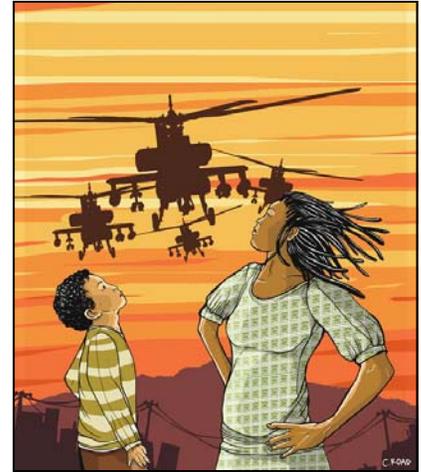


LAW ENFORCEMENT VIOLENCE & DISASTER

➔ POLICE BRUTALITY & HURRICANE KATRINA

In 2005, images of thousands of New Orleans residents — the majority of whom were low income women of color and their children, elders, and others, unable, due to poverty, to leave the city before Hurricane Katrina struck, abandoned by our government — were quickly followed by images of law enforcement violence and abuse of individuals struggling to survive under the horrifying conditions that prevailed in the city during the days, months, and now years following the hurricane.

In the initial days following Hurricane Katrina, thousands of members of the National Guard and federal troops were mobilized in the state, along with members of local law enforcement agencies from across the country who were temporarily deputized by the Governor. **These officers and troops quickly established militarized zones in which individuals, desperate for basic necessities like food and water, were routinely verbally abused and threatened with use of lethal force for seeking out food, water and clothing from local businesses, and were often violently arrested and detained.**²



Art by Cristy C. Road, croadcore.org

“These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well trained, experienced, battle tested, and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will.”

- Then Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco,
September 2, 2005³

On September 5, 2005, just seven days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the city, with no gas stations, grocery stores, mail delivery services, or opened hospitals and schools, and nearly 90 percent of the city evacuated, the city had a makeshift jail at the Greyhound bus station terminal. It was erected by Burl Cain, the warden of Angola Louisiana State Penitentiary, in collaboration with Sheriff Marlin Gusman and city officials. “This,” states Burl Cain, *“is a real start to rebuilding this city — this jail,”* officially declaring the central role of law enforcement in the reconstruction of the city. **Individuals detained at this makeshift facility were held by law enforcement and military personnel for weeks in open-air cages surrounded by chain-link fencing topped by razor wire, arrested for offenses related to seeking water, food, and other necessities.**⁴

In the years since the devastation that followed Hurricane Katrina, abusive policing and criminalization have continued unabated in New Orleans, including in schools, public housing, immigration enforcement, and mental health policing. Up to today, the city is described as “a police state encampment, occupied by an estimated 14,000 heavily armed government officers and their machine guns, patrolled by military trucks, armored Humvees, Black Hawks, and Chinooks.”⁵ **A recent survey by the community-based organization Safe Streets/Strong Communities found that 72% of the predominantly (80%) African American respondents who had been stopped by police reported being victimized, be it through verbal abuse, public strip searches, or physical abuse.**⁶ Abusive policing and criminalization also extend to healthcare, neighborhood planning, Black motherhood, gender identity and expression, and reproductive legislation. In this current climate, people of color, particularly those who are women, LGBT/queer, low-income, and/or with mental health needs, have become socially marked as “criminal” and undeserving of civil, political, and human rights — thus increasing their vulnerability to police brutality and violence by the military forces that continue to occupy the city, poverty, further criminalization, and continual displacement from and within the city.



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LAW ENFORCEMENT VIOLENCE & DISASTER

The current disaster paradigm that has been created for understanding the impact of Hurricane Katrina in the face of militarized policing, violence, intimidation, and surveillance fails to examine the intersecting (and often competing) economic, social, and political conditions women of color inhabit, and the daily hardships residents face as they struggle to rebuild their lives, communities, and social networks. In other words, Hurricane Katrina & its impacts did not take place in a vacuum, were not unique to one particular storm or environmental disaster, and served as a foothold for bolstering and intensifying existing structures of militarization, “law and order,” economic oppression, and displacement through gentrification and skewed economic (re)development.

➔ RACIAL PROFILING & POLICE BRUTALITY AGAINST WOMEN & TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOR POST-KATRINA

Women of color were among those profiled as “looters” by New Orleans and area police, and continue to be among those profiled as people who do not “belong” in the “new” New Orleans. Additionally, as law enforcement and military forces are conscripted to enforce land and housing grabs, women of color who fight to keep their homes and return to and rebuild their communities are increasingly subject to escalating police brutality and abuse. Today, these realities are implicitly characterized by a fight to exist and live for the self-determination of their communities. For example:

The day after Hurricane Katrina struck, 73-year old Merlene Maten, an African American grandmother and church elder who had evacuated to a hotel in the New Orleans suburb of Kenner, Louisiana following the flooding of her home in the city, was handcuffed and arrested for “looting” by local police. As a Black woman taking shelter from the storm in a predominantly white suburb, she was profiled by police as having committed or participated in a break-in at a nearby deli when in fact, at the time of her arrest, she was retrieving food she had brought with her from her car. Witnesses confirm that Ms. Maten never entered the store in question. Although witnesses tried to explain the situation to police, the officers refused to listen and characterized the women as “emotional.” Ms. Maten was held for over 16 days, first on an overpass outside the Greyhound bus terminal “jail,” and then in the state penitentiary, on charges that she took \$63.50 in food from the deli.⁷

In the days following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, Sharlie Arpollo Vicks, a Black transgender woman from New Orleans, was arrested and jailed for six days for using the women's shower at a Texas evacuation center.⁸

On April 4, 2006, police stopped Jonie Pratt, a Black school teacher and wife and sister of New Orleans police officers, for allegedly running a stop sign two blocks from her house. A witness saw the officers pull Pratt out of the car by her hair, throw her repeatedly against her car, twist her arms behind her, and spray mace in her face. Two more officers arrived on the scene and the three shoved Pratt to the ground and knelt on her back while one of the officers kicked her in the head. Pratt suffered a broken wrist, a black eye, and a haematoma on her forehead as a result of the incident. The witness said the officers refused to believe that Pratt lived in the house that is her home because it is located in a middle class area of the city. The local NAACP chapter called for a federal investigation, noting that incidents of this type were common in New Orleans even before Hurricane Katrina struck.⁹



LAW ENFORCEMENT VIOLENCE & DISASTER



INCITE! New Orleans member (right) and another activist support a woman hurt by police in a demonstration for affordable housing

During a December 2007 protest at New Orleans City Hall to save 4,500 units of public housing scheduled to be demolished in a city facing a severe housing crisis for returning residents -- particularly low-income residents of color -- police unleashed Tasers, pepper spray, and batons on public housing residents and their allies seeking to speak at a City Council meeting at which the demolitions were to be approved. New Orleans public housing residents are overwhelmingly African American women and women headed households, as were those targeted for police abuse at the demonstration. INCITE! New Orleans members, some of whom were present at the protest, emphasize that denial of safe affordable housing to poor and working class women of color is an act of violence and it also increases vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence, and poverty. The destruction of public housing in New Orleans is also a population control issue, an act of racial cleansing and reproductive violence.¹⁰

⇒ ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Police Kill 5 in New Orleans Shootout*, theage.com.au, September 5, 2005, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/police-kill-five-in-new-orleans-shootout/2005/09/05/1125772439555.html>
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- ³ *Military due to Move Into New Orleans: Governor Warns Thugs, Troops 'Know how to Shoot and Kill'*, CNN.com, Friday, September 2, 2005.
- ⁴ "With Jails Flooded, Bus Station Fills the Void" Alex Berenson, New York Times, September 7, 2005.
- ⁵ Gerald Smith, *New Orleans: A Police State Encampment*, Copwatch Report, Berkeley Cop Watch, Winter 2006.
- ⁶ *Crisis of Confidence: Persistent Problems Within the New Orleans Police Department: Voices and solutions from communities most impacted by violent crime*, Safe Streets/Strong Communities, October 2006.
- ⁷ *Grandma accused of looting makes her case: After 16 days in detention 73-year-old woman sets the record straight*, September 20, 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9408059/>; *Jailed deaconess, 73, ordered released*, Associated Press, September 16, 2005.
- ⁸ Mandy Carter, *Southerners on New Ground*, in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, Ed. South End Press Collective. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007.
- ⁹ Mary Foster, *New Orleans to Probe Brutality Allegations*, Associated Press, April 6, 2006.
- ¹⁰ Leonard Doyle, "New Orleans to Demolish Thousands of 'Poor' Homes," The UK Independent, December 21, 2007.





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