# From Katrina to COVID-19: Black communities in New Orleans were disproportionately impacted

September 22 2020, by Claire Miller

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Hurricane Katrina took a devastating toll on New Orleans, LA, when it made landfall in August 2005.

But for the city's communities of color, the government's inaction and lack of investment in rebuilding Black neighborhoods following the storm caused more damage than Katrina's initial physical impact.

In a report recently published by the National Education Policy Center, Associate Professor Kristen Buras outlines how Black communities in New Orleans were disproportionately impacted by Hurricane Katrina—particularly due to government neglect and poor policymaking—and how those same issues are playing out nationally during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

"Without a federal plan to address the virus, communities of color are dying disproportionately and suffering economically—again," she explained. "Disinvestment in urban [public schools](#) is a form of neglect and we are seeing the effects of this exacerbated with COVID-19. We need to recognize that inaction is a policy with real and inequitable consequences."

Her research indicates that local and state leaders chose market-based solutions over strategic government planning in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which shifted how they viewed and managed post-disaster recovery efforts. For example, public schools throughout New Orleans were changed to privately-managed [charter schools](#), and [school](#) administrators demonstrated more concern for profit margins than supporting Black students' academic achievement.

In the midst of COVID-19 school closings, disease outbreaks, and a major economic downturn, the federal government has largely left state leaders in charge of making public policy in response to the pandemic. This has led to massive shortages in medical supplies, students lacking the digital resources for online learning-, economic insecurity, and significantly higher COVID-19 death rates for Black people.

Buras details a series of recommendations in her report that if followed, could prevent destructive effects for communities of color while states rebuild their educational, economic and health care systems, including paid [sick leave](#) and universal health care, raising the [minimum wage](#) to a living wage, and rebuilding and supporting neighborhood public schools overseen by locally elected school boards responsive to communities.

These and other recommendations, though, must be undertaken with input from people who have been hit hardest by the pandemic. Many policies after Katrina, Buras says, were developed without community engagement and imposed top-down.

Based on this experience, Buras urges that COVID-19 recovery plans be developed through substantive community involvement. "It is essential that Black, Brown and Indigenous communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic have a say in rebuilding and funding priorities," Buras said. "This is especially important as local and state budgets take major hits."

**More information:** From Katrina to COVID-19: How Disaster, Federal Neglect, and the Market Compound Racial Inequities.  
[nepc.colorado.edu/publication/katrina-covid](https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/katrina-covid)

Provided by Georgia State University

Citation: From Katrina to COVID-19: Black communities in New Orleans were disproportionately impacted (2020, September 22) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-katrina-covid-black-orleans-disproportionately.html>

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