

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: THE DATA CENTER AND THE NEW ORLEANS INDEX

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Like most people in New Orleans, Allison Plyer remembers where she was—and where she ended up—in late August 2005. “The entire organization was evacuated,” she said. “The city was underwater.”

For months after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans’ future was uncertain. It was unclear if or when people and businesses would return. Given the significant flooding, there was even debate about whether parts of the city should be marked uninhabitable. Basic information about which local services were operable and the extent of the damage in different areas was in short supply.

But working remotely, Plyer and her colleagues were able to help. “From our evacuation locations we answered questions that came through. It was everything from federal agencies wanting shapefiles [to make more accurate maps] to individuals trying to locate their loved ones.”

She and her team were not part of the U.S. Coast Guard, FEMA, or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They weren’t in local government. Yet thousands of people depended on their work.

Plyer is executive director of The Data Center. Founded in 1997, The Data Center is a central resource for information about New Orleans’

neighborhoods and surrounding parishes. It presents data with an emphasis on usability with interactive maps, quantitative and qualitative neighborhood profiles, easy-to-use spreadsheets, and reports.

In the days following the storm, the number of data requests skyrocketed, and within months, traffic to the Center’s website tripled. Well-connected, firmly established, and highly responsive, The Data Center was uniquely positioned to provide residents, government agencies, and media outlets some of the information they needed when Katrina hit.

One of those requests came from the Brookings Institution. Brookings, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy research organization, was writing a report on how federal policies contributed to what happened in New Orleans. That reporting inspired Brookings to develop a series of indicators, which it dubbed “The Katrina Index,” to help guide recovery. Brookings partnered with The Data Center to refine the index and promote its use. Today, the index, known as The New Orleans Index, is published solely by the Center.

THE NEW ORLEANS INDEX

In its first few years, the Index focused on recovery measures, such as the numbers of returned households, FEMA trailers, applications

to FEMA, and construction permits. But Plyer and others wanted more. “July 2005 [the month before storm] was not a high point for New Orleans,” Plyer says, “so the conversation should not just be about how to get back there.” The Index could help chart the city’s long-term growth.

The most recent edition covers a wide variety of indicators, including job growth, employment, entrepreneurship, workforce development, incarceration, minority-owned businesses, and the geography of poverty. Indicators on sustainability are also examined, and there are plans to expand that section in the future.

The Index has been well received by the surrounding community, because it is created with their input and support. “We have a steering committee for the Index that includes university presidents, staff from community development corporations, and members of the philanthropic community,” says Ben Horwitz, former operations and data manager at The Data Center. “They are our foundation.”

Each installment is followed closely. The data are picked up by major newspapers on a regular basis, and Plyer is often invited to discuss recovery efforts on local radio and television programs.

The Index’s regular publication enables The Data Center to play an important role in framing policy discussions about the issues facing New Orleans.

AN UNEVEN RECOVERY

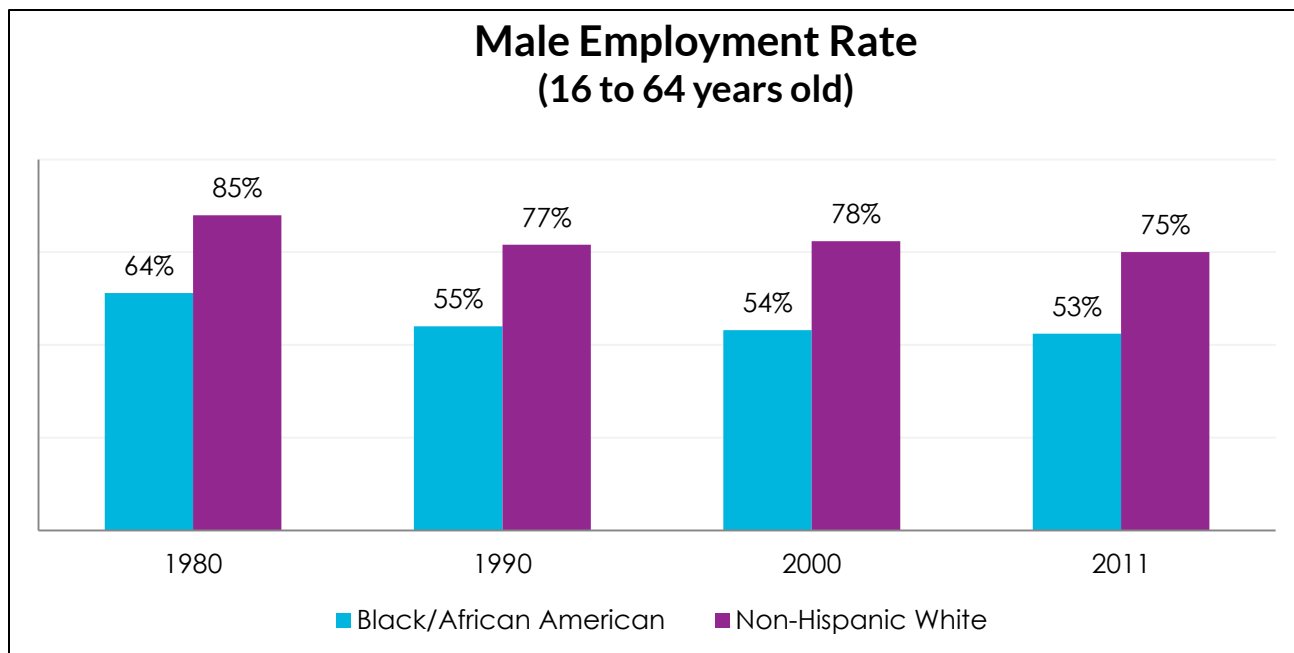
One of the most salient issues facing New Orleans is inequality.

Flozell Daniels, Jr. is president and CEO of the Foundation for Louisiana, a nonprofit organization focused on creating economic and civic engagement opportunities in underserved communities. For Daniels, disaggregating key statistics such as household income, education levels, and employment rates, by gender, race, and geography, as the Index does, has helped shift the policy conversation from a generic idea of prosperity to equality. “It allows us to identify where we have barriers and challenges, then build system-level solutions,” he says.

The Index “has helped decisionmakers understand why low-income neighborhoods and minority residents have not experienced the same level of recovery,” says Plyer. “It’s helped explain why you have the tale of two cities.”

In *The New Orleans Index at Eight*, The Data Center disaggregated rates of educational attainment, employment, and incarceration by race and gender. The black male employment rate in the New Orleans metro area is 53 percent. Focusing attention on numbers like these has helped broaden the discourse around workforce development.

Working with the City of New Orleans, the New Orleans Business Alliance—a public-private entity focused on business and economic development—used the data on black male



Source: The Data Center

Note: This figure was adapted from the *New Orleans Index at Eight*. See the full Index report at https://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/reports/GNOCDC_NewOrleansIndexAtEight.pdf.

employment to create a five-year strategy called ProsperityNOLA.

Black male employment is also a key indicator being tracked in the Livable Claiborne Communities study, a multidisciplinary study funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the US Department of Transportation that focuses on community revitalization and economic development in the neighborhoods along the Claiborne Avenue corridor. And Dillard University has used the Index and other Data Center analyses to create a strategic plan that better aligns with the needs of and issues facing the city and surrounding community. Specifically, President Walter Kimbrough notes that Dillard was inspired to launch initiatives aimed at enrolling more black male students and providing more support for

current students in hopes of improving educational outcomes and lessening future income inequality.

The Data Center team is currently preparing for a surge of questions that will come with an increased interest in New Orleans in 2015, 10 years after the storm. In addition to updating the Index, they are producing an edited volume of essays on critical topics and assisting other nonprofits who need data as they prepare to mark the tenth anniversary. Plyer and her staff know that eventually much of the national attention will subside, but as conditions in New Orleans change, The Data Center will continue to monitor and support that progress with rigorous, independent analysis.



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