

20 years after Katrina, experts say divides in disaster preparedness, recovery persist

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
July 18, 2025

In the 20 years since Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, killing more than 1,300 people, experts say the U.S. has failed to prepare for future disasters — even as climate change has accelerated those events.

Speakers from several disciplines gathered at Arizona State University's Washington, D.C., location on Wednesday to explore America's disaster preparedness in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The daylong event, hosted by [New America](#), a partner of ASU, was titled "[Katrina's America: 20 Years Since the Storm](#)."

Panelists elaborated on how climate disasters disproportionately affect rural, poor and underrepresented communities, and how that contributes to infrastructure funding decisions. The subsequent disasters of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricane Helene in North Carolina last year and the Los Angeles fires earlier this year highlighted the socioeconomic divide in preparation and recovery.

"Katrina was called a thousand-year storm, and since Katrina there have been over 300 disasters that have caused a billion dollars of damage or more," said Saket Soni, executive director of the Resilience Force, an organization that trains and advocates for the low-wage workers who travel to disaster zones to rebuild.

"There's a very deep resilience divide in America. Some people can self-fund their preparation for disaster, and others — mostly people of color, rural people and others — cannot. And that division is a second policy failure."

Recognizing racial divisions

Nikole Hannah-Jones, journalist and author of "The 1619 Project," which won a Pulitzer Prize, said that racial inequality set the stage for the Katrina disaster.

“Because of housing segregation, a home in a white neighborhood in New Orleans was valued many, many times more than a house in a Black neighborhood,” she said. “And yet the formula to rebuild is based on what your property appraised at, not how much it costs to rebuild your house. So that structural inequality meant that Black folks whose houses cost the exact same amount to build couldn't get money to rebuild their houses.”

Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America, compared Katrina to the Vietnam War as a disaster that unfolded in full view of the public.

“Think about the fissures and the revelations of Katrina, the racial inequality, the disparity, the outright discrimination that was on vivid and unavoidable display through the days of Katrina as we watched white people leave the city and Black people be left behind in conditions that were horrific,” Slaughter said.

“I mean, you had Walmart coming in, bringing water and providing buses, lots of civic groups providing buses. Our government could not act,” she said. “Are those conditions better today than they were 20 years ago? I don't think so. The inequalities are much worse.”

Investing in a rebuilding workforce

Disasters have become extraordinarily profitable, Soni said.

“These tiny companies that sprung up after Katrina to rebuild homes are now massive firms owned by private-equity companies. Billions of federal dollars and billions of insurance dollars are flowing through what is surely going to be seen by historians as the American industry of our time — an industry created by climate change.

“And in the middle of that, workers who I represent are still earning \$6 an hour and are falling off roofs, breaking their backs and dying of toxic mold. And uninsured homeowners aren't getting help. I think that is one of the extraordinary legacies of Katrina — this workforce that lives in cars and sleeps on the floor of a Home Depot and nonetheless wakes up in the morning to rebuild your home.

“It's not a question of resources. It's really a question of a society's priorities.”

Making life-or-death decisions

Sherry Fink, a physician and former New America fellow, wrote the bestseller “Five Days at Memorial,” about a hospital staff dealing with the crisis.

“There's this idea that the greatest ethical failure is the failure to prepare,” Fink said. “There were all these horrible dilemmas, life-and-death dilemmas, in the moment in Katrina, in the aftermath of the levee failures. But let's prevent these horrible ethical dilemmas from ever being faced.

“Why are the resources limited? Can we make more resources so that we don't have to make the tragic, ethical choices?”

The enormous amounts of money donated show that people care in the aftermath, Fink said.

“The problem is we care too much in the moment when it’s on TV, and we don’t care enough ahead of time.”

Mental health preparedness

“Black people in New Orleans were called refugees and criminals, and they were told that they really shouldn’t come back to the city,” said Denese Shervington, a psychiatrist and chief mental health technical advisor for the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies in New Orleans. “That’s very disorienting. New Orleans is a city of generations.”

Housing and mental health support are crucial in the aftermath of a disaster, she said.

“If you’re going to rebuild to help people to recover their mental well-being and their resilience, they have to feel a belonging in the place. That’s not what we are prepared to do. We’re barely prepared to work with people when there’s no disaster,” Shervington said.

“It’s a whole different approach. It’s not around medicalizing. It’s about human goodness, human love, human compassion. I think that’s the best thing we can do to help people to rebuild their lives. And that’s what did not happen in New Orleans.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



The flooded Lake Forest area of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. New America held a daylong event titled "Katrina's America: 20 Years Since the Storm" at Arizona State University's Ambassador Barbara Barrett & Justice O'Connor Washington Center on Wednesday. Photo by Joey Nick/iStock