Conclusion

What will it take to boost scores on the American Human Development Index?

Progress depends on us all:
People, the Public Sector, the Business Community, Civic Groups, Philanthropy, Religious Institutions, and the Media.
Conclusion

This analysis of the well-being of Louisianaans by parish group, race, and gender found that significant human development gaps separate different parts of the state, African Americans and whites, and women and men. Though Louisiana overall is near the bottom of the U.S. ranking, some population groups in the state enjoy levels of human well-being similar to that found in top-ranked states like Connecticut and Massachusetts, whereas the opportunities of others are constrained by comparatively poor health and by levels of educational attainment and personal earnings typical of the average American 30, 40, even 50 years ago. In addition, several human development challenges—among them the affordable housing shortage, widespread and inadequately treated mental health problems, high rates of infant mortality and homicide, and continuing environmental threats—hamper progress.

For individuals, health, education, and a decent standard of living are critical building blocks of a life of choice, value, and dignity. These basic capabilities allow people to invest in themselves and their families and to reach their full potential. But investing in people is not just good for individual Louisianaans. It is also necessary for the economic growth and future competitiveness of the state in the fast-changing, knowledge-based, global marketplace. Thus, the significant racial disparities that can be observed in the Louisiana HD Index and the earnings gap between women and men are impediments to the enhanced well-being of everyone in the state.

As recovery continues, Louisiana can build on its unique cultural heritage, its rich natural resources, and a deeply rooted population that is committed to the state and optimistic about its future. In addition, recovery funds coupled with stimulus monies are providing unprecedented levels of resources that, if invested in building people’s capabilities, can serve to expand the choices and opportunities of current and future generations of Louisianaans.

What will it take to improve Louisiana’s ranking on the overall Human Development Index? What will it take to close the distressingly wide gaps that separate African Americans and whites in the three fundamental areas of human development measured by the HD Index? What can be done to increase women’s earnings to improve their well-being and that of their families? What can we do today that will yield better health, education, and income scores in five, 10, or 20 years’ time?

Specific policy recommendations are well beyond the purview of this study. However, concerted actions in the following areas are clearly vital if Louisiana’s HD scores are to improve over time.
HEALTH

Improve the health of African American men. An African American baby boy born today in Louisiana can expect to live 68.1 years. This is a life span shorter than that of the average American in 1960 and on par with that of men in Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Jamaica today. African American men in Louisiana die at higher rates than white men from the leading causes of death—heart disease, cancer, and stroke—as well as from other causes like homicide, accidents, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS. The premature loss of African American men is a source of heartbreak as well as economic distress for Louisiana families and communities.

Reduce infant mortality by improving the health of African American girls and women. African American babies die in Louisiana at more than twice the rate of white babies. The death of a child is a loss like no other, and the burden of grief borne by the African American community is heavy. The majority of infant deaths are associated with low birth weight. The solution lies in reducing the risk of low birth weight by ensuring that women have access to quality medical care and that girls grow to adulthood in an environment that supports them to eat a nutritious diet, get adequate exercise, manage chronic conditions like diabetes and HIV, cope with stress, enjoy overall mental health, avoid smoking, and delay childbearing until after the teenage years.

Improve access to mental health services. Prior to the 2005 hurricane season, the mental health system in Louisiana was not able to meet the needs of many who needed its services. The traumatic events of 2005 coupled with the long-term displacement and upheaval that so many families have experienced in the interim have strained this already overburdened and underresourced mental health system to the breaking point. Children and adults in psychological distress need help to recover from traumatic events and to manage persistent and severe mental illness if they are to live lives of well-being, choice, and opportunity—and many are not getting this help.

Dramatically reduce the homicide rate. The homicide rate in Louisiana is nearly three times the national average and more like the rates in countries like Nicaragua and Swaziland than those of its peer states. The vast majority of the dead are African American teenage boys and young men killed by guns. This extraordinarily high rate of violent death constitutes a public health emergency. One proven way to address this crisis is to improve educational outcomes, ensuring that all youth get a quality education and complete high school as a minimum.
EDUCATION

Improve the quality and quantity of education in Louisiana. One in five adults in Louisiana has not completed high school, one of the highest rates in the nation, and the public schools have long been counted among the country’s worst. Education is the engine of opportunity and a key determinant of income, health, and crime outcomes. Research jointly conducted by the American Human Development Project and United Way suggests that if all adults in the state had at least a high school diploma:

- About 85,000 fewer Louisianans would live in poverty.
- Median personal earnings would increase by more than $1,700 per year.
- There would be 62 fewer murders, and 10,000 fewer people would be behind bars.
- 300 fewer babies would be imperiled by low birth weight.
- 28,000 fewer adults would be obese.45

Unprecedented new resources and a renewed commitment to a quality education for all Louisiana’s children offer reasons for optimism.

INCOME

Ensure that families can make ends meet. White men in Louisiana earn annual wages and salaries that are roughly $8,400 higher than the U.S. median. White women, African American men, and African American women earn much less.

- The income gap between women ($18,139) and men ($31,756) in Louisiana is significantly larger than the national gender wage gap. Since most two-parent families rely on two incomes and a large share of the state’s families are headed by single women, this wage gap translates into a well-being-and-opportunity gap for too many Louisianans.
- The racial earnings gap is also significant. Twenty-five percent of African American families have household incomes under $15,000 per year, compared to 7 percent of white families. At the other end of the spectrum, the proportion flips. Nearly 25 percent of white families have household incomes over $100,000 per year, compared to 7 percent of African American families.
- African American women are on the losing end of both gender and racial wage disparities; their earnings are on par with wages of the typical American worker in the 1950s.

Boosting incomes with programs that have worked well in other states is vital to level the playing field.
OTHER HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Bring back housing and make it affordable. The people who are rebuilding and restaffing the physical and social infrastructure of coastal Louisiana—from roads and bridges to schools and hospitals—need an affordable place to live. So do the people who have yet to return to the state, who are doubled up with relatives, and who are still, astonishingly, living in FEMA trailers (more than 2,000 families in Louisiana). Moreover, those homeowners who have not yet been able to rebuild their homes need assistance. Rebuilding subsidized housing, replacing rental units, expanding the stock of affordable housing near where jobs are, and helping homeowners clear final hurdles to rebuilding are critical to Louisiana’s recovery.

Protect people from environmental risks and hazards. Restoring wetlands; improving the integrated management of land, water resources, and coastal areas; and better protecting people and property from storms and rising seas is critical and will grow more urgent as climate change progresses. Addressing the disproportionate siting of polluting industries near low-income and minority communities as well as the environmental toxins often found in housing for the poor, such as lead paint, are critical from a human development perspective. Reducing vulnerability by building the capacity of disadvantaged communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from severe weather is also vital.

Improve data collection and establish clear indicators for success. In the face of all that remains to be done, it may seem counterintuitive to prioritize data collection. But collecting data on key indicators of human well-being and making the data available quickly and in an accessible form is key to understanding where actions are needed and assessing if the situation is improving. The state departments responsible for gathering and compiling statistics on areas vital to human development—health, housing, environment, poverty, and the like—as well as those that gather basic demographic information critical to tracking population trends are badly understaffed. Setting clear indicators to track the outcomes and performance of initiatives funded by recovery and stimulus monies is critical to ensuring that projects are on track and that funds have been properly and effectively deployed.

Promote transparency and accountability. Since 2005, the Gulf states affected by Katrina have received upward of $140 billion in federal dollars for hurricane recovery [see TABLE 6]. According to the Louisiana Recovery Authority, at least $60 billion of that total sum was allocated to Louisiana. The new federal stimulus bill directs another $3.3 billion to Louisiana. Given that the state population is roughly 4.3 million people, this sum represents nearly $15,000 for each and every woman, man, and child in Louisiana—$44,000 for the average three-person family in the state.

These funds offer great potential not just to rebuild the physical infrastructure of Louisiana but also to construct a new infrastructure of opportunity to serve the next generation of Louisianans. Sums on this order of magnitude represent

Federal hurricane recovery dollars directed to the state thus far amount to roughly $44,000 per Louisiana family.
CONCLUSION

A unique opportunity to invest in people, empowering them with the tools to lead self-sufficient lives of freedom, choice, and value.

But this won’t happen automatically. In fact, evidence from disaster recovery around the world suggests that the rebuilding phase often results in a further concentration of power and resources in the hands of elites and greater marginalization of disadvantaged groups.

Another risk in the recovery period is corruption. Corruption thrives when temptation is strong and oversight is weak. Infrastructure projects are particularly vulnerable to corruption, given the huge sums of money changing hands, the many actors involved, the diffusion of responsibility, the complexity of the enterprise, and the unequal knowledge that different actors possess (for instance, watchdog organizations may not have the technical expertise to spot inflated costs in building plans or to assess the competence of engineering firms awarded contracts). In the recovery phase, the suspension of normal safeguards and accountability mechanisms coupled with the pressure to act quickly also helps create opportunities for those entrusted with the public good to use their position for private gain.

Ensuring equitable distribution of the benefits and opportunities that emerge from reconstruction requires that the government of Louisiana provide easily accessible and easily understood reports to the general public on the use of recovery dollars. It is critical that information include the breakdown of benefits by income level, gender, race, and disability status. Reporting on the awarding of contracts as well as tracking the progress of large projects (using indicators for staying on budget and on time) should be regular and transparent as well. Equally critical is that Louisianans raise their voices to demand accountability.

### Table 6: Federal Funding for Gulf States Affected by Katrina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enacted</th>
<th>Budget Authority</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levees, Wetlands Protection and Other Flood Control Items</td>
<td>$15.6 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Term Housing and Other Infrastructure</td>
<td>$20.3 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMA Disaster Relief Fund</td>
<td>$48.1 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood Insurance Borrowing Authority</td>
<td>$20.8 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
<td>$7.2 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Transportation</td>
<td>$3.5 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Human Services</td>
<td>$2.7 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education</td>
<td>$1.9 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Infrastructure and Other Federal Assistance (SBA loans, DOJ/DOL grants, fisheries assistance, etc.)</td>
<td>$7.9 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL ENACTED</strong></td>
<td><strong>$128.0 billion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina and Gulf Opportunity Zone Tax Incentives &amp; Relief</td>
<td>$12.8 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL ENACTED (with tax relief)</strong></td>
<td><strong>$141.8 billion</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All data are as of December 30, 2008, except for the Department of Defense data, which is as of September 30, 2008.

Source: U.S. Office of Management and Budget with data from the respective agencies.
How is **Louisiana** doing?

Some in Louisiana enjoy human development levels **well above the U.S. average**. Others experience levels of well-being typical of the country as a whole in the 1970s.

White adults in Louisiana today are **twice as likely to have graduated from college** as African American adults.

A **seven-year life span gap** separates the top and bottom parishes in Louisiana.

**Median earnings are about $32,000 for men, and about $18,000 for women—a gender earnings gap of $14,000.**

*A Portrait of Louisiana* uses a well-honed international approach to assess progress, opportunity, and human well-being across the state—with some surprising results.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Sarah Burd-Sharps and Kristen Lewis are co-directors of the American Human Development Project and co-authors of *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009*. They both previously worked on human development issues at both the community and macro levels in over 40 developing nations.


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**ABOUT THE PROJECT**

The **American Human Development Project** is an initiative of the Social Science Research Council with funding from the **Conrad N. Hilton Foundation** that aims to stimulate fact-based dialogue about human development issues in the U.S.

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**ABOUT THE DESIGN**

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