

A Forgotten Crisis?: Coverage of post-Katrina Gulf Coast Poverty Since 2005

A study of print media, February 13, 2009

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Introduction

This study examines U.S. print media coverage of Gulf Coast poverty in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Articles published starting on December 1, 2005 — three months after the storm's first landfall in Louisiana — and ending on January 15, 2009, were examined. To conduct the study, we reviewed all stories in all papers available in Lexis-Nexis that mentioned key search terms. Our data show a consistent and significant decrease in coverage of Gulf Coast poverty in the context of Katrina. This is despite ongoing poverty news in the region, including a public housing crisis that has left an estimated 37,000 Gulf Coast residents living in FEMA trailers as of August, 2008.¹

Key findings include:

- Coverage in all U.S. newspapers and wires has declined steadily and significantly, reaching its lowest point in recent months
- While coverage of poverty in relation to politics increased from 2005 through 2008,² coverage of poverty in relation to Katrina declined
- Coverage of Katrina in general, while also declining, has been relatively high; coverage of poverty in relation to Katrina has made up a very small portion of overall Katrina coverage
- Coverage has declined not only in local newspapers far removed from the Gulf Coast, but in a collection of the 25 most read national and regional newspapers
- Coverage in Gulf Coast newspapers has declined far less rapidly than that in outside newspapers
- Coverage of major celebrities and Gulf Coast sports teams has exceeded and in most cases dwarfed coverage of poverty and Katrina

It appears that media interest in post-Katrina Gulf Coast poverty has significantly declined in all sources as we have moved further from the storm. Despite persistent poverty in the region, the issue is under addressed.

This study includes a description of the methodology, a presentation of the findings, and some key conclusions.

Methodology

The Lexis-Nexis database was used to find articles in print media with keywords related to Hurricane Katrina and poverty.

This was done in three parts.

In Part I, a Lexis search was conducted of "All U.S. Newspapers and Wires," a database containing major national newspapers, national wires, and local newspapers. Articles considered topical were those containing "Katrina" and one or more of the following: "poverty," "low income," "unemployment," and "public housing." Searches were divided into three-month increments. Results include stories from December 1, 2005, to January 15, 2009 (data was extrapolated to February 28, 2009). For comparison with coverage of Katrina generally, a search was performed collecting articles containing the term "Katrina" and, to distinguish results from those regarding persons named Katrina, one or more of "storm," "hurricane," "Rita," "New Orleans," "Louisiana," "Mississippi," or "Gulf." For comparison with coverage of poverty in relation to politics, a graph from an earlier study indicating the number of stories retrieved yearly from 2004-2008 using the terms "poverty," "politics," and "candidate" was included.

For Part II, the same search terms and date ranges were used as were used in Part I to gauge coverage of post-Katrina Gulf Coast poverty, but only 25 of the top-ranking newspapers in the U.S. by circulation were analyzed.³

For Part III, a search was conducted using the same terms and date ranges as used in Part I to examine post-Katrina Gulf Coast poverty, but only three major Gulf Coast newspapers were examined: the *Baton Rouge Advocate*, the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, and the *Biloxi Sun Herald*. Part I results for All U.S. Newspapers and Wires were then adjusted to exclude those three papers. Data from both searches was used to compare the change in national and local attention to post-Katrina poverty over time.

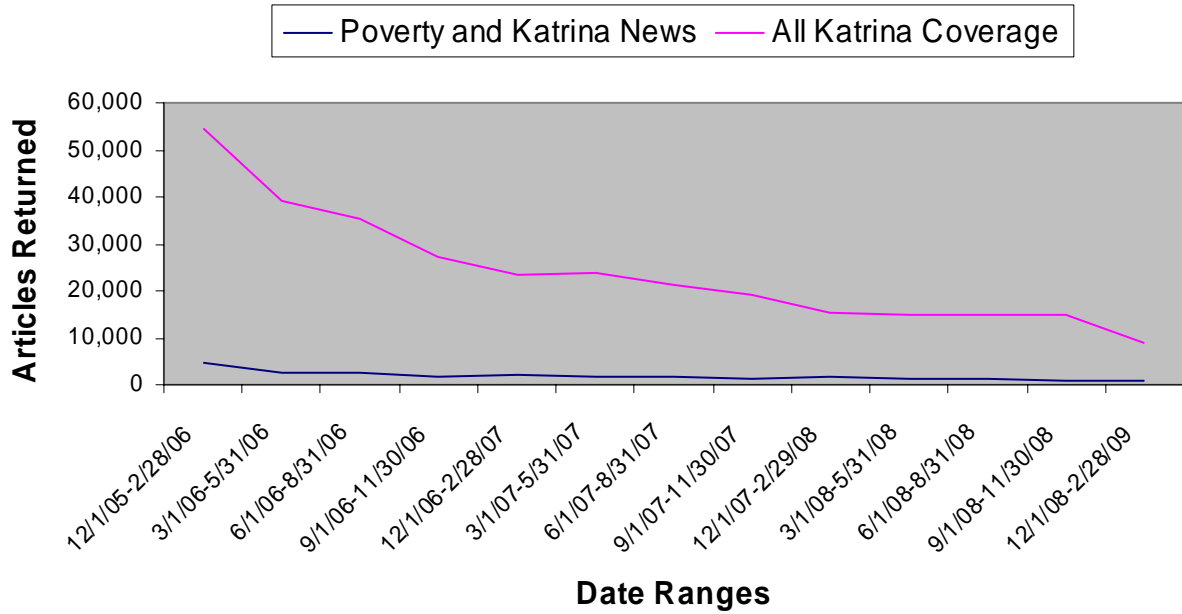
For Part IV, searches were conducted using All U.S. Newspapers and Wires over the same date ranges as Parts I, II, and III. Two searches were conducted. First, articles containing any one of the terms "Paris Hilton," "Brad Pitt," "Angelina Jolie," "Jennifer Aniston," or "Miley Cyrus" were collected. Second, articles were collected that covered Gulf Coast sports teams, using the terms "New Orleans Hornets," "LSU Tigers," "Mississippi Bulldogs," or a combination of "Saints" and one or more of "NFL" and "football" (to distinguish from the term "Saints" as applied to New Orleans generally). Data from both this search and Part I were then used to compare media attention towards celebrity and sports news and post-Katrina poverty over time.

PART I: Stories Mentioning Poverty and Katrina in All U.S Newspapers and Wires

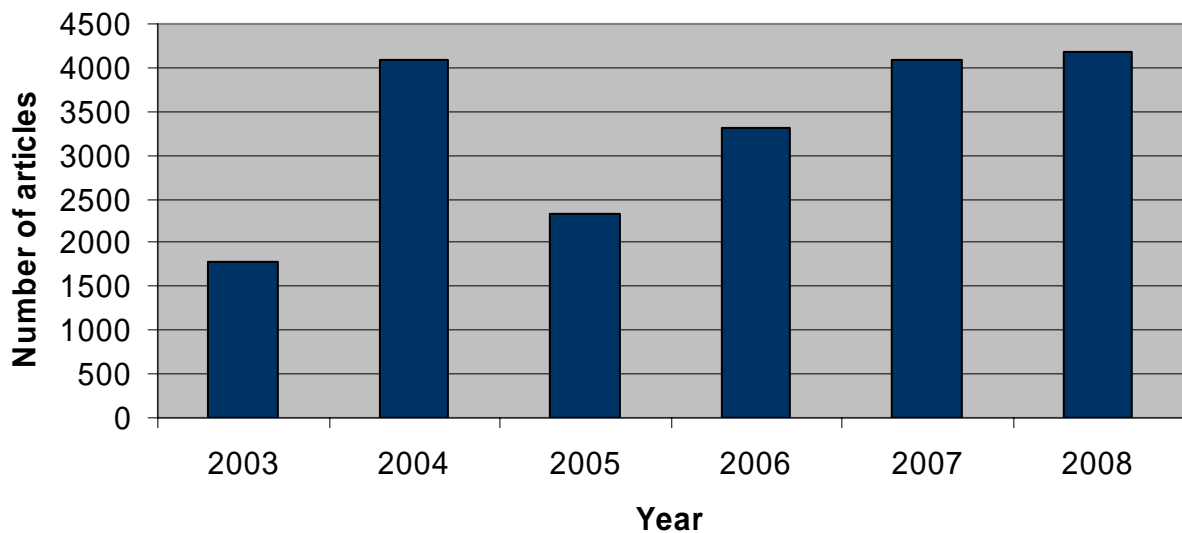
Months	Documents returned for Katrina and poverty	Documents returned for Katrina in general
December 1, 2005-February 28, 2006	4,737	54,571
March 1, 2006-May 31, 2006	2,677	39,214
June 1, 2006-August 31, 2006	2,580	35,435
September 1, 2006-November 30, 2006	1,904	27,396
December 1, 2006-February 28, 2007	1,949	23,211
March 1, 2007-May 31, 2007	1,746	23,844
June 1, 2007-August 31, 2007	1,647	21,304
September 1, 2007-November 30, 2007	1,301	19,041
December 1, 2007-February 29, 2008	1,560	15,399
March 1, 2008-May 31, 2008	1,463	15,044
June 1, 2008-August 31, 2008	1,236	14,845
September 1, 2008-November 30, 2008	1,038	15,002
December 1, 2008-February 28, 2009	874*	8,998*

*Extrapolated from 1.5-month total

Coverage in All U.S. Newspapers and Wires

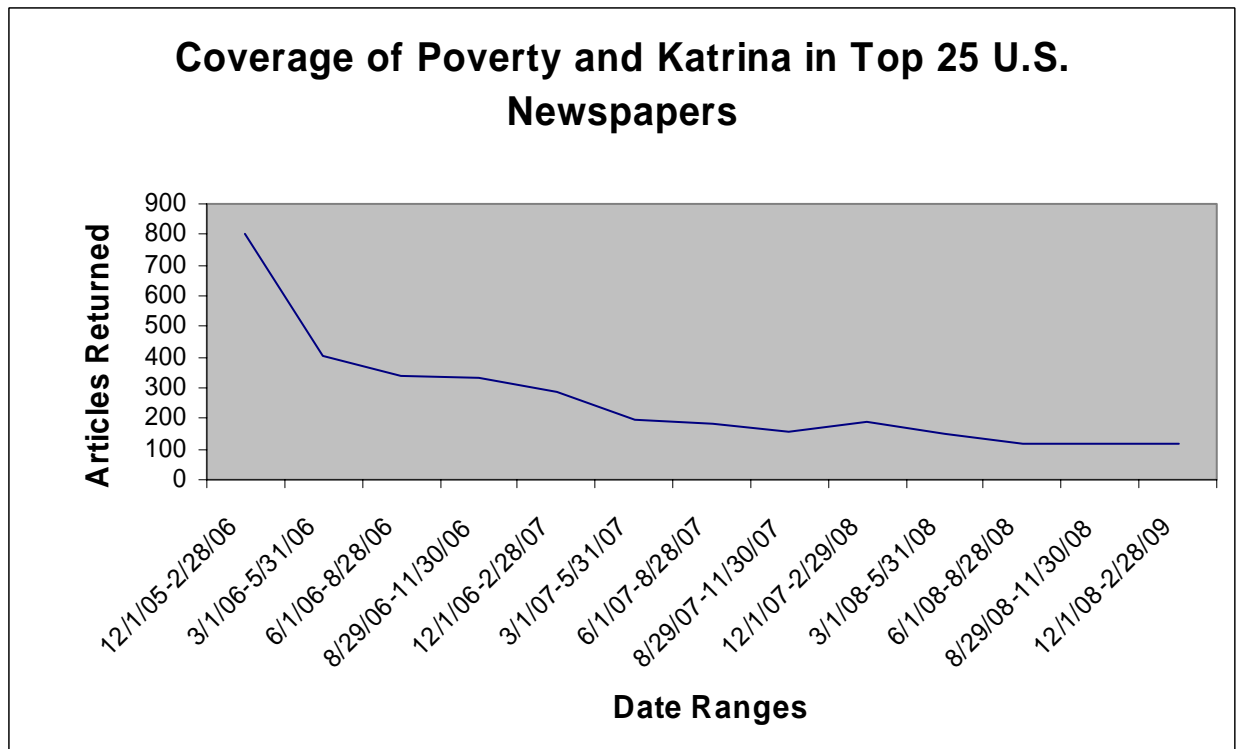


U.S. Newspapers and Wires Stories Mentioning both Poverty and Politics



PART II: Stories Mentioning Poverty and Katrina in the Top 25 U.S. Newspapers by Circulation

Months	Documents returned
December 1, 2005-February 28, 2006	805
March 1, 2006-May 31, 2006	403
June 1, 2006-August 31, 2006	384
September 1, 2006-November 30, 2006	289
December 1, 2006-February 28, 2007	287
March 1, 2007-May 31, 2007	193
June 1, 2007-August 31, 2007	213
September 1, 2007-November 30, 2007	157
December 1, 2007-February 29, 2008	190
March 1, 2008-May 31, 2008	151
June 1, 2008-August 31, 2008	129
September 1, 2008-November 30, 2008	116
December 1, 2008-February 28, 2009	116*



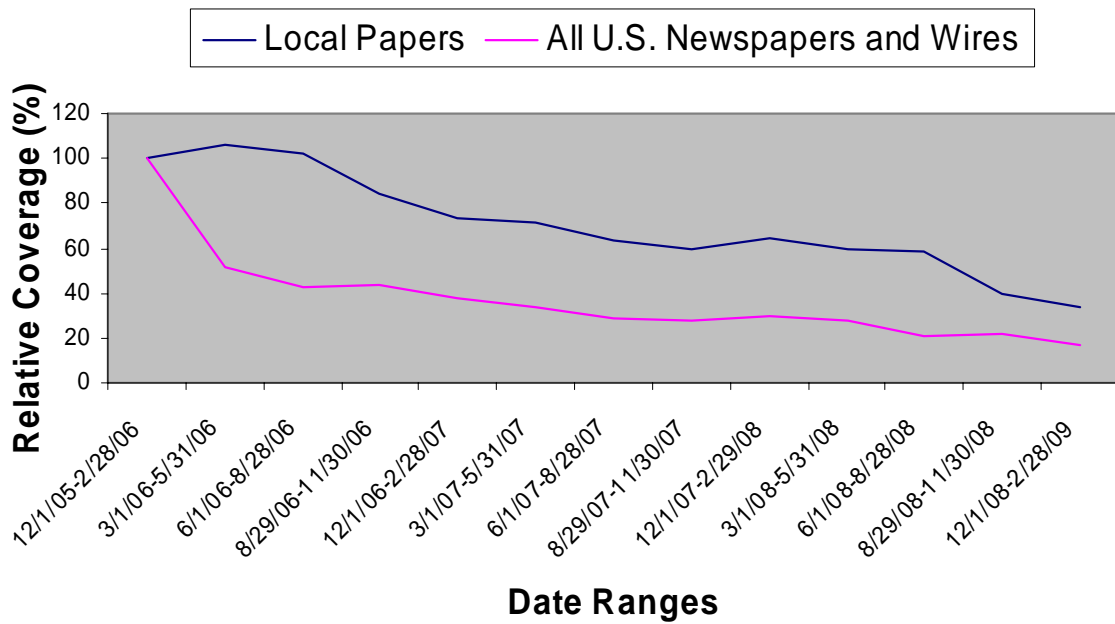
*Extrapolated from 1.5-month total

PART III: Stories Mentioning Poverty and Katrina in Three Local Papers vs. Stories Mentioning Poverty and Katrina in All U.S. Newspapers and Wires

Months	Documents returned for local papers (percent of first-period coverage)	Documents returned for all U.S. Newspapers and Wires, excluding local papers (percent of first-period coverage)
December 1, 2005-February 28, 2006	388 (100%)	4,349 (100%)
March 1, 2006-May 31, 2006	411 (106%)	2,266 (52%)
June 1, 2006-August 31, 2006	421 (109%)	2,159 (50%)
September 1, 2006-November 30, 2006	302 (78%)	1,602 (37%)
December 1, 2006-February 28, 2007	285 (73%)	1,664 (38%)
March 1, 2007-May 31, 2007	274 (71%)	1,472 (34%)
June 1, 2007-August 31, 2007	259 (67%)	1,388 (32%)
September 1, 2007-November 30, 2007	221 (57%)	1,080 (25%)
December 1, 2007-February 29, 2008	250 (64%)	1,310 (30%)
March 1, 2008-May 31, 2008	231 (60%)	1,232 (28%)
June 1, 2008-August 31, 2008	241 (62%)	995 (23%)
September 1, 2008-November 30, 2008	142 (37%)	896 (21%)
December 1, 2008-February 28, 2009	132*	742*

*Extrapolated from 1.5-month total

Local vs. National Coverage of Poverty and Katrina



PART IV: Stories Mentioning Celebrities vs. Stories Mentioning Gulf Coast Sports Teams vs. Stories Mentioning Poverty and Katrina in All U.S. Newspapers and Wires

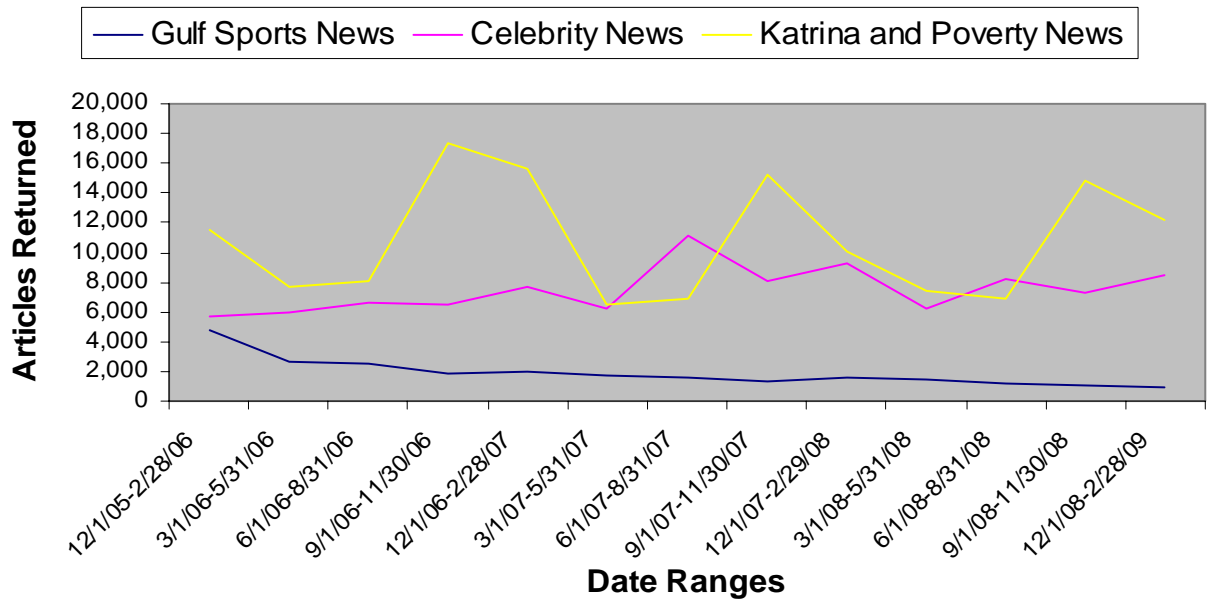
Months	Documents returned on Katrina and poverty	Documents returned on celebrities†	Documents returned on Gulf Coast sports ‡
December 1, 2005-February 28, 2006	4,737	5,734	11,476
March 1, 2006-May 31, 2006	2,677	6,020	7,730
June 1, 2006-August 31, 2006	2,580	6,684	8,040
September 1, 2006-November 30, 2006	1,904	6,493	17,345
December 1, 2006-February 28, 2007	1,949	7,654	15,612
March 1, 2007-May 31, 2007	1,746	6,200	6,545
June 1, 2007-August 31, 2007	1,647	11,125	6,947
September 1, 2007-November 30, 2007	1,301	8,112	15,227
December 1, 2007-February 29, 2008	1,560	9,335	10,110
March 1, 2008-May 31, 2008	1,463	6,274	7,420
June 1, 2008-August 31, 2008	1,236	8,277	6,840
September 1, 2008-November 30, 2008	1,038	7,269	14,858
December 1, 2008-February 28, 2009	874*	8,464*	12,204*

†Paris Hilton, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Aniston, or Miley Cyrus

‡ New Orleans Hornets, LSU Tigers, Mississippi Bulldogs, New Orleans Saints

*Extrapolated from 1.5-month total

Sports and Celebrity News vs. Katrina and Poverty News



Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina initially attracted considerable media attention to the concerns of the poor living on the Gulf Coast. Coverage was devoted to those who fell into poverty due to the storm's effects and to those whose deprivation was further deepened.

About three and a half years later, coverage has reduced considerably. Stories in all newspapers across the country have declined, despite relatively high coverage of Katrina in general. Coverage of post-Katrina Gulf Coast poverty in all newspapers has also shown no relationship to coverage of political candidates and poverty, indicating that either candidates have not spoken about Katrina and poverty consistently or the news has not covered them doing so. Coverage in our country's major newspapers has also declined. The reduction is especially pronounced outside the Gulf Coast region: national coverage of Katrina-related poverty fell at a faster rate than local coverage following the hurricane. Finally, celebrity and Gulf Coast sports news has far exceeded coverage of the Gulf Coast's poor. While levels of sports and celebrity news have fluctuated significantly, based on the time of year and events in celebrities' lives, respectively, Katrina-related poverty coverage has basically simply declined.

Only 2 in 5 damaged affordable rental units in Louisiana will be replaced or repaired with recovery assistance, while the homeless population of New Orleans has been doubled by the storm.⁴ The question is, in the words of Ambassador James A. Joseph, Chairman of the LDRF Board of Directors, "How do we sustain the sense of community we shared during the hurricanes now that the intensity of the crisis is no longer as visible?"⁵ This study indicates one important step could be a renewed national focus on the problem of poverty in the Gulf Coast region.

¹Oxfam America, "Mirror on America: How the State of the Gulf Coast Recovery Affects Us All," http://www.oxfamamerica.org/newsandpublications/publications/research_reports/mirror-on-america/Mirror-on-America.pdf

²Freedman Consulting, LLC and Civic Enterprises, LLC, "Reaching New Heights: The Issue of Poverty in the 2008 Campaign," <http://www.naktv.net/Spotlight/SpotlightMediaStudy.pdf>

³These were: *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Denver Post*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *New York Post*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *Star Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Newark Star Ledger*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Seattle Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Detroit Free Press*, *New York Newsday*, and the *Arizona Republic*. A notable exception to the Lexis-Nexis newspaper search engine is the *Wall Street Journal*, which consistently ranks in the top twenty newspapers in the U.S. by circulation.

⁴PolicyLink, "A Long Way Home: The State of Louisiana Housing Recovery in 2008," <http://www.policylink.org/threeyearslater/6.html>

⁵Ambassador James A. Joseph, "Remaking Louisiana: The Call to a New Adventure," http://www.louisianahelp.org/docs/REMAKING_LOUISIANA.pdf