

# NEWS

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## **Women of Gulf Coast Key to Rebuilding After Katrina and Rita**

### **New Report Finds More Than Half of New Orleans' Families Headed by Single Mothers**

Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region are especially hard-hit by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as they are more likely than men to be in poverty, and to head single-parent families, according to a new study released today by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

*The Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Multiple Disadvantages and Key Assets for Recovery, Part I. Poverty, Race, Gender and Class* uses U.S. Census Bureau data to provide a detailed portrait of poverty among women and people of color in the city of New Orleans and the metropolitan areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas hardest hit by the hurricanes. The paper also presents data on poverty in the cities and metropolitan areas to which many hurricane victims have moved.

The paper finds that poverty rates for women in this region are higher than for the nation as a whole, at 25.9% in the city of New Orleans, 17.4% in the broader New Orleans metropolitan area, 18.6% in the Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula metropolitan area of Mississippi, and 16.2% in the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area of Texas, compared with 14.5% nationally.

"Recognizing the unique circumstances of women in the Gulf Coast region must be central to the rebuilding efforts. Ensuring that women are fully represented in the planning process will help to inform effective workforce development strategies and the design of services that support employment," said IWPR Director of Research Dr. Barbara Gault. "Because of the high prevalence of single mother families, for example, access to convenient child care is crucial for successful redevelopment."

Of all families with related children under age 18, female-headed families make up 56.0% in the city of New Orleans versus 25.2% for the nation as a whole. Many of these families also live below the poverty line. Four in ten female-headed families in the city of New Orleans and the New Orleans metropolitan area are poor, and poverty rates among these families are also very high in Beaumont-Port Arthur (34.7%) and Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula (28.6%).

Median annual earnings for African American women who worked full-time, year-round were quite low in all of the regions hit by the hurricanes, at \$19,951 in the city of New Orleans, \$20,798 in the broader New Orleans metropolitan area, and \$21,552 in Beaumont-Port Arthur.

"Black women and single mothers in this region need policies that extend emergency assistance for more than a few months, and that provide living wages and job training that will allow them to find economic security both during the rebuilding phase and beyond," said IWPR Study Director Dr. Avis Jones-DeWeever, chief author

of the new study. “The median earnings for Black women working full-time, all year in the Gulf Coast region, would barely put a single woman with three dependents above the poverty line.”

Older women in the Gulf Coast also face serious disadvantages. In all three metropolitan areas and the city of New Orleans, women make up the majority of people aged 65 and older. These women face high poverty rates at 24.3% in the city of New Orleans, 16.1% in the broader New Orleans metropolitan area, and 14.6% in the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area of Texas.

The study found that in many of the cities and metropolitan areas to which victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have evacuated, women have also struggled with high poverty and low earnings. Baton-Rouge, Louisiana, Jackson, Mississippi, and Little Rock-North Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, all have high poverty rates among women at 18.0%, 21.7%, and 18.1% respectively. Shreveport-Bossier City and Lafayette, Louisiana, and Charleston-North Charleston, South Carolina have particularly low earnings for African American women with median annual earnings for full-time, year-round work at \$20,897, \$15,131, and \$20,776, respectively.

Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas all rank in the bottom ten of all states on a number of indicators of women’s status, according to the latest Institute for Women’s Policy Research *Status of Women in the States* report. On women’s poverty, Texas ranked 44th, Louisiana ranked 47th, and Mississippi ranked last in the nation at 51st. These states also ranked in the bottom of all states for health insurance coverage among women, with Louisiana at 43rd, Mississippi at 49th, and Texas falling last in the nation at 51st.

“Katrina and Rita should inspire us to begin a new national dialogue on poverty and its disproportionate impacts on women, especially women of color,” according to IWPR President Dr. Heidi Hartmann. “Research tells us a great deal about the solutions that work such as access to training and work and family supports. We must face the persistent poverty that is growing around our nation and work together to advance policies addressing its root causes.”

*IWPR is a nonprofit scientific research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating debate on public policy issues of critical importance to women and their families. IWPR’s new Briefing Paper can be found on its website at [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org).*

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