In the wake of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation, few observers—inside or outside the academy—seriously considered the question, “Should New Orleans be rebuilt?” As urban historian Lawrence Vale (2005) noted in The Boston Globe, some in the international media wondered immediately whether the city would become “the American Pompeii.” But as he concluded, “Regardless of whether [cities] have been flooded, burned, bombed, starved, shaken, or poisoned, we have long bypassed the age of ‘lost cities.’” The emotional attachments of survivors, the political imperative to reassure citizens about building back “bigger and better than ever,” the financial investments—however uneven, frustrating, or conservative—of private insurers, the newly globalized charitable giving made possible by information technology, and other forces all favor rebuilding (Vale and Campanella, 2005). “From Banda Aceh to Biloxi,” said Vale, “cities are no longer left on their own to die.”

But a modern city could certainly rebound as a shadow of its former self. Cities that fell victim to slow, unnatural disasters—Camden, New Jersey or Gary, Indiana, for example—fit that bill. And those places were not developed, as the British newsmagazine The Economist defined New Orleans’ curious birthplace, on “low-lying, hurricane-prone
swampland surrounded by water on three sides.”¹ Furthermore, the questions of how to rebuild New Orleans and how to address the city’s staggering pre-storm levels of racial segregation and geographically concentrated, persistent poverty, beg attention to the broader issue of what kind of economy and politics is possible in the new New Orleans. In this essay, I briefly outline this context and develop two arguments about rebuilding: first, that debates about returning versus relocating families, including the poor, should be grounded in the realities of the city’s housing and labor markets and reflect informed choices, not anecdotes, about the preferences of the displaced; and second, that we should not rely on simplistic images of “community lost” to understand what the displaced stand to lose or gain by either moving back or moving on. In the final part of the essay, I offer more direct response to Susan and Sudhir’s rich arguments (also in this issue), addressing the question of what a public sociology of the disaster and recovery should include.

**Context: How do you restart a city?**

While rebuilding per se may be a certainty, and while the city’s rich cultural life should—in my view—be a powerful driver, no discussion of the prospects of the poorest displaced families can afford to ignore the city’s precarious economic position before the storm. A brighter future is not only about rebuilding less segregated—“not like before,” as David Brooks (2005) outlined the mantra in the *New York Times*, where he rightly called Katrina “a natural disaster that interrupted a social disaster.” That better future is, more fundamentally, about rebuilding a regional economy where growth and higher wages are a realistic prospect (Walsh, 2005). New Orleans’ central-city population has

declined steadily since 1960, even as the metro area’s population grew slowly (Brookings, 2005), and while the region’s transportation (port) and oil and gas sectors were economically successful before the hurricane, they employed relatively few city residents. Most were employed in low-wage health care, social assistance, and hospitality (tourism) jobs. Without a different economic future for the city as a whole, tackling poverty will become an exercise in quality-of-life enhancements—making poverty more bearable and a bit less risky, rather than more short-lived and rare. Sadly, the Bush Administration’s hastily proposed Gulf Opportunity Zone, a hodgepodge of tax breaks and deregulation, offers little promise and a host of risks.

Yes, New Orleans was a very racially segregated place. It was one of the few cities in America in which racial segregation actually increased between 1980 and 2000, with the second highest rate of poverty concentration in the nation (Brookings, 2005). The average black child attended a school where 87% of the students were poor. The average black person lived in a neighborhood that was 82% black, and while Susan and Sudhir are right that some residents no doubt maintained vital personal ties that should be protected, too many of these neighborhoods exhibited high rates of joblessness and crime. These were places served by frequently incompetent and corrupt public agencies, in a poor parish with a poor tax base, where race and class are the defining fault lines of politics. But for now, the larger point is that in order to thrive, the city needs a more successful economy, as well as a more equitable, less segregated one. Better governance is critical to enable this. The Mayor’s predictably controversial Bring New Orleans Back Commission will be one window on that project, and so will state-level efforts to chart a
viable course for the regional economy and to bring innovation and performance to
government.

For now, these efforts struggle with urban growth 101 challenges: How to
jumpstart a housing recovery without a functioning job base to fuel demand and,
conversely, where to house workers who are drawn back to a city that has few viable
neighborhoods. Much will hinge on the federal government’s funding decisions about
rebuilding the levees (which are prerequisites to New Orleans’ rebirth) and property and
job recovery. Funding the latter is the economic equivalent of defibrillation—an
exogenous shock to restart the positive cycle of income growth and housing demand.

The displaced: Moving back versus moving on

Beyond the big questions about rebuilding places, there have been vigorous
debates among scholars and policy advocates about how to rebuild the many *lives*
displaced by Katrina—and most of all the lives of New Orleans’ black poor. Researchers
and the media seized quickly, in the weeks after the storm, on the “return or move on”
question: Given the barriers to rebuilding, as well as the social and economic problems
that predated the storm, should many who were displaced be encouraged to relocate their
lives (with assistance) or to simply wait out the basic clean-up, in hopes of the fastest
possible return? Journalists held up Chicago’s court-ordered Gautreaux program and the
federal government’s multi-site Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment as models of
the relocation alternative, outlining how government has used portable rental subsidies
(housing vouchers) and special counseling to deconcentrate ghetto poverty. At their best, these tools helped people relocate from high poverty public housing to low poverty areas and—sometimes—from low to high performing schools as well.

At the request of an innovative new policy think tank created by doctoral students in sociology and other fields, I drafted a scholar’s petition (see Appendix), asking that assisted housing mobility be a meaningful option for displaced families. The nonpartisan petition cited research evidence on MTO and Gautreaux program. The petition, which was signed by 176 scholars nationwide, underscored that this was not a plan to depopulate New Orleans’ historically black communities but a plan, rather, to give struggling families more choices. Careful deconcentration would, in turn, give rebuilt communities back in New Orleans a chance to be somewhat more economically diverse and healthy than they had been pre-storm.

Yet the prospect of land grabs by a group that even the Wall Street Journal called “New Orleans’ power elite” made a well-targeted and rapid response by government, community groups, and responsible businesses crucial (Briggs and Turner, 2005). The alternative might be urban renewal on steroids, a parade of the “growth machine” (Logan and Molotch, 1987) in which poor folks would quickly be sidelined and forgotten. Sudhir and Susan are right to remind us of the dangers of this, particularly where there is added pressure to rebuild fast on a large scale.

---

As for the desire to return, as of this writing, no reliable data are available on the top-of-mind preferences of the displaced, much less on the informed preferences that should drive public policy and community action. But a few things seem clear. First, one should not pursue a voluntary, assisted relocation program unless a smart rebuilding strategy is also visible, financed, and reasonably on track. To do so would be to signal a land grab rather than a commitment to expanding poor families’ housing choices—and the social and economic fortunes tied to those choices. Second, as outlined above, rebuilding strategy should be grounded in realities of housing demand, not theme park nostalgia about how big to build and where. Third, the “right to return” should be reaffirmed, but it will be rhetorical in lieu of secure legal and financial supports. Examples are found in ongoing legal action and advocacy by the Advancement Project, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Community Oversight Committee, and other social justice advocates, to stop the avalanche of housing evictions; in proposed protections for uninsured, low-income property owners who could lose their generations-long ownership stake overnight; and in proposed “land banking” by responsible nonprofits that would act as community stewards. Fourth, rebuilding lives in particular places, including the places evacuated, should reflect the mixed evidence on how poverty is linked to place, and people to the social worlds around them, not Potemkin Village notions of socially cohesive poor neighborhoods—i.e., not just a resonant version of what Wellman and Leighton (1979) termed the “community lost” perspective on urban social life.
Why is the community lost model so risky here? New Orleans’ poorest neighborhoods were centered on some of the most distressed public housing projects in the nation, and local politics drove the siting of newer, nonprofit-developed housing in the same poor, segregated places over the past decade. These were not freely chosen ethnic enclaves but high-crime, jobless racial ghettos created by bad policy and preserved by discrimination and neglect. Let’s not recreate those places in hopes of restoring vital social support for the worst off.

Rejoinder

Susan’s essay rightly emphasizes the risks in a blind-faith policy of deconcentrating the urban poor, Sudhir’s the need to protect a critical, diagnostic role for sociology from the urge to merely proffer policy advice. First, to Susan: It is absolutely the case that a narrow focus on deconcentration may obscure the underlying crisis of housing affordability. It is a distressingly quiet crisis that breaks the backs of many poor people in America, both those who work and those do not, with crushing rent burdens and lousy neighborhood choices. Nor should we discount the risks in relocating people—through deconcentration efforts—though the evidence on what movers gain and lose in the process is very mixed, in part because the movers (or “relocatees”) themselves are often quite diverse in their capacities and needs.

Susan contends that “the major problem is not the concentration of poverty” but rather the scarcity of decent, affordable housing. Consider these facts: Before the storm, based on the latest data available (2004), the “housing wage” in greater New Orleans—the wage one would need to afford a modest apartment, given then-current rent levels, at
the federal standard of affordability (no more than 30% of household income spent on housing costs)—was $13 per hour, or close to three times the minimum wage. That is low compared to the tightest, highest-cost markets in the country, such as San Francisco (almost $29 per hour) or Boston (over $24) (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2004). But it nevertheless conveys the sizeable gap that existed between what many New Orleanians could afford, given their low wages, and what the local market supplied.

Still, we cannot afford a false choice among housing priorities either. In broad terms, the nation has three severe housing problems, and relatively few academic sociologists, I should note, work on any of them: an affordability gap that is centered on the most vibrant metro economies (where much of the nation’s population growth is happening) and driven both by low wage levels and excessive constraints on new housing supply; a quality problem (substandard dwelling units), which was made rare in most cities a generation ago but which persists in many rural communities, most of all Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, the informally settled colonias along the U.S.-Mexico border, and Indian Country; and a locational problem—the segregated “geography of opportunity” (Briggs, 2005; Massey and Denton, 1993). America’s communities have a long history of ambivalence toward new arrivals and minority groups, whether immigrant or native born. Much of this ambivalence has been expressed through housing exclusion, from government-sanctioned segregation in the era of Jim Crow and ongoing discrimination by realtors, banks, and other private parties today to the everyday acts of racial avoidance or “self-steering”—perfectly legal, but costly—that thwart the creation of a more integrated society.
In this context, housing advocates’ important and, in recent years, largely defensive battle over the affordability gap holds several risks. One is trading away social inclusion as a public value: “Help them secure housing, but not here in my community.” A second hazard is exacerbating the concentration of affordable housing in inner-city areas or older at-risk suburbs, far away from quality schools, most job growth, safer streets, and other keys to opportunity and upward mobility. That is, even if we manage to supply more affordable housing, but only across a sharply restricted geography, our public policies will help deepen the very inequality we claim to be fighting. New Orleans, and the post-Katrina rebuilding debate, illustrates this risk to an extreme.

Conversely, when deconcentration is tried, what do low-income movers actually trade away? It is a mixed picture and very dependent on context, making sweeping claims unwise. For example, a decade ago, in the wake of the bitter, court-ordered housing desegregation in Yonkers, New York, I focused on the risk that low-income, mostly black and Latino families had lost social support in the move to mostly white, middle-income neighborhoods. That is, I worried that these relocatees might benefit by broadening their social worlds in new places—in the shorthand of network analysis, by creating more diverse networks with wider range and function—while losing crucial supports. But I could find no evidence of either a few years after resettlement. People mostly sustained their networks, and good access to the origin neighborhoods—Yonkers’ modest scale, plus reliable transportation ensured by the public housing agency—was important to that (Briggs, 1998).
Likewise, in recent ethnographic work with low-income black, Latino, and Asian families in the MTO experiment, the few families who emphasized supportive ties in their decisions to move back to poor neighborhoods told our research team that they made those moves very reluctantly. They wanted better neighborhoods and the support offered by crucial people in their lives. Rent increases, landlord problems, illness and death in the family, and other shocks were far and away the most common triggers for these decisions to move back to poor neighborhoods—moves which the Census Bureau defines as “involuntary”—and not the felt loss of important social connections. Indeed, most relocatees actively maintained such connections, to small circles of friends and relatives, after they moved—as Sudhir and Susan both find in their ethnographic work on social effects of the significant public housing redevelopment and relocation launched in various cities in recent years.

In fact, an interim survey of MTO families some four to seven years after relocation found no negative effects on adult networks or interaction patterns, whether number of friends, density of friendships, or socializing (Orr et al., 2003), though social support could have been measured much better. Like most people in urban America, respondents in all three MTO treatment groups tended to have few if any friends in their immediate neighborhoods and to be wary of close ties to neighbors in every kind of neighborhood now touched by the experiment. Like the very poor nationwide, all three groups in the experiment, not just those who moved to low poverty areas, reported few connections to neighborhood institutions. And notably, children in the experimental group (who were still living in lower poverty neighborhoods, on average) were indeed
less likely to visit with friends from their “old” neighborhoods, but respondent children
did not have fewer friends overall than counterparts in the other treatment groups.

This is not to downplay the shocks associated with moving or to glorify poverty
deconcentration at the expense of all else. Although adults in the MTO experimental
group enjoyed dramatic improvements in health and mental health, boys who relocated
seem to do worse, on average, than counterparts in the control group, while mover girls
do much better across a range of important adolescent outcomes (Orr et al., 2003); we
have much work ahead to understand these mixed patterns, including rocky adjustment to
new social worlds. The poor in Susan and Sudhir’s studies, like those displaced by
Katrina but unlike the families in Gautreaux and MTO, were involuntary movers, and the
evidence that involuntary, and often hasty and poorly tracked, relocation disrupted
valuable ties is very important. But it is not the end of the story. We should worry, first
and foremost, about whether poor people can access resources and buffer themselves and
their children from risks wherever they happen to be living. Emerging efforts to define
“responsible relocation” and “responsible redevelopment,” for example, recognize the
value of welcoming community institutions that adopt displaced families.\(^3\) And whether
or not federal housing policy gives opportunity-oriented vouchers a chance, it will be
important to see whether the widely publicized assistance rendered by faith-based and
secular nonprofit organizations in the immediate wake of the storm evolves—anywhere

\(^3\) See, for example, the Baltimore Regional Initiative Developing Genuine Equality (BRIDGE) and
efforts by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and partners in East Baltimore, where large-scale urban
redevelopment and family relocation are planned.
along the Katrina diaspora—into useful support that helps people move from getting by to getting ahead.

In addition, we should pay more attention to the stability of people’s housing in the best-possible locations, which is fundamental to forging supportive ties, both informal (to personal contacts) and formal (to service providers, including schools). Without stability in place, what Robert Sampson and colleagues term “collective efficacy,” a form of social capital grounded in proximate trust, social cohesion, and the expectation of cooperation from neighbors, cannot be developed (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997; Sampson, 1999). This is particularly important for minority families and children, who are more likely to bounce from poor place to poor place in a volatile housing market (Fischer 2002), exiting poor neighborhoods only to re-enter them again quickly (Quillian 2003). Susan, Sudhir, and I agree that genuinely supportive ties matter a great deal to the poor—for instrumental as well as expressive or affective reasons—even if we draw on different evidence about where such ties are found or how to protect these vital social resources across moves, life course transitions, and other changes.

**The engaged scholar: Public sociology after Katrina**

Finally, to Sudhir’s wider focus on the role of social science, I celebrate sociology’s critical role even when I make policy-focused choices about where to invest my own energies. But I think would-be critical sociologists could be more effective with a modicum of attention to how (exactly) the public agenda is shaped over time, as well as a more specific understanding of how practitioners and policymakers actually decide things. Sometimes, to use Chris Argyris (1993) deceptively simple but powerful
distinction, it is not enough to produce relevant knowledge; one should also strive to make it actionable. This is more important than ever as scholars and their students look out on a world that seems so indifferent to research knowledge about social problems.

In this light, I try to teach my students about the importance of recognizing windows of opportunity to focus public attention (Kingdon, 1984), about framing ideas well to influence that attention (Majone, 1989; Schön and Rein, 1994; Stone 1988), about the crucial difference between changing the issues on the public agenda (“agenda setting”) and informing some important ones already there (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; Moore, 1990; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Wilensky 2005), and about respecting the deep knowledge of everyday people and the practitioners who work with them (Scott, 1998)—even as we bring scholarly insights and conscience to bear. It is simply not enough to inform the world that things are more complex, upon investigation, than people thought. Complexity is for seminars. Insights that tame complexity and highlight points of leverage on hard problems—those are the keys to shaping decisionmaking. Research that primarily aims to build theory can and should be different.

MTO, and the role of responsible scholar-advocates in relation to the experiment, is a case in point. MTO is a complex, imperfect effort to test the idea that neighborhood context matters for healthy family development and economic success. But MTO’s effects so far are mixed, and the intervention itself is mixed and fluid, making an honest-yet-accessible conversation about its lessons challenging. In spite of the overall ambition, the MTO intervention is very modest in character (providing some up-front housing search assistance and rental subsidy but no other special supports over time),
implementing agencies shaped and limited the intervention in ways that should inform our interpretation of results, many of those who moved closer to locational “opportunity” were compelled (as outlined above) to deal with additional moves and disruption, most of the control group (70%) had also moved by time of the interim follow-up, and most families who changed neighborhoods—80% of the experimental group that successfully “leased up” in a private apartment in low poverty areas—did not change school districts or, in some cases, even change schools. So far, MTO’s slippery treatment has not produced gains in test scores, and thankfully, recent media treatment of that finding—on the lack of “school payoff,” as Education Week put it—included a range of well-balanced social science views on how to interpret what MTO is and is not, in fact, testing.⁴

I believe there will be considerable attention paid by scholars to what Sudhir calls the “social structuring” of the rebuilding in Katrina-affected areas, for example. Given the inter-governmental complexity, regional politics of race, midterm Congressional campaign dynamics, networks of communication and political advocacy along the diaspora, and other factors, there is rich fodder. And some scholarship is already tracing the path of sociologist Eric Klinenberg’s (2002) “social autopsy” of the Chicago heat wave. Sharkey (2006), in a reply to media conjecture about who the storm hit hardest, finds that once the age distribution of New Orleans is accounted for, blacks were indeed more likely than whites to die as a consequence of the storm. In part, this is because blacks were much more likely than whites to live in the most flood-prone parts of the segregated city (Logan 2006). That geography of risk, we should note, was made over

⁴ Debra Viadero, “Housing experiment for poor found to lack school payoff,” Education Week (January 25, 2006).
many decades, and it parallels the origins of the “black bottoms” in the South, which relegated black residential areas to the least desirable, lowest-lying land near waterways.

Finally, though researchers are understandably eager to celebrate discovery, I would also bet that some scholars will re-discover and document what practitioners and policy advocates already know well but struggle to act on, whether because of bureaucratic impediments, a shortage of viable implementation options, divided public opinion, or other barriers. This much is certain: Most useful knowledge about the storm’s effects and the pain and promise of rebuilding will not emerge from a timid or hyper-specialized science. We should take risks and think outside of narrow specialties. A public sociology of well-informed critique has much to learn from dialogue with other disciplines and with hands-on efforts to get things done on the ground, however imperfect those efforts may remain. Whatever we can teach will hinge on the same kind of imagination and dialogue.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Stefanie DeLuca, Leigh Graham, Langley Keyes, Jal Mehta, Sue Popkin, Tom Sander, and Beth Weitzman for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

APPENDIX: Scholar’s Petition

The petition below was signed by 176 of the country’s top scholars and educators, including many well-known sociologists. It was released on October 12, 2005 by New Vision: An Institute for Policy and Progress (newvisioninstitute.org). New Vision was organized by Harvard and MIT doctoral students in sociology, economics, social policy,
urban planning, and other fields. It is a “non-partisan, non-profit think tank that provides empirically-driven, research-oriented progressive policy solutions.”

Moving to Opportunity in the Wake of Katrina

We, the undersigned, comprise a nonpartisan, multidisciplinary group of social science researchers with expertise in economic opportunity, housing markets, community development, and the well-being of children and families of all backgrounds. In the terrible wake of Hurricane Katrina, we see an historic opportunity to lift thousands of the nation’s most vulnerable families out of ghetto poverty and the associated physical and social risks that Katrina has so vividly illustrated in recent weeks. As the nation seeks to find housing for the many who have been left homeless, our goal for these low-income displaced persons, most of whom are racial minorities, should be to create a “move to opportunity.”

A growing body of scientific research indicates that moving to lower poverty, lower risk neighborhoods and school districts can have significant positive effects on the well-being and economic opportunity of low-income children and their families. Not all families benefit equally, and some need more support than others to secure new homes and adapt effectively in new communities. But in careful studies of the federal government’s own Moving to Opportunity demonstration program, the Chicago-area Gautreaux housing opportunity program, and other efforts to enable voluntary moves away from poor neighborhoods, researchers have documented sizable benefits in safety, health and mental health, educational attainment and other domains—making assisted
housing mobility, as this approach is known, one of the nation’s most important and under-utilized tools for closing the gap between have’s and have not’s. The ingredients are straightforward: Mobility programs use existing federal rental housing subsidies for low income families, counseling to assist in relocation, and—in the most successful cases—transitional support in the form of support services for each family.

Creating moves to opportunity is one part of rebuilding a stronger New Orleans; we do not seek to depopulate the city or its historically black communities. Some families will want to return to their neighborhoods, some will want to return to the Gulf Coast region but be motivated to live in safer, more resource-rich communities there, and some will choose to live outside the region—at least for a time. The key is thinking of housing assistance as an opportunity generator in the best-possible locations, not just a way to ensure shelter.

We urge the President and Congress, working with state and local leaders, nonprofit and community groups, and the private sector, to seize this extraordinary opportunity to rebuild lives, not just the physical infrastructure. Thousands of families can come back stronger than before. The policy and program knowledge exist, and so does the operational capacity to implement this proposal effectively at scale. We urge America’s leaders to show the will and make this possible.

References


